

# MODERN TIMES REVIEW

THE EUROPEAN DOCUMENTARY MAGAZINE  
summer 2024

FEATURE INTERVIEW  
Johan Grimonprez

UKRAINE  
Cataloguing the horrors

PALESTINE  
Solidarity and friendship

INDIA  
Farmer suicide cases

## China: cultural richness and harsh realities

page 21



MODERNITY  
Life without papers

NIHILISM  
The digital age

ECOSYSTEMS  
IKEA, a tree per second

INDIGENOUS IDENTITY  
Apache tribe and colonial impact



## Biopower in Europe

page 11





JOHAN GRIMONPREZ, FROM THE INTERVIEW (MAYBE A CLIP FROM LIE'S VIDEO WILL BE ONLINE LATER).

# War, fear and decolonialization

**INTERVIEW:** Director Johan Grimonprez has for more than 25 years worked with documentaries that addresses power, media and manipulations through his more essayistic style. His latest film, *Soundtrack to a Coup d'État*, was screened at Thessaloniki Documentary Film Festival – where he garnered the audience award for best documentary. BY TRULS LIE



Sitting down with the renowned filmmaker, Johan Grimonprez (1962–), is more than just a talk about his latest film, *Soundtrack to a Coup d'État*, screened here in the Thessaloniki Documentary Film Festival. It is more about an intellectual's work – meaning a political-artistic oeuvre. He has produced several documentaries since I first watched his *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, back in 1997.

*Soundtrack to a Coup d'État* is definitely, as they wrote in Thessaloniki, «an explosive cocktail of geopolitics, jazz music, cold-war intrigues and colonization practices, having Congo and the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected prime minister, as its backdrop.» Read our review on page 3.

You can wonder why 'soundtrack' was in the title of Grimonprez's 150-minute non-linear structure of a film:

«It is called *Soundtrack* for a reason. Because when I listened to the material, then it really directs where you head with the story. A lot of the political agency is also set forth by music. For example did many rumba artists accompany the politicians who came to claim Congolese independence at the Brussels roundtable. They actually 'composed' independence. The music is inseparable from that political agency. And other musicians – like Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach – lead that moment where they crash into the UN Security Council in New York in 1961 to protest against what was announced there – the murder of Patrice Lumumba and two of his colleagues. It's also called the opening salvo of the black militant movement.»

---

Loius Armstrong even talked about renouncing his American citizenship and moving to Ghana ...

---

In *Soundtrack*, we also see and hear how Louis Armstrong, from the vast archival material used to build this film, suddenly realised he and other black 'American music ambassadors' were sent to the Congo as a smoke screen – for the start of the Coup that happened at the same time. Armstrong even talked about renouncing his American citi-

zenship and moving to Ghana ... Grimonprez responds: «CIA even plotted the assassination of Lumumba at the same moment when Louis Armstrong was actually playing his concerts.»

«Civil rights are sort of intertwined with jazz music for a part. The black jazz ambassadors came at the same time as six independent African countries was admitted to the world stage of the United Nations – a huge shift for African independence, and a source of inspiration for civil rights leaders in the United States.»

## Khrushchev and decolonization

A remarkable archive scene in Grimonprez's film is when Nikita Khrushchev talked at the UN General Assembly in 1960, denouncing Western colonialism:

«You know, when we were translating his Russian with a student of mine, I fell from my chair. Because it has always been claimed in the press that he said 'We're going to bury the United States'. But he didn't say that! He said we're going to 'bury colonialism'. It is a big difference. At the same time, his tirade denounced America as they were still lynching black people. And that was not disinformation, it's true – but it was quite provocative. Of course, he had an agenda because he was trying to get the global South on his side. So, he was playing a game as well. He proposed a decolonization resolution. – but the ensuing months that marked the end of the old Empire were the beginning of new colonialism. The flipside of that decolonization vote is that Lumumba became the ground zero of how the West then was going to deal with decolonization.»

## Lumumba and Hammarskjöld

At the core is the killing of Patrice Lumumba, the freedom activist who wanted to free Congo from the Western exploiters.

Filmmaker Raoul Peck – who Grimonprez says actually was on his producer board – in Peck's documentary and fiction film about Lumumba (2000/2005), ends with this killing. For Grimonprez, this was more of a starting point in his film – followed by a lot of political events and disclosures.

One such is where a CIA leader involved in the murder says the killing was a direct order from President Eisenhower himself. They wanted to continue their exploitation. Jump then to another scene, where we see Eisenhower talks to an audience about Congo, that every country should rule themselves

and be free, without any influence from outside. He is blatantly lying (not different from some presidents after him...). Grimonprez comments: «As you see at the end of the film, what was set forth in 1960 is actually still the same in East Congo today. Yesterday, there was a court case where they held companies and corporations accountable for conflict minerals and the genocide in East Congo. But the accusers lost the case.»

And, what about the role of UN Secretary Dag Hammarskjöld at that time? He is seen as introducing the hymn to United Nations in 1958 composed by the peace activist Pablo Casals at the General Assembly. There is also a flip side, although much of the work of Swedish Hammarskjöld was admirable. As in 1955 with his politics within the Middle-East and arguing for peace in the Suez crisis, as Grimonprez remarks. But although not visible, Hammarskjöld, behind the scenes, didn't protest the murder of Lumumba:

---

«Behind the scenes, Hammarskjöld was literally working against Lumumba.»

---

«During the Congo crisis, Hammarskjöld made a mishap. He was complicit in the downfall. His biggest remorse was actually that decision about Lumumba and his 'hands-off'. Actually, it was General Alexander who was still the British general and the head of the army in Ghana, who was part of the UN troops, who was directly responsible for capturing Lumumba. Hammarskjöld was playing sometimes a schizophrenic politics officer, but behind the scenes, he was literally working against Lumumba.»

## A global apartheid wall

So much for the big powers and their secret operations, which can be partly disclosed in such essayistic archival films like Grimonprez's.

Not so many of these powers have changed today, where militarism and big politics stand above human rights and against democratic rule. They have an interest in valuable minerals, just like the rubber industry that the Belgian kingdom sucked out of Congo or how African uranium is

Continues on page 4

# MODERN TIMES REVIEW

THE INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY MAGAZINE

Editor-in-chief:

**Truls Lie**

truls@moderntimes.review

Industry editor:

**Steve Rickinson**

steve@moderntimes.review

Regular critics:

Nina Trige Andersen, Anders Dunker, Marc and Daniel Glassman, Carmen Gray, Margareta Hruza, Aleksander Huser, Ellen Lande, Tue Steen Müller, Bianca-Olivia Nita, Nick Holdsworth, Dieter Wieczorek, Melita Zajc, Astra Zoldnere, Mariana Hristova, Olivia Popp, Karen Cirillo, Massimo Iannetti

Editorial line:

Our political focus covers typical films (and some books) on our modern times like surveillance, finance, big tech, the military-industrial complex, state and bureaucracy – but also in a broader sense ecological and more existential-philosophical topics.

Modern Times Review is also made by a cooperation with the quarterly Norwegian literary non-fiction magazine **NY TID** (Modern Times), and publishes English reviews of non-fiction books also. See en.nytid.no

Print:

Nr1 Trykk/Amedia, Lillestrøm, Norway

Publisher:

**Film AS**

Address:

PB. 3113 Elisenberg, 0207 Oslo, Norway  
Organisation number: 997460103 MVA

## Support/donations:

18 euro/year, you will receive 2 print issues plus free weekly online PDFs  
e-mail: info@moderntimes.review  
www.moderntimes.review/donation

# Jazz hands

**GEOPOLITICS** / How jazz music played a role in political manoeuvres during the Cold War.

BY LAUREN WISSOT / THESSALONIKI DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL, CPH:DOX



## Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat

Director: Johan Grimonprez  
Producer: Onomatopée Films, Warboys Films, BALDR  
Country: Belgium, France, Netherlands

One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, as the old slogan goes, and the murdered Congolese leader/assassinated civil rights martyr Patrice Lumumba is certainly the latter in Johan Grimonprez's Sundance debuting *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat*. Nearly a decade in the making, the veteran director's (*dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, *Shadow World*, *Double Take*) cinematic reframing of history is every bit as grand and showy as its title might imply. (Not to mention as overwhelming as a doctoral thesis, albeit a groovy one.)

### Accidental spark

Indeed, in a surprisingly swift 2.5 hours, Grimonprez revisits/revives the sprawling, real-life, early 60s saga that pitted the 16 newly independent African countries recently admitted to the UN against the long-established, Western democratic powers newly committed to decolonisation or, perhaps more accurately, a decolonisation version of illiberal democracy. One which would guarantee the West's access to precious resources like, say, uranium – a necessary ingredient for the world-ordering atomic bombs. And a metal that just so happens to be abundant in the Katanga region of – you guessed it – Belgium's former colony, the Congo.

Which is where a former beer-hawking, rabble-rouser named Lumumba mistook his role as the Republic of the Congo's first prime minister as a mandate for kicking

out the West – and paid with his life. But unlike Raoul Peck's 2000 biographical thriller *Lumumba*, a methodically detailed account of the political machinations behind the nationalist hero's rise and eventual fall, the CIA-involved elimination of Lumumba is where *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat* begins, not ends. For the killing was also the accidental spark that ignited and then united oppressed peoples from the Global South to the racist Global North, which is where the crashing of the UN Security Council by American musicians Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach in protest occurred. Cue the titular soundtrack and let the credits (rock and) roll.

### Not surprising

Actually, cut. This would be a good time to explain that *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat* is also about as far from Peck's aesthetic as Haiti is from Belgium. Firstly, Grimonprez's latest is a tour de force of editing, its chaotic nonlinear structure shaped by an editor, Rik Chaubet, who also happens to be an experimental musician, which is important since Lincoln and Roach are far from the only jazz legends to play a role in the historical proceedings. In fact, jazz was sort of the Eisenhower administration's Trojan horse, a way to win hearts and minds while distracting from those nasty CIA-backed coups. Black «jazz ambassadors» – including Louis Armstrong, Nina Simone, Melba Liston, Duke Ellington and Dizzie Gillespie – were sent overseas on what most assumed were goodwill missions but were often much more nefarious. Horrifically, it was Armstrong himself who served as the unwitting smokescreen for the coup that led to Lumumba's

removal and eventual death.

---

The killing was also the accidental spark that ignited and then united oppressed peoples from the Global South to the racist Global North

---

Though to a cynical American like myself, who lived through the CIA black site debacle of the Bush-Cheney years, the Satchmo deployment is shocking but not all that surprising. More unexpected is the Belgian filmmaker's lifting up of Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev as a crucial ally to the anti-colonialist cause, a virtuous comrade who «bangs his shoe in indignation at the UN's complicity in the overthrow of Lumumba» (per the Sundance synopsis). Really? While *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat* displays a compelling cinematic rigour (and is painstakingly researched right down to title cards that include author names, print sources and page numbers for every quote), the quick-cut, jazz-infused atmosphere is also upbeat and fun. Perhaps too fun. Not unlike the Adam Curtis oeuvre, a viewer can't help but get swept up into becoming a true believer. Only later to be left wondering if all that onscreen action was really true.

### History rhymes

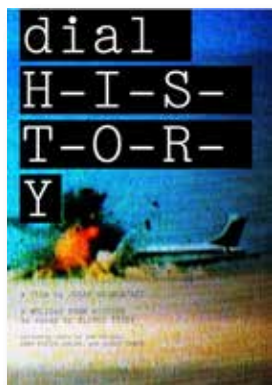
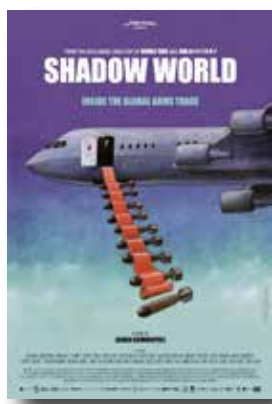
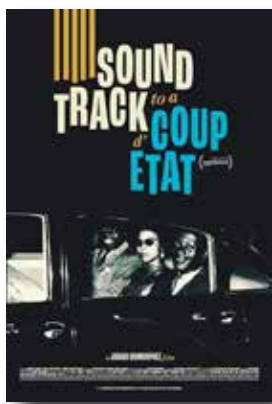
For history, as with great cinema, doesn't depend on the story but the storyteller. And Grimonprez's take seems troublingly

simplistic at times, the film often playing dangerously fast and loose with the facts (and history is not an improv session). Case in point: the aforementioned Khrushchev as a catalyst, infuriated on behalf of the African countries, demanding an immediate end to colonisation. Are we meant to now see this infamous shoe-banging incident (itself disputed) as some sort of benevolent act on the part of the Russian leader – and unsee the fact that the theatrical outrage came from the uranium-coveting, colonialist and imperialist USSR he was there to proudly represent? (Does Grimonprez think Khrushchev was likewise in favour of returning the Tatars to Crimea too?)

As for the US side, the Belgian director rightly celebrates American icon Armstrong's refusal to play for a segregated audience in South Africa and also Satchmo's subsequent cancelling of his jazz ambassador tour in reaction to the Arkansas National Guard being sent to Little Rock to prevent Black students from entering the state capital's high school. But Grimonprez then gives short shrift to the seismic event that happened as a consequence: the ordering of the federal National Guard into Little Rock to enforce integration (overriding the racist Governor Faubus's refusal to comply with *Brown v. Board of Education*). And who handed down that righteous mandate? None other than the coup-approving President Eisenhower.

But ultimately, as the Twain saying goes, «History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes,» and *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat* also moves and shakes in glorious cacophony. Just best to keep in mind that that quote attributed to Mark Twain might not actually be his.





Continues from page 2

exploited by the nuclear industry. Today, the technology of electric cars and mobile phones push these powers to new exploitations in Africa.

We ask Grimonprez about his previous film, *Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade* (2016, see previous review), which digs behind the scenes of the apparatus of big military powers. Based on Andrew Feinstein's book (2011) with the same title, we are exposed here to money and sex. As the prostitutes, politicians can likewise be bought.

«You have to see the bigger picture of Hamas.»

We see in the film how corrupted South African politicians are bribed for 260 million dollars – as BAE Systems gets a deal worth ten billion with South Africa. But not least, as Gaza today is in everyone's attention, we see in this 2016-film how Israeli forces attack Gaza regularly, often followed by weapon fairs showing their efficacy. Israeli weapon manufacturers depend on these wars and also cooperate with the American market – as U.S. big 'donations' of billions every year go to buying weapons from U.S. Yes, we can add, what about the US and their enormous weapon delivery to Ukraine and Israel today?

«All the weapons ... I think it's the same situation again. They found a big gas deposit right off the coast in Gaza: British Petroleum, Egypt and, of course, Netanyahu and the U.S.. But that gas actually belongs to the people in Gaza.»

In Grimonprez's film, Malcolm X says, «If you defend yourself, you're called an extreme.» Is Hamas extreme?

«You have to see the bigger picture of Hamas: Netanyahu was there at the origin of Hamas and supported it as a buffer for Yasser Arafat. You must also see in perspective that Hamas is a very good tool to disseminate divide – divide and conquer. Michael Hardt (behind the book *Empire*) has called the situation for «global apartheid». It's not just a wall in the

West Bank or Gaza or a wall at the border of the US to Mexico. The border is also in our heads. There's a global apartheid wall. We're actually all colonized. That's a shame. We are also manipulated through media, part of a system where we live in a reality channel.»

#### The culture of fear

In his earlier collage film, *Double Take* (2010), Grimonprez casts Alfred Hitchcock as a paranoid history professor, unwittingly caught up in a double take on the Cold War period. Subverting a meticulous array of TV footage, *Double Take* also links to a nice 'kitchen debate' between Nixon and Khrushchev in 1959 – to the rise of television. Then, it moves from the Americans' search for a new enemy after the fall of the Berlin Wall through the ambiguity of love relationships and murders in Hitchcock's thrillers – to the continuous stream of images on YouTube and television. An early hint to today's propaganda, and infusion of *fear*, as the 'war on terror' ...

We're actually all colonized.

In the film, Michael Hardt is reading from Machiavelli saying that 'to be feared is better than being loved'.

«He refers to Machiavelli and *The Prince*. You are set for two choices: One is fear, and one is love. Fear for the ruler can make people fearful. And so, they would abide by what his decisions are, whatever that is – like being sent to war and getting killed. But if it's love, then the population is in charge. And they decide what the well-being of the bigger population is – which is democratic.»

«Cinema was the box of illusions, the building of dreams. But television was part of disseminating the culture of fear from the beginning of the sixties. We used to be consumers of domestic bliss, of commercials, you name it, but now we're consumers of fear.»

## The unflinching eye

**CONFLICT** / Cataloguing the horrors of the war in Ukraine becomes an obsessive search for the last perfect picture to crown an award-winning career for Dutch war photographer Eddy van Wessel. BY NICK HOLDSWORTH



#### Eddy's War

Director: Joost van der Valk  
Producer: Zeppers Film & TV  
Country: Netherlands

Eddy van Wessel has a long, distinguished career as the top war photographer in the Netherlands. His trademark black and white photographs form an iconography of man's inhumanity to man over the last three or four decades. He has captured images of conflicts in Chechnya, Syria, and Iraq, to name a few. And yet Ukraine seems to present him with a challenge framed by reaching the limits of a physically – and emotionally – draining job when he is at the peak of his professional experience but facing up to the fact that he is no longer a young man.

#### Bakhmut

Cataloguing the horrors of war across the seasons from the autumn of 2022 through the summer of 2023, Eddy and director Joost van der Valk push themselves to the limits, always seeking the frontlines

and remaining in the shattered city of Bakhmut even after parts of it have been taken by Russian forces.

Van der Valk introduces his audience to Eddy and his work gently compared to the gut-wrenching horror that the genre of war photography can show. A wounded Ukrainian soldier is brought to a casualty clearing station close to the front lines, and the juxtaposition between van der Valk's vivid colour footage and the hauntingly beautiful monochrome images Eddy produces sets up the film.

Bakhmut is a desolate place. It cannot have been very pretty before the war – its Soviet-era prefabricated concrete apartment blocks lack any pleasing aesthetic – but burned and bombed by war, it is now simply a place of pain. Eddy has an eye and a nose for sensing the most telling images. Like most war photographers, he is not immune to human suffering – indeed, he feels his job is a necessary witness to the carnage visited by war – but when working, he is totally focused on the image.

At one point in Bakhmut, Eddy and his Ukrainian assistant arrive in a village on the outskirts shortly after a volley of Russian shells have left civilians crumpled dead in the streets. They pull over, parking their car as safely as possible, and Eddy begins talking to locals and shooting pictures. A man whose neighbour is lying lifeless, wrapped around a metal gate, is

## Living in limbo

**PALESTINE** / Living in exile is hard, as we can experience in Mohamed Jabaly's award-winning *Life Is Beautiful*. Despite the hardships, this film is a feel-good story celebrating solidarity and friendship.

BY MARGARETA HRUZA / ONE WORLD CZ, KRAKOW FILM FESTIVAL



#### Life is Beautiful

Director: Mohamed Jabaly  
Producer: Stray Dog Productions AS  
Country: Norway, Palestine

Mohamed Jabaly is a Palestinian from Gaza. Ever since his father bought him a mobile phone with a camera for his 14th birthday, he has filmed his life as a digital diary. Being a self-taught filmmaker, he led courses at the Gaza Youth Center, introducing young people to media, and this is how he came in contact with the Tvibit Center in Tromsø, Norway.

#### Twin cities

Gaza became the twin city to Tromsø in 2001, leading to the creation of the Tromsø Gaza Twin City Cooperation at Tvibit, a creative production centre



that allows youth from both cities to collaborate on cultural projects within media and arts. Jabaly was invited to stay for a month at the centre in Tromsø when the Israeli government suddenly closed the borders to Gaza, and he found himself stranded in north Norway for an uncertain timespan.

Fortunately, Herman Grevel, the host and project leader at the Tvibit, shows great solidarity by offering to share his home and small office with Jabaly. Over time, Herman takes on a fatherly role for the 25-year-old Palestinian, who has no experience living independently, nor can he cook or deal with Norwegian bureaucrats on his own – understandably. As time passes and summer turns into dark winter, Jabaly waits, although he is unsure of what he is actually waiting for as there are no signs that the borders of Gaza will open soon. With Herman's help, he makes





in shock, blandly stating that the obvious: anyone out in the open didn't stand a chance. Others direct their anger at the journalists, claiming the shelling was caused by his presence. Pleas that they had arrived after the barrage are met with more anger. «Let's get out of here, now,» Eddy mutters as they scurry back to their car.

### Drawing characters

Watching a war photographer at work can be difficult: as others scramble to pull the wounded and dead from wrecked buildings, Eddy is weaving between them to achieve the best shot. It is easy to assume that he does not give a damn about those he photographs when the opposite is the truth. One of my longest-standing professional associations has been with an award-winning Irish war photographer. Although our work together came after his active years in combat zones, I heard plenty of the stories to know what hell he

went through for the incredible images he captured. Of course, there is bravado and ego there – journalism is a job that draws characters, and working in conflict zones exacerbates that. But Eddy's images show a sensitivity and eye for detail that is the mark of a true professional working under the most difficult conditions.

Van der Valk introduces his audience to Eddy and his work gently compared to the gut-wrenching horror that the genre of war photography can show.

It is telling that, at one point, Eddy remarks that he failed to get his best shots in Bakhmut because of the con-

stant distractions from snipers and drones. The war in Ukraine must be really hell if a war photographer remarks on that. His professional ego comes to the surface on the occasions when he is prevented from achieving what he aims to: a beautiful shot of a father with a couple of kids balanced on his bicycle is lost because Eddy's assistant seems reluctant to stop at the moment Eddy wants. And, later, in the summer of 2023, when Eddy has gained permission to operate with an armoured brigade on the frontlines, his frustration at being stopped from actually going up to the trenches is evident: he explodes, first cursing in English, then Dutch. «I understand the difficulties of getting me up there, but this is history!» he exclaims.

### Adding to the record

Van der Valk balances the wrenching war scenes with peaceful interludes in which

Eddy is back in the Netherlands, printing photographs or visiting family in Sweden.

The closing images of this moving portrayal of Ukraine's anguish show us the scene where a crowded restaurant in Kramatorsk has been hit by a Russian missile – killing more than a dozen people, including acclaimed Ukrainian writer Victoria Amelina – and the funeral of two young sisters who also died there. Van der Valk's footage captures the distressing funeral, with mourners collapsing in tears over the coffins; Eddy's still shots are images of painful beauty.

The war in Ukraine is producing more and more documentaries. Some, like this one, are excellent—it is not surprising that *20 Days in Mariupol* won an Oscar. Others are not so good. But all of them add something to the record of the horrors Russia has visited upon the country—and that record can never be considered final while the war continues to rage.

his first application for an artist visa, which he receives after an 8-month-long wait, although only with permission to stay for a year, meaning he needs to think of writing a new application right away. This turns out to be the beginning of an ongoing process leading to uncertainty and anxiety, as any planning for the future seems impossible. He has no idea how long he will be able to stay in Norway, nor does he have any other place to go.

In search of a purpose and with the solid encouragement of Herman, Mohammed decides to make something out of all the hundreds of hours of recordings he has.

Living in a state of limbo with prolonged uncertainty often leads to serious mental issues such as anxiety, stress, and, ultimately, depression. Studies have shown that many applicants wait a long time for permission to stay, isolating themselves and avoiding communication with others due to their uncertainty and inability to commit. In search of a purpose and with the solid encouragement of Herman, Mohammed decides to make something out of all the hundreds of hours of recordings he has. This has resulted in two films that have made headlines in film festival circuits.

### Ambulance unit

At first, the mission is to make a film about the 51 days he spent with the Gaza ambulance unit during the Israeli airstrike attacks in 2014. Again, Herman demonstrates solid support by orchestrating a professional team and flies Jabaly to Copenhagen to work with an editor. Jabaly is going through growing pains as he transforms from an amateur to a professional filmmaker. After long hours in the editing room, the editor parts with him, saying, «You see now, Mohamed, the way we cut the film, it can not be called *Ambulance*. Do you feel that?» Jabaly nods, discouraged, while he records the whole process on his mobile as a digital letter to his mother, who encourages him not to give up his dream. Through persistent hard work, *Ambulance* became one of the most celebrated documentary films of 2017.

As *Ambulance* is travelling to film festivals worldwide and collecting awards, Jabaly can not attend the screenings personally because the Norwegian government will not grant him an artist visa. The reasoning is rather absurd, as they argue that he can not call himself a professional film director when he does not have an official film education. As Jabaly continues to film everything important that happens in his life in his digital diary, he is documenting what turns out to be a 7-year struggle with the Norwegian bureaucracy, which becomes the core of Jabaly's second film, *Life is Beautiful*.

### A second home

Jabaly receives great professional support



from the experienced editor Erland Edenholm. The chronological storyline depicts Jabaly's growing struggle with the Norwegian bureaucracy, while his memories and thoughts oscillate between Gaza and its traumatic memories of war destruction. In contrast, the film portrays everyday scenes from his life in Tromsø as he gradually adapts to living in a Nordic region where the sun never sets in the summer and never rises in the winter. In this way, the film draws attention to two important contemporary issues: the suffering of the people of Gaza and the mental anguish experienced by millions of asylum seekers worldwide. The film score composed by Gaute Barlindhaug sets the tone right away, indicating that this will be a feel-good movie despite the difficult topics. The feel-good aspect reflects Jabaly's good-natured personality and the engagement his colleagues at Tvibit demonstrate in solidarity with his case. Today, Mohamed Jabaly works at

the Tvibit Center as a project leader, and it seems he has found a place he can truly call his second home.

*Life is Beautiful* is a testament to hard work and talent, but its ultimate success is due to the fact that Jabaly, as a Palestinian filmmaker, has managed to resonate with the global community through his films. Without the connections and support of his colleagues at Tvibit, this film would never have been made, which reinforces a well-known fact in the film industry: you can't create a film without strong support from your friends and a great team.

As of writing this review, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas G. Støre made a historic statement, declaring that recognizing Palestine as a state is essential for achieving peace in the Middle East. He urged other nations to do the same. Had Norway recognized Palestine as a sovereign nation decades ago, like India did in 1974, a peaceful two-state solution might have been more achievable today.



# Life without papers

**MODERNITY** / Revealing the hidden world of the evaporated.

BY MELITA ZAJC / CPH:DOX, THESSALONIKI DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL



## Johatsu - Into Thin Air

Director: Andreas Hartmann, Arata Mori  
Producer: Ossa Film, BR Bayerischer Rundfunk, Mori Film  
Country: Germany, Japan

Ms Saita 'started her night escape service around twenty years ago. Today, her company, TSC, is one of Japan's biggest of its kind. *Johatsu – Into Thin Air* delicately follows her as she performs her daily chores of night-moving, disclosing a world we didn't know existed: every year, between eighty and one hundred thousand people are reported missing in Japan. Most of them are found or return home, but thousands of others simply vanish. They are known as Johatsu, «the evaporated.» This German-Japanese production, directed by Andreas Hartmann and Arata Mori, just won the main prize at the DOK fest Munchen. Apart from revealing an unknown world, the directors also manage to show that the phenomenon of people disappearing without a trace, marked by traditional Japanese cultural values, also bears universal traits and relevance.

---

Among «the evaporated,» as the Japanese vividly defines them, are people who suffered domestic abuse, were victims of organised crime, and were blackmailed by abusive employers.

---

### Avoiding the shame and harassment

Night Escape Companies emerged in the 1990s when thousands of people fled their debt after the collapse of Japan's economic bubble, as we learn at the start of the film. These companies operate within the law, but some of their activities fall into a grey area. Given the delicate subject, the film does not reveal much about the legal procedure of the disappearance. More attention is paid to the relationships between Ms Saita and her clients: she is helping them escape by driving them away from their former homes, packing their belongings, and giving them emotional support in distress. From her clients' first-person testimonies, fragmented and cryptic, we learn that



avoiding responsibilities and finances in the first place is not the only motive for people to change identities and leave their former lives without a trace. Among «the evaporated,» as the Japanese vividly defines them, are people who suffered domestic abuse, were victims of organised crime, and were blackmailed by abusive employers.

### The new normal

Just like they avoid the legal aspects and procedures of the Night Escapes, the authors are also careful not to openly connect the practice of voluntary disappearance to the Japanese cultural norms, social stigma, and shame. Rather, they concentrate on the routine of life after the «evaporation,» the normality of the new life. Proving that, yes, there is no official evidence of these people, but they do exist. Contemplating what they did, speaking about their afterlife and the problems they have, they do not mention the problems with the authorities or the state. They are missing their previous life – some their parents, some their children, and others, again, simply miss the «normal life.» On the other hand, through a parallel story from the opposite side, we learn that those left behind are also missing those who disappeared. We observe the mother and a private detective she engaged to find her missing son. In vain.

«There is no such thing as society», Margaret Thatcher claimed in 1987. Thatcher was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979 to 1990 and whose policies (along with those of US President Ronald Reagan) paved the ground for what we know today as liberal capitalism. The documentary by Hartmann and Mori indicates that her

statement might have become the truth.

Modern society has been closely tied to the notion of personal identity. The notion of the person as an active subject of their destiny and history is built into the Renaissance model of representation of space, organised around one central point, the viewing point of the spectator, re-asserted in the vanishing point of the representation. One subject with one identity was essential for the rise of capitalism and for the modern state, which had its «raison d'être» in its' citizens' registers and control over them.

### Grey zone

One of the first known areas where the state had no control over its citizens was Nigeria. Scholars (Brian Larkin in *Signal and Noise*, 2008) warned that official statistical, demographic, and economic data only partly correspond to the factual situation. It was proof that the state does not have control over the whole country and that part of its territory, economy, and demographics is not completely outside the law but somewhere in between, a sort of grey zone, very much like the evaporated people of Japan. However, Nigeria is a country of the global south, and in a certain sense, forced to cope with the Western norms of modernity. Japan is one of the most developed parts of the global north. *Johatsu – Into Thin Air* outlines a novel, hybrid reality suspended between the abandoned, unbearable normality of before and the new normality in the making, where people can live and work without a legal personal identity. Without papers.

### The society vanishes

Hartmann's and Mori's careful

observation presents a complex and ambiguous reality. If providing escape service is lucrative, the number of people ready to «evaporate» is not negligible. It might be a sign that the modern state itself is evaporating in the air. A sort of dark side of what has been the major concern during the last decades: the weakening of the powers of the state compared to corporations and the reduction of responsibilities of the state towards its citizens. This was exactly what Thatcher's discourse was about. She said, I quote, «You know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first.»

---

Modern society has been closely tied to the notion of personal identity.

---

There is another view, though. The contemporary state has developed along various citizens' identification and control systems, with names and family names, city streets and addresses, photographic portraits and identity cards, and compulsory birth records. Considering the tragic destinies of people who find themselves without papers, for example, among migrants, the news that there is life without identity papers can also be liberating.

*Johatsu – Into Thin Air*, a precious documentary surprise, starts as an intimate portrait of its protagonists' feelings, and ends as an invitation to think about the future of human life.

# An unknown soldier

**CONFLICT** / Contrasting quiet Ukrainian life compositions with intercepted phone conversations between Russian soldiers and their families. BY MARGARETA HRUZA/ KRAKOW FILM FESTIVAL, DOCUDAYS UA



## Intercepted

Director: Oksana Karpovych  
Producer: Les films Cosmos  
Country: Canada, France, Ukraine

Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began at dawn on February 24, 2022, Ukrainian security forces have been tapping into the mobile communications of Russian soldiers, recording their conversations and posting them online. Filmmakers have used these recorded phone conversations freely, and Oksana Karpovych is one who skillfully utilises them in her film *Intercepted*. What makes *Intercepted* stand out is how successfully Karpovych has created a distinct cinematographic form based on juxtaposing sound and pictures to create tension between what is seen and heard.

### Living paintings

Karpovych begins her film with darkness, and we can barely hear some faint sounds that make the viewer think of lurking danger. The scene opens by capturing a serene moment of children playing by an abandoned country road. A girl is on a swing, and like a pendulum, she swings from one side of the frame to another. The minimalistic music, composed by the Ukrainian musician Olesia Onykienko, intensifies and eventually merges with the sound of thunder, foreshadowing the imminent presence of evil. While evil is not visible, its approaching destruction is hinted at through the escalating audio.

Then, all of a sudden, we see the world from the point of view of an invading soldier looking from his tank as he drives through destroyed villages. The initial phone conversations have even a humorous tone and indicate that the soldiers still think their mission is a field trip. They are so excited about how amazing the Ukrainian ice cream is and how delicious real juice tastes. They also mention how fertile the soil is and the nice clothing they find in the bombed homes. «The Ukrainians live much better than us at home,» they all say with awe. «I snatched some makeup for you and something small for everyone in the family,» one soldier reported. The woman on the other end of the line is thrilled and laughs, «You wouldn't be Russian if you didn't steal something!»

The camera peacefully observes the devastation of bombed landscapes and the tireless efforts of people to clean up the rubble and restore a sense of normalcy in a war zone.

Christopher Nunn's camerawork is reminiscent of the visual poetry found in Roy Andersson's films. The still images resemble living paintings, allowing viewers ample time to contemplate each

scene. Nunn's camera captures not only the destruction of Ukrainian homes but also the war's impact on humanity. The camera peacefully observes the devastation of bombed landscapes and the tireless efforts of people to clean up the rubble and restore a sense of normalcy in a war zone.

### Gradual gloom

Gradually, the accounts of the soldiers become gloomier as they become disillusioned. If there is one thing they all realize, it is that state propaganda fooled them, and everything is based on lies. The soldiers are at first told that they are entering Ukraine as liberators, but soon, they realise that they have been lured into a combat field to murder and loot.

Most realise they are mere pawns in a power game set up by Putin. «Are you bombing the NATO bases?» asks one father to his son, who answers, «I have not seen anyone yet.» The father is a little confused, «But they show us on the TV that we are bombing one NATO base after another.» His soldier son replies, «Don't believe what they show you; it is all false.» The father says, «Those at home find it hard to believe – so why are you fighting there and what is the meaning of this all?» His son replies, «It is not for the people. It is for Putin and his sense of power.»

*Intercepted* is as much a witness of the atrocities of war, as well as a study of the systematic dehumanisation process. Committing war crimes becomes a standard practice. «I have seen things no time can erase,» says a despaired soul to

his girlfriend. Gunning down a mother in front of her children just because she happens to be out for an afternoon walk, executing children, and torturing and murdering Ukrainian prisoners of war are just some of the accounts we hear. A tired soldier yells to his crying wife, «Listen! This is the last thing I have to say – just make sure that our son never joins the army.»

When the conversation ends, the film turns to long-lasting, observable scenes captured from a prison camp. Now, for the first time, we see the soldiers. We see these silent, broken men quietly shuffling around in the cafeteria line, their skin as pale as the washed-out walls behind them. These are broken human beings that no timespan can heal. Even men turned into monsters are victims of the machinery of war.

### Few stand

Hopefully, one day, people in Russia will be able to see this film. *Intercepted* is an exemplary film about the extent of potential destruction caused by false news, how dangerous it is for its people, and how easily the people are led by manipulation. It is hard to know what the Russian people think and feel about the Ukrainian war. Only some dare to express themselves, as the woman who cries to her soldier friend, «Please, don't call me anymore!... Destruction is a choice, and they [the state leaders] have chosen that for you. This is the choice we made by simply staying silent.» Some stand up, but they are few.

Would you like to advertise with us?

– in print or online

Contact our communication manager  
[steve@moderntimes.review](mailto:steve@moderntimes.review)





# Eastern promises

**ELECTIONS** / Tricked by cynical populists' fake commitments for their own obscure ends, the elderly residents of an entire village in Georgia are left toothless, figuratively and literally.

BY MARIANA HRISTOVA

## Smiling Georgia

Director: Luka Beradze  
 Producer: 1991 Productions, Color of May, Enkeny Films  
 Country: Georgia, Germany

At a synopsis level, Luka Beradze's debut feature *Smiling Georgia* evokes an instant comparison with another bitterly humorous documentary, the 2006 *Sugartown: The Bridegrooms*. Its director, Kimon Tsakiris, follows the successful election campaign of a small-town mayoral candidate who won after promising to match the predominantly male local population with single Ukrainian women. And even though the utopian concept fails after an inevitable collision with reality, the newly elected governor at least tries to fulfil his commitment by indeed organizing a trip for his voters to a twin Ukrainian city packed with single females.

In *Smiling Georgia*, the pre-electoral «words of honour» are backed by less ambitious, cheaper, and generally more easily fulfilled pledges. Nevertheless, the elderly characters do not turn out to be that lucky. After being promised free dental repairs in 2012 by the then Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, so they could look forward to a bright future with big smiles when they eventually re-elect him, the whole murky business resulted in a significant portion of the ageing population in the region of Chiatura waking up

edental. Their benefactor Saakashvili, who is currently in prison following abuse of power accusations, evaporated immediately after his campaign failed and went into hiding abroad. But beforehand, in order to be more convincing in securing votes in his favour, he had arranged an ostentatious group tooth-pulling campaign, abandoning the seniors who trusted him in an awkward comic-tragic situation shortly afterwards. «No one has time for your teeth now,» one of the victims was told when she subsequently attempted to get hold of her prosthetics.

### Media and the people

A Man of the People might step back, but the media traces inevitably remain. The film includes comically ridiculous promotional videos with Saakashvili (fondly called Misha by his supporters), who passionately shares his plans to bring back shiny smiles to the people under a special campaign titled «Smiling Georgia,» adding that Hollywood might also show interest. People praise and bless him, seemingly unsuspecting or unwilling to suspect that their hopes might be betrayed as usual. And when that happens, they meekly share personal testimonies in front of Lomero Akhvlediani's camera for this current documentary, apparently unconcerned that their faces, personalities and private experiences could be misused again. Only one man dares to doubt and slams the door in the face, not of the *Smiling*

*Georgia* team, but of a TV crew when, eight years later, politics again shows concern for the locals' teeth on the eve of a new election campaign. The charitable affair quickly ends, however, when the presenter fails to find suitable characters for her show, while the Georgian Dream political party wins with a convincing majority with and without the votes from Chiatura. Life goes on quietly, undisturbed, though toothless, surrounded by stunning natural landscapes.

It is precisely the regularly appearing captions to these landscapes that seem to imply there is a huge gap between the humans who still live close to their land and the ruling class who inhabits media reality but also governs with the help of its tools. The inhabitants of these remote places – who are barely immersed in the media bubble and perceive everything broadcast there as absolute reality when they are – are easily susceptible to manipulation, so the elite conveniently takes advantage and «casts» them to fill up screen time at the earliest opportunity. In this regard, *Smiling Georgia* portrays a clash of worlds that would otherwise never collide. The prospects are that one will swallow up the other, which is not so far off in such areas of dwindling population.

### Should we laugh. Should we cry.

Intentionally or not, the film evokes a rich palette of amplified emotions: from sympathy to indignation, from stifled laughter to immediate shame

induced by the fact that such an unfortunate situation can prompt sniggering. The narrative style combines hilarious absurdism with an authentic depiction of tragic realms, getting close enough to stir compassion and keep enough distance to not feel voyeuristic. The visual layer is also jokey – from the iconic prosthetics in the snow of the opening shot and the poster to the close-ups of everyday details, such as the cluttered table around which all important decisions are made. Meanwhile, the rhythmic montage, a joint work between Beradze himself, experienced editor Nodar Nozadze, and director Ioseb 'Soso' Bliadze (known for his debut fiction feature *A Room On My Own*), is in danceable sync with the catchy music score by Alexandre Kordzaia which contributes further to the overall ironic mood of the film.

The fable-like ending, featuring two men who seem to have taken their pig out to graze amidst tranquil greenery, might appear surprisingly positive to a rational mind. However, despite all misfortunes, it takes on a different hue within the context of enduring Georgian joyfulness. There, under the tree with a heavenly view extending as far as their eyes can see, they peacefully conclude that regardless of who comes to power, they will still have to fend for themselves. What more optimistic conclusion could there be than the realization that our destiny is in our own hands?



# Scrolling into the abyss

**NIHILISM** / A globe-trotting journey through the emotional wasteland of the digital age. BY STEVE RICKINSON / CPH:DOX



## Can't Feel Nothing

Director: David Borenstein  
Producer: Snowglobe  
Country: Denmark

A 2024 CPH:DOX World Premiere, *Can't Feel Nothing*, unveils the unsettling numbness pervading the digital age. Kickstarted by Director David Borenstein's own struggle with digital addiction and desensitisation (becoming a «screen zombie,» as he calls it), the film is a globe-trotting adventure through the emotional effects of the (still) surprisingly mainstream avenues of the web.

### The light that shines on all

The film opens with an image that is all too familiar: a man lies in his bed, illuminated only by the eerie blue-white light of his smartphone, mindlessly scrolling through an endless feed that swings wildly between the trivial and the traumatic, yet feeling utterly detached. We don't know what features on his feed, but take a moment to think about what appears on your own these days: a relentless ethnic cleansing approved by some of the world's most influential powers, a climate disaster well past a point of no return, continued manifestations of late-stage capitalist destruction, all scattered with the latest sociopathic tale of «rugged individualism» are but a few consistently appearing on mine.

---

Mindlessly scrolling through an endless feed that swings wildly between the trivial and the traumatic

---

With a professional life dependent on connectivity, I can hardly pinpoint my own point of desensitisation (sometime around 2010, maybe, deep in the throes of the ruthless and unrelenting New York City media sphere). Nevertheless, its all-consuming nature is heavy and persistent and trickles into virtually all aspects of my life, particularly decision-making. I all-to-frequently ask myself, «Do I even care?»

### Global nihilism

Imbued with light-hearted curiosity and



critical interrogation, Borenstein explores who exactly orchestrates our digital emotions—anger, sadness, arousal, apathy—and questions if there is a path to reclaim our emotional integrity. These stories serve as practical illustrations of B.F. Skinner's reinforcement theory, showcasing how digital platforms engineer emotional responses to cultivate addiction-like user engagement. In the context of social media, these concepts manifest through algorithmically catalysed mechanisms like likes, shares, saves, and comments, which serve as forms of said reinforcement.

The film spans investigations across the USA, China, North Macedonia, and Russia. Throughout his travels, Borenstein encounters a diverse array of digital manipulators and victims. Each segment introduces viewers to different visuals that embody the effects of this digital over-engagement: an admittedly lonely American internet troll who thrives on the chaos of online animosity, a burnt-out Asian influencer superstar seemingly one of many in the factory-like online friendship industry, a Danish therapist with an increasing number of clients feeling emotionally numb, and an operative and full-time doctor from a fake-news factory in Eastern Europe who exposes the calculated spread of disinformation. Perhaps most striking is the segment featuring a Russian state propagandist who manipulates emotions for a living. In mentioning how Trump supporters and Western feminists are particularly easy targets, he explicitly illustrates the commodification of human interaction in stark, almost dystopian terms.

For me, the young Chinese man who has

spent some \$75K on his gamified digital friend (of which he is happy to pay more in order to achieve various advanced «levels» of friendship) was the most striking vignette. In internet-speak, he would be the prime example of a «simp» (short for simpleton). Or someone who shows excessive sympathy and attention toward another person who typically does not reciprocate the same feelings in pursuit of emotional affection. This personality is rampant across the internet, particularly in the era of Pornhub and OnlyFans. It is the foundation of the modern «incel»—a group found everywhere, from gaming forums to mass shooter appreciation pages.

---

These stories serve as practical illustrations of B.F. Skinner's reinforcement theory, showcasing how digital platforms engineer emotional responses to cultivate addiction-like user engagement.

---

Despite its scope and the severity of its critique, *Can't Feel Nothing* manages to provide a humanistic lens on all its subjects, ensuring we see the people (and, in many cases, their suffering) behind the online avatars. Therefore, the film doesn't criticise. Instead, it seeks to understand the lure and impact of digital interaction

on real lives, especially given its narrative is grounded in alarming real statistics. These include a report by the Pew Research Center that about 28% of adults in the U.S. are «almost constantly» online. The World Health Organization and UN Secretary-General have also highlighted concerns about digital media's impact on mental health, particularly noting the rise in anxiety, loneliness, and depression linked to heavy use.

### Post-emotion

While the film doesn't necessarily break new ground in its critique of social media—that these platforms can lead to emotional numbing is by now a familiar argument—it distinguishes itself through its storytelling. It challenges its audience to consider the implications of living in a world where emotions can be algorithmically triggered and where human experiences largely occur through the inherent barrier of the screen.

Realistically speaking, it may be too little, too late. Artificial Intelligence, for example, has quickly proliferated to ubiquity. Aside from its productivity aides, it has lit a fire under the capabilities of emotional manipulation. App-based chatbot psychologists, AI «dream girls,» and, of course, deep fakes and degenerative audio are but a few. There are also the «chans.» Alternative social media, which served as a breeding ground for incel culture and the alt-right. All of these have extended beyond the individual and digital and permeated throughout real society, evolving it into something where a post-emotion mindset may be as vital to self-survival as a diversified asset portfolio and medicinal marijuana prescription.





# Widowhood in India as farmers' suicides soar

**GRIEF** / Amidst India's farmer suicide crisis, a young woman navigates her grief as she joins a community of widows.

BY SEVARA PAN / CPH:DOX



## Marching in the Dark

Director: Kinshuk Surjan  
 Producer: Clin d'oeil films  
 Country: Belgium, Netherlands, India

Supporting its leaves high above the ground, a tree fans out to meet the soil. Its branches extend to the edge of the tree's silhouette. Several men and youths stand nearby; their feet occupy a patch of the ploughed land. A tree is now a crime scene where a farmer has hanged himself. The body has already been removed, with only the uttered stories to remind us of the befallen tragedy. And the tree is to be felled.

### Suicide crisis

The feature debut by Kinshuk Surjan *Marching in the Dark* unfolds in India's Maharashtra, in the backdrop of the farmer suicide crisis, with more and more people succumbing to the pressures of crop failures, volatile market prices, rising costs and overwhelming debts. «Something is terribly wrong in the countryside,» said Former Chairman of

the National Commission of Farmers, M.S. Swaminathan. The quote well encapsulates the troubling statistics that report over 400,000 Indian farmers committing suicide in the last two decades. According to recent figures, during the years of the BJP-led Modi government's tenure, about 30 farmers died by suicide daily.

Soaring suicide rates among farmers have led to a surge in widowhood in India, including younger women who are still rearing children. Widowhood in India comes with a particular vulnerability to discrimination, social and economic marginalisation and ostracisation, as society—marked by stringent patriarchal mores—by and large confers status on a woman through a man. Stigmatisation of widows is further perpetuated by certain customary codes and religious symbolism associated with widowhood, which deem widows as «bringing misfortune» or being «unworthy.»

«Something is terribly wrong in the countryside»

### An invisible group

Bearing witness to adversities facing this «invisible» group of women, the film focuses on Sanjivani, a widow in her 30s and a mother of two, who navigates her life after her farmer-husband—crushed by debts—died by suicide. A compellingly

austere and unadorned in its formalistic approach, the film drops us into the life of the young widow, simply documenting her daily routines, which oscillate between manifold responsibilities and chores, from silkworm farming to mending clothes, tending to children and preparing meals for her brother-in-law's family. Amidst all the tasks, Sanjivani also studies, which turns into a furtive undertaking, as does joining a local support group for widows, with her having to conjure up excuses to attend the group sessions.

Articulating a gentle yet keen sense of observation, the film carefully places the observed world into a frame of storytelling, all the while extrapolating on the question of impact in a documentary film. Can impact be attained all along the process of filmmaking rather than only after the film is completed, distributed, and seen? – the director wonders in her notes on the film. Banding together the changemakers (such as psychologist and activist Dr. Potdar, who works suicide prevention among farmers, and the NGO Manaswini that advocates against violence and discrimination against women) and the widows in group sessions taking place within the bounds of the film, Surjan treats the filmmaking process not only as a means of crafting a socially pertinent story but also as a vessel to affect change while the camera is still rolling.

### Narrative safe spaces

Proving effective as narrative pillars, the group sessions in the film ultimately serve



as safe spaces for the widows to confide their grief, share stories of resilience, and partake in joyous celebrations or auspicious events that they are excluded from. The women also exchange views on the veiled areas of widowhood, such as child widowhood or entering into new conjugal relations following the death of their husbands. One woman who got wedded as a child recalls, «My husband died when I was 17. [...] I was in seventh grade when they got me married. I have two kids now. [...] I couldn't even grasp his death [at that age],» she says.

«To be a widow in India is to become invisible to the state, the society, and even to her own family,» quotes the film's press notes. Aptly using subtle narrative techniques, Sanjivani creates a poignant portrait of widowhood, its ineffable weight, and the inevitable traces of grace. The film closes with Sanjivani at home, barred from attending a Hindu observance akin to other widows. The woman's silence, which seems to span several minutes, builds up an oppressive tension, which discharges at last into the whirring of the sewing machine.





# Bodily autonomy in contemporary Europe

**BODIES** / Elina Psykou's debut feature delves into biopolitics and bodily management, reflecting on Foucault's theory of biopower in Europe.

BY OLIVIA POPP / CPH:DOX, THESSALONIKI FILM FESTIVAL



## Stray Bodies

Director: Elina Psykou  
 Producer: Jungle Films, Contrast Film, Doclab, Red Carpet  
 Country: Greece, Switzerland, Italy, Bulgaria

What does it really mean to «play God,» with all of its many connotations?

So asks Elina Psykou in her debut documentary feature, a profoundly observant survey of bodily autonomy and biopolitical control in today's Europe. *Stray Bodies* interrogates the interconnectedness of a trio of biomedical procedures: abortion, in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), and assisted suicide. The filmmaker provokes broader questions around definitions of autonomy and (human) rights, aspects claimed to be fundamental to a modern European identity.

*Stray Bodies* recently premiered at the Thessaloniki International Documentary Festival — where it received a special mention — and made its way to CPH:DOX, where it competed for the F:ACT Award. While the plethora of stories is sometimes difficult to follow, it's no small feat to tackle these topics together, even in 109 minutes; *Stray Bodies* could easily be a five-hour exploration and still barely scratch the surface. Instead, with her essayistic approach and experimental touches, Psykou connects the dots rather than diving deep, a sharp and necessary perspective on topics inundated by harsh contestations.

## A biopolitical regime

The film's English title brilliantly captures the multiplicity of the human body when made political: stray, indicating wandering or roaming, or otherwise undesired, random, aimless. Psykou's cinematic linkages are an apt examination of what Michel Foucault popularised

as biopolitics, where (bio)power is derived from the management and discipline of bodies. He proposed that the modern Westphalian regime of liberal sovereignty aims to «make live and let die» in order to harness populations.

Psykou predominantly examines cases within Malta, Italy, Greece, and Switzerland, where biopower is exerted in different ways. In Malta, abortion was illegal without exception until 2023, where it is now legal if the mother's life is threatened. In Italy, single women and same-sex couples are banned from fertility treatments and artificial insemination, but abortion within the first 90 days has been legal since 1978. In Greece, both abortion and medically assisted reproduction are legal. Assisted suicide has been legal in Switzerland since 1942 — and it is also legal in certain cases in the Netherlands, Belgium, and now Spain and Italy.

In Europe, does a right to live also mean a right to die? A right to have a child? Who qualifies for each, and who gets to decide?

## Women in transit

While bodily autonomy is not strictly a women's issue, women's bodies (and all bodies with reproductive abilities) are more actively policed. *Stray Bodies* almost exclusively features women forced to be mobile to exert any biopolitical agency. Mobility within the Schengen Zone makes it possible for the women to take control of their bodily autonomy, even while their own countries prevent it.

After she gets pregnant from a one-night stand, young Maltese student Robin takes a ferry to Sicily to get an abortion, while Caterina, a single woman who wants a biological child, flies to Greece to undergo IVF. Several other subjects are also afforded brief snapshots. Kiki, a Greek woman with ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis) who has lost the ability to speak verbally, wishes to die «with dignity» by assisted suicide but cannot do so legally in Greece. Gaia, an Italian woman, has actively practiced «procreative tourism» since 2018. Madame Duvivier, a quadriplegic elderly French woman, ends her life in Switzerland through assisted suicide.

The film also includes interjections from three individuals who oppose abortion: a socially conservative male Italian politi-



Psykou connects the dots rather than diving deep, a sharp and necessary perspective on topics inundated by harsh contestations

cian, a Swiss woman who aids in assisted suicide, and a deacon for the Church of Rome. Even if one disagrees with their staunch views, it is hard to ignore that they provide interesting perspectives on the biopolitics of bodies: that women are valued by how much they produce, that artificial insemination could offer a gateway to selective breeding, and that biomedicine intervenes with the intention of letting live at all costs, regardless of consent.

## Immaculate conception(s)

From the start of the film, Psykou fills the film with shots of religious iconography, including statues of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Using clips from films, she also draws parallels between IVF and the Immaculate Conception, pointing to pervasive religious sentiment in the overwhelmingly Catholic countries of Italy and Malta. Curiously enough, even while religious fanaticism denounces abortion as interventionist, modern science and Western biomedicine derive from the Christian idea that God willed man to harness nature.

In the credits, Psykou acknowledges her unintended complicity in the cycle of nonconsent and intervention. She dedicates the film to her son, «to whom [she] gave birth without asking him,» and to her parents, who «gave birth to [her] without asking.» She daringly proposes that we humans, too, play God every day without ever realising it — and whether we like it or not.





# Echoes of Geronimo

**IDENTITY** / A captivating road movie adventure to find the lost Apache tribe blending humour and poignant revelations on the complex tapestry of indigenous identity and colonial impact. BY HELLE HANSEN / CPH:DOX



## Phantoms of the Sierra Madre

Director: Håvard Bustnes  
 Producer: UpNorth Film  
 Country: Norway, Finland, USA, Mexico

It is seven years since the Norwegian film director Håvard Bustnes started developing the film. Seven years ago, the world was different regarding perceptions of what was appropriate to say and do. Bustnes shares his troubles and realizations during the making of the film *Phantom of the Sierra Madre* after the world premiere at CPH:DOX, together with two of the characters in the film, Pius and Lars K. Andersen and the executive producer Bird Runningwater.

### Helge Ingstad

Andersen has been fascinated by native Americans since he was a small boy, and the fascination followed him in his adult years. Inspired by the Norwegian explorer and author Helge Ingstad, who, back in the late thirties, made an expedition to the Apaches in New Mexico, searching for chief Geronimo's lost tribe. Now, Andersen wants to follow Ingstad's footsteps and investigate if anyone is left of the tribe. The road movie sets off. Andersen is a character in the film and also the scriptwriter. Bustnes is the director who also appears in the film.

It seems like a very honest film. Andersen declares in the beginning: «I walked into a world that was not mine» and «we thought we had every right to do what we were doing.» Luckily, Andersen gets in touch with Pius, but first, after approaching people on the streets and calling for help in a radio program – Andersen speaks Spanish, which is helpful along the way. Pius makes contact, declaring that he is the great-great-grandson of Geronimo. Pius is very helpful in taking Andersen to his relatives and helping to investigate a question he also finds interesting. He asks his uncle if it is right or wrong to look for them, and when the uncle gives his approval, the film continues to ask: Are any of the Apaches left in Mexico?

### Geronimo

We also encounter two Mexican sisters who claim to be descendants of an unknown daughter of Geronimo. The meeting takes place in no-man's land between the USA and Mexico. Pius, a family member, and Andersen are present.

The sisters argue loudly, and it is clear that the Apache inheritance and identity are crucial.

The film is full of humour, surprises and, to me, new knowledge about how some people try to benefit from being descended from Geronimo. It is a film that also discusses who is entitled to tell other people's stories. At a point, the film is shown to Amanda Fayant, an indigenous Canadian with a degree in indigenous studies. Andersen is waiting for her opinion: «It is a sad film. Colonialists have told the story. Now, it is time for the indigenous to tell their story. We need to consider: do we have the right to know everything?»

### Are any of the Apaches left in Mexico?

We witness an uncomfortable argument between Andersen and Bustnes driving in the car. An anthropologist, Dr. Medina, has contacted Andersen and claims he knows where the Apache are, but they don't want to be found, and he will not tell or talk to Andersen. Back in the car, Andersen is upset. Bustnes argues that Medina is right. Maybe it is not their business to look for them. Andersen gets furious and wants the camera turned off. It is fantastic and cringe.

### Stolen artefacts

In the next scene, Andersen is hospitalised with a possible heart attack. It is truly a road movie. Luckily, Andersen survives. He travels to Norway to Ingstad's old house and meets his grandson. In the attic, a big suitcase belonging to Ingstad is still intact, with some of his possessions. The grandson unwraps a secret artefact that Ingstad improperly brought to Norway, but he might not have known better at that time. It is a delicate scene. Andersen promises to return the artefact to Pius so he can return it where it belongs. Pius is very upset by Ingstad's ignorance. Again, the film points to the different opinions one had 80 years ago versus today, but we still have some miles to go.

Back in Denmark, Lars is writing the ending scene: Pius and Lars travel to Sierra Madre to return the stolen artefact – but he deletes his name and concludes, after all, it wasn't my story. Thanks to Andersen, Pius and Bustnes for inviting us to see the story from a wider perspective, focusing on ethical dilemmas. I left the theatre much more clear about what I find appropriate today. What Ingstad did is almost a century ago, but is that an apology? I don't think so, even though I understand the lack of knowledge. What I am certain about is that without Pius, the film couldn't have been made today.







# The secret battle between Russia and the West

**RUSSIA** / Russian President Vladimir Putin blames the West for the war in Ukraine, but as *Putin's Playground* shows, the Kremlin has been subverting the west to suit its own agenda for years. BY NICK HOLDSWORTH / ONE WORLD CZ



## Putin's Playground

Director: Konrad Szolajski  
Country: Poland, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Norway, Latvia, Germany

The war in Ukraine is only the most visible and recent manifestation of a conflict between Russia and the West that has been bubbling beneath the surface of European politics for years, Konrad Szolajski's documentary *Putin's Playground* demonstrates.

Beginning with a deep dive into an apparently Russian-backed wiretapping scandal in Poland in 2014, where leaked conversations with senior government and financial figures weakened the pro-EU party Civic Platform and laid the ground for the election of right-wing nationalists, the Law and Justice Party, Szolajski examines the hybrid warfare of recent years, where Moscow's hand has been seen in influencing support for populist measures, including Brexit, across Europe.

Known as 'the Gerasimov Doctrine' – the policy of subversion means that Europe is «no longer in a state of war or peace,» as one NATO-affiliated Think Tank puts it. «We are no longer in a state of war or a state of peace. The reality is that these days – partially because of technological advancement – we are in a permanent state of confrontation. We can no longer say we are at war or peace; you don't have to roll tanks across a border to subdue or subvert a country.»

Szolajski – who keeps himself in frame through much of the film – assiduously tracks down key figures involved in investigating the scandal, where more than 700 hours of recordings were made over the course of more than 80 meetings with senior politicians and officials

at two Warsaw restaurants. We see how simple it is to place unobtrusive recording devices that can pick up conversations from a distance of several metres and hear snippets of conversations recorded at the upmarket Sowa I Przyjaciele (Sowa and Friends) restaurant at the time.

In Poland, the episode was dubbed «Waitergate» – because of the involvement of two restaurant employees in the wiretapping.

Eventually, Marek Falenta, a Polish businessman with interests in the coal industry (and reported multi-million-dollar debts to a Russian coal company), was convicted of organising the operation. But by then, the damage had been done: remarks in 2014 by Radosław Sikorski, the then foreign minister, who described Polish defence ties with the US as «worthless» had had their effect.

Europe is «no longer in a state of war or peace»

## Hybrid warfare

Szolajski and Malgorzata Prociak, his partner and producer, set off on a journey around Central and Eastern Europe to trace Russian links in episodes of hybrid warfare.

They stop off near Zlin, in the Czech Republic, where in October 2014, an explosion at a warehouse owned by a Czech arms dealer left two dead. (There was another explosion at the same site a couple of months later.) Investigators later linked two Russian military intelligence agents to the explosion, believed to have been designed to prevent munitions from being exported to Ukraine. The GRU agents were none other than Alexander Mishkin and Anatoly Chepiga, who were identified as the key suspects in the 2018 Novichok poisoning of former KGB officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury, England. A local woman, Dawn Sturgess, later died after her boyfriend found what he thought was a bottle of perfume, but which, in fact, contained the



lethal nerve agent.

In Zlin, hundreds of tonnes of ammunition and weapons were destroyed in the blasts and thousands of tonnes were rendered useless. Much of the weaponry had been destined via a Bulgarian intermediary for Ukraine, which was battling Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas at the time. The incidents later led to Prague expelling Russian diplomats it claimed were connected to them.

The trail then leads the filmmakers to Bulgaria – where another explosion and subsequent poisoning of the intermediary also lead back to Russia. Bulgaria had never quite shaken off its close secret service ties with Russia, former Bulgarian president Rosen Plevneliev tells them. And although Bulgaria officially supports Ukrainian sovereignty – and even secretly supplied Kyiv with fuel and ammunition in the early days of the war, its relationship with Russia remains complex. Bulgaria's defence minister, Todor Tagarev, notes that ancient ties with Russia – which liberated Bulgaria from Ottoman rule in the late 19th century and from the Nazis in 1944 – remain a factor in current politics. And the Kremlin knows how to take advantage of this.

As an Orthodox Christian country, Bulgaria's links to Russia's pro-Kremlin Orthodox Church are well established, and conservative church figures share

Kremlin criticism of LGBT rights, for example.

And in Latvia, where a quarter of the population are ethnic Russians – and many don't speak Latvian – vulnerability to Putin's subversion is a key concern for government figures.

## Walking backwards

The film closes with Szolajski's attempt to turn the tables on Putin: using #3AI software, he concocts convincingly real footage of Putin apologising for his invasion of Ukraine, admitting that his troops killed women, children, and civilians and that he had lied about NATO getting closer to Russia's border. Szolajski and Prociak look at each other slack-jawed at how real it all appears as Putin ends his apology by declaring he is giving all his billions to rebuilding Ukraine.

As the film's credits roll, we see reverse footage of Putin in the Kremlin walking backwards – a visual representation of his charge back to the 'glories' of the Soviet Union and beyond as he jerkily retreats into the distance.

Szolajski's film may be a little ponderous at times, and its style very traditional, but its message is a disturbing and strident call for Europe and the world to truly wake up to the threat to peace Putin's Russia presents.



# Sunlight on pause in Kharkiv's underground

UKRAINE / The courage and community of Kharkiv's metro dwellers amidst ongoing attacks. BY CARMEN GRAY / MOVIES THAT MATTER



## Photophobia

Director: Ivan Ostrochovsky, Pavol Pekarcik  
Producers: Ivan Ostrochovský, Albert Malinovský, Katarína Tomková, Tomáš Michálek, Kristýna Michálek Květová  
Country: Slovakia, Czech Republic, Ukraine

In the first moments of the docufiction *Photophobia*, the sudden, nearby whistle and boom of an airstrike sounds on a street in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. Workmen who have been there attempting to contain the damage to wires and plumbing in the smoking debris of a building, another recent point of shelling impact, run for cover. The random unpredictability of attacks from Russian forces means efforts to keep infrastructure functioning cannot keep pace with the heavy weaponry that is wreaking destruction in the ongoing war. What is more, it makes just being out in the open risky for survival. Above ground has become largely unlivable for citizens near the front line — and as a result, many have moved underground. A metro station now serves as a bomb shelter in *Photophobia*, shot in the spring of 2022, and as a makeshift home for the Kharkiv residents and their pet cats and dogs who have been holed up there for weeks. Their everyday lives have been frozen to a standstill, and their futures are in grave uncertainty, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine shows no sign of abating, and explosions keep hammering the city and the housing they have fled. The hybrid film from Ivan Ostrochovsky and Pavel Oekarchik, whose previous features include *Velvet Terrorists* (2013), about attacks against the Communist regime in '80s Czechoslovakia, opened the Movies that Matter festival in the Netherlands. It takes us inside a surreal underworld, where hastily packed belongings are piled in bags between bedding in rows on subway platforms, and families cook what scant food resources they can get on portable stoves by ticket turnstiles. Children pass the days here away from direct sunlight or familiar schedules, grappling with depression and confusion in a city turned upside down, uncounted



wartime casualties of a faceless but relentless imperialist aggression.

## Starved sunbeams

In perhaps the most poignant scene of *Photophobia*, 12-year-old Nikita ignores the adamant instruction of his mother to stay inside the safety of the station and edges with his new friend Vika into a sunbeam that has bathed the steps leading out of the metro with a warm light that is full of both the natural vitamin D they have been starved of and a more intangible kind of hope. Even simple exposure to sunlight can no longer be taken for granted. When his mother asks her husband if the children will remember this stay underground, where they are camped out in a metro carriage, it is clear that the unspoken subtext of the question is really whether these traumatic weeks will irrevocably scar their lives. Doctors are on call, their availability announced over the station loudspeaker, but the earnest assistance they can offer is limited. Following advice from his medical appointment, Nikita starts keeping a diary, which may help him track time and his health, but there is no easy cure for the hardship of war.

Mobile phone communication allows some semblance of connection to remain,

---

Children pass the days here away from direct sunlight or familiar schedules, grappling with depression and confusion in a city turned upside down, uncounted wartime casualties of a faceless but relentless imperialist aggression.

---

as Nikita texts with schoolmates (two have stayed with their families above ground), and homework continues remotely. But play on the out-of-use tracks offers little real fun or exploration, and angst at being stuck in a place far removed from fresh air and normality grows. Of course, the distress of the adults and the intimation that death, loss and other forms of suffering are the status quo in wartime are felt acutely by the children in an environment in which people psychologically breaking down is not an infrequent sight, and shared stories of harrowing things witnessed is a common means by which the more than a thousand residents packed into the station try to process together what they have seen. The pandemic has hit, and days for Covid tests are also called out on the loudspeaker, adding yet another layer of anxiety and strangeness to an already unfathomable situation.

## Still in the dark

An old-fashioned viewmaster is dug out, its slides offering reminders of an outside world that exists now in longing for the past. The filmmakers employ this as a formal device to show Super-8 imagery of an outside world at a hazy remove from the underground station, of citizens in an environment bearing the terrifying marks of war. Desperately painted signage announces that «people and children live here» from the early days of the full-scale invasion when it seemed such a plea might activate mercy. Play-acting in interviews by international reporters is another way to pass the time for the children, who have already become aware of the reality that the global media are less interested in the subsequent days of the war than they were in the first. Fast-forward to 2024, and their cynical observation is even more relevant. The war grinds on while the world becomes desensitized to it, and global attention is pulled in other directions. *Photophobia* is an emotionally affecting reminder not to leave these disrupted lives in the dark.





# The forest remembers

**MIGRANTS** / The plight of refugees trapped by geopolitical manoeuvres at the EU border. BY OLIVIA POPP / CPH:DOX, KRAKOW FILM FESTIVAL



**Silent Trees**  
Director: Agnieszka Zwiefka  
Producer: Chilli Productions, Ma.ja.de GmbH, HBO Max  
Country: Poland, Germany, Denmark

In a slow-moving drone shot, thousands of white-barked birch trees lean canted and stock-still, cinematically emblematic of the stark and perilous Poland-Belarus border. The windswept woods bear witness to violence and despair, with a worn-out panda plushie and a pair of ripped jeans among the only remaining evidence of human passage. «Even now, when I see trees, I hear my mother's voice,» says 16-year-old Runa of her parent who passed at the border. «I can't forget it.»

Writer-director Agnieszka Zwiefka centres this arbourous analogy in her latest documentary, *Silent Trees*, which just enjoyed its world premiere at CPH:DOX in competition for the inaugural HUMAN:RIGHTS Award. The film follows an Iraqi Kurdish family seeking asylum in Poland: Runa, her four younger brothers (Ayham, Mizgeen, Ghareeb, and Mateen), and their father, Baravan. The filmmaker also brings Runa's personal sketchbook to life in short black-and-white 2D animation sequences (by Łódź-based studio Yellow Tapir Films) that dramatise her most emotional moments.

Zwiefka's fourth film is a fitting follow-up to two of her other works, which also feature individuals from stateless nations, including a Roma girl in *The Queen of Silence* (2014) and Sri Lankan Tamilwomen in *Scars* (2020).

## The EU border, redux

*Silent Trees* first explains how thousands of refugees became trapped in limbo at Poland (European Union)-Belarus border after the latter's regime, headed by Alexander Lukashenko, used them as pawns in a game of geopolitical chess. The

film plays as a documentary counterpoint to Agnieszka Holland's *Green Border*, which fictionalises encounters at the eponymous boundary. Lidia Duda's *Forest*, which just secured the Silver Alexander at Thessaloniki, shines another light on the fraught crossing through the eyes of a Polish family living at the border.

Beginning in mid-2021, the autocratic president Lukashenko encouraged migrants to use the country as a crossing point to enter the EU, whose authorities perceived this as his attempt to unsettle the union. Poland's right-wing government hardened its border controls in response to Lukashenko's move, with up to 15,000 soldiers deployed at checkpoints through late 2021. Clashes between migrants and both state authorities were prevalent, although the mass attempts to cross began to slow in November 2021. In January 2022, Poland began erecting a border wall in response to the crisis. In August 2023, rumblings of further migration attempts led to Poland announcing 10,000 more soldiers deployed.

*Silent Trees* joins an oeuvre that confronts the reality—and hypocrisy—behind migrants from the Global South seeking to enter the EU. But Zwiefka's approach is balanced: Just as she captures train station announcements advertising immediate help for Ukrainian refugees, she also shows how Runa's family amplifies the direness of their situation back in Kurdistan to strengthen their asylum case. Embedded within the film is a strong pathos appeal to EU viewers, many of whom may side with the state in matters of migration.

## A story of asylum

The director draws on a panoply of conflict-related cinematic parallels to create *Silent Trees*. The animated portions evoke Jonas Poher Rasmussen's *Flee* (2021), especially a sequence of refugees also traversing a treacherous forest. An ecstatic scene at a playground carousel is reminiscent of a similar moment in Daniel Asadi Faezi and Mila Zhluktenko's short film *Waking Up in Silence* (2023), which depicts Ukrainian refugees in Germany.

Through an initially clunky exposition, viewers learn that Runa's mother, Avin, suffered from hypothermia at the border and miscarried, later passing away

Embedded within the film is a strong pathos appeal to EU viewers, many of whom may side with the state in matters of migration.

at a nearby hospital. Runa faces a heavy burden from her father, who turns to her to communicate in Polish and English on his behalf. DoP Kacper Czubak captures the teen lost in thought or inscrutably monitoring her brothers' hard-earned happiness. Only in small moments of joy with her loved ones do we see the full extent of her exuberance. She aspires to become a lawyer, which is a harsh bit of irony in a sociolegal system that deigns to protect them at all.

## A refugee «crisis»?

Sometimes, the film fails to distinguish itself from other so-called refugee documentaries, but Runa's story also acts as a synecdoche for countless others across the world. This quality does not detract from the film's careful equilibrium between deep sorrow and fleeting joy, with Zwiefka creating an empathetic bond between the audience and her subjects very early on. Niklas Paschburg's gentle piano and strings score complements the family's journey without intrusion or melodrama.

After it finds its footing, *Silent Trees* reveals itself as an accomplished documentary. In contrast with the confining forest, the most striking are familial moments captured warmly by Czubak at the freeing Polish seaside. Baravan notes that his children have the luxury of playing safely in the ocean while others are stuck on boats. Zwiefka very purposefully suggests that Runa's family is an exception to the rule; not everyone is so lucky.







# A different house

**ARCHITECTURE** / A tale of architectural brilliance and the female gaze, red

## E.1027 - Eileen Gray and the House by the Sea

Director: Beatrice Minger, Christoph Schaub  
 Producer: Das Kollektiv fuer audiovisuelle Werke, Soap Factory  
 Country: Switzerland

There is a subtle but decisive change taking place in contemporary cinema. As more women have the opportunity to make films, a distinct form of female narrative based on a particular female gaze and female sensitivity is being developed. *Anatomy of a Fall* by Justine Triet is at the moment the most celebrated example of this cinematic «écriture féminine» but the hybrid of documentary and fiction *E.1027 – Eileen Gray and the House by the Sea* by Beatrice Minger and Christoph Schaub which just premiered at the CPH:DOX is a sign of this important change in the world of documentary and art cinema.

**The house in Roquebrune Cap-Martin**  
 «Maybe I could imagine a different house, and then I could conceive of a different

world,» ponders at the beginning. Eileen Gray, the iconic modernist designer and architect who, between 1926 and 1929, together with Jean Badovici, created the E.1027. A splendid modernist villa in Roquebrune Cap-Martin on the French Riviera, right on the rocks above the Mediterranean Sea that now hosts a museum, is a protagonist of this hybrid documentary composed of the re-enacted scenes based on Gray's memories and carefully selected archive material. Badovici was her lover at the time, and their liaison is cherished in the house's name – E stands for Eileen, 10 for J in Jean, 2 for B in Badovici, and 7 for the first letter in Gray. «We found each other in our work,» says Gray. They remained friends all their lives, but their love lasted only a couple of years. Instead of marking the triumph of her creativity, the house transformed into a means through which she was hurt. Punished for wanting more than what she as a woman was permitted to achieve.

**Eileen Gray**  
 Gray is known as the brilliant and

innovative experimenter in furniture and interior design who introduced novel materials such as aluminium, celluloid, tubular steel, bakelite, and cork and who was the first to adopt the ancient oriental technique of lacquering mass-produced furniture. Nonconformist also in her customs, openly bisexual. The film introduces her while she is in Paris, articulating the scope of her work to «create a space for the woman who needs a room of her own,» a reference to the seminal feminist essay *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf, first published the same year, 1929. Along with other like-minded women, she was searching «for new forms of expressions, forms in which we could recognise ourselves.» The critics considered her work bold, daring, strange, disturbing, and too futuristic. But not Badovici, the architect, critic, and editor of the important journal *L'Architecture Vivante*, who suggested that she build «a house for her furniture.»

**Men's world**  
 She knew about the male idols of modernist architecture, from Mies van

der Rohe to Rietveld and, of course, Le Corbusier. But, «I never heard of a woman architect.» Which, of course, leads to the key point. Since «men build the world to meet their own needs,» what if imagining a different house, we could conceive of a different world? The House by the Sea was an attempt to do so. And thanks to the directors and producers of this film, who reconstructed the house as it was originally built; in the film, we can see it in all its particular beauty. Because the house, in the way Eileen Gray conceived and built it, does not exist anymore.

«men build the world to meet their own needs»

### Female gaze

When Beatrice Minger was invited to this project, it was supposed to be a film about Le Corbusier. As she obtained more info, she suggested making a film about Eileen Gray and the E.1027 instead. In the film, we are offered two different types of gaze:





# for a different world

fining modernist landscapes through Eileen Gray's story. BY MELITA ZAJC / CPH:DOX

the female gaze, which represents the view by Gray, and the male gaze, which represents Badovici and Le Corbusier, who started living in the house after she left. From the female perspective, seeing used towels and half-empty plates all over the place perfectly explains why she had to leave.

But the film's directors very convincingly presented another crucial point. We are accustomed to the discourse about the obstacles encountered by women in patriarchal society. We like to believe that society, tradition, culture, or, in any case, some completely alienated system from the outside is imposing the conditions in which women have been disadvantaged in practically all public spheres.

The film about Eileen Gray and the House by the Sea makes us see how this is not enough. An active, personal engagement of concrete, individual men, the men we often trust or even love, is needed for this patriarchal order to be kept in place and reproduced. Most of the time, they are nice and friendly. But they can be violent, too. *E.1027* is a story about such violence.

---

As more women have the opportunity to make films, a distinct form of female narrative based on a particular female gaze and female sensitivity is being developed.

---

## Ornament and crime

The same path Gray took as she left the house, Le Corbusier, a friend of Badovici, took as he came into it. He was fascinated, and his words were full of praise: «This house is more than architecture. Its beauty is hurting me.» He sent a postcard to Gray that he would like to meet with her. But when he organized a World Congress of Modern Architecture, with 100 participants from 30 cities and 28 countries, he did not invite Eileen Gray. He kept visiting Badovici and eventually covered the plain white walls of the house with murals, published photos of these wall paintings, and never contradicted those who believed that he had built the house. Modernist architecture is based on the teaching of the Austrian architectural theorist Adolf Loos, who, in his notorious article *Ornament and Crime*, advocated against ornament and for simplicity in modern design and architecture. This already makes Le Corbusier's argument that the empty walls in E.1027 were boring, suspicious at least.

There is a re-enacted scene where

we see Gray asking Badovici to ask Le Corbusier to remove the paintings. He refused. We hear Gray say she perceives this as an act of violence, but we can feel it as well. He appropriated Gray's house, in emotional, symbolic, and finally also in a material way. After Badovici, to whom Gray gave the house, died, legal battles followed, and Le Corbusier achieved that his gallerist bought it, thinking it was Le Corbusier who constructed it.

## For my soul

The cinematography, acting, music, and everything in this film is superb. It is beautiful in a subtle, never-seen-before way. It will make you adore Eileen Gray (if you did not before) for her thorough reflections of her work, the objects, and the space, her noble generosity with which she gives the house to Badovici and helps him till the end, and her openness in searching for a place she finally acknowledges it is a phantasmagoric, imaginary place. But this film is also a sign of hope that what earlier generations of women only imagined nowadays is gradually becoming real.



# The changing mindset among young American Jews

**ISRAEL** / Exploring the shift in American Jewish support for Israel through personal journeys of disillusionment and activism. BY HANS HENRIK FAFNER / CPH:DOX



## Israelism

Director: Erin Axelman, Sam Eilertsen  
Producer: Tikkun Olam Productions  
Country: USA

In later years, we have seen a growing generational divide among Jewish Americans, and that has become very obvious after 7 October last year. On that date, Hamas attacked a number of communities in southern Israel, and the Israeli response came as a massive military invasion and enormous devastation in the Gaza Strip.

Established Jewish organisations like AIPAC came up with almost unlimited support for the Israeli war effort, while many from the younger generation joined the protest movement. That, of course, made waves in the current situation, not least in the debate on American university campuses, but actually, it is part of a phenomenon that has existed for quite some time. Young American Jews are no longer willing to subscribe to their parents' unrelenting support of Israel and, in particular, the occupation.

## Mutual understanding

A new documentary, that will have its Europe premiere at CPH:DOX on 21 March, has a very interesting take on this important and rising awakening in the Jewish community. The film's protagonist, Simone Zimmerman, tells about a pretty normal Jewish upbringing. Jewish day school, Jewish youth group, Jewish camp. She has family in Israel and lived there on a youth exchange program. «Israel was just treated as a core part of being a Jew. You did prayers, and you did Israel,» she says.

The opening shots of the film are from a Birthright mega-event in Jerusalem. Birthright is a program that has given thousands of young Jews a free tour of Israel, and the whole idea is to create good Zionists and make the participants enlist in the IDF – the Israeli army. While nationalistic music is blaring and flags are waving, we hear a voice at the event say that everyone knows someone who is a soldier. They are hot, they are awesome, they are strong. They are everything we



---

Young American Jews are no longer willing to subscribe to their parents' unrelenting support of Israel and, in particular, the occupation.

---

would want to be.

Simone Zimmerman broke away from all that. She describes how she did not have any perception of what it means to be a Palestinian, except a person who wants to kill Jews. In other words, she traveled there to see for herself what is so horrifying that they did not let her see it during her upbringing. Her experience was mind boggling.

The film takes us to a wide range of strong personalities that helped her get another picture of the occupation. Sami Awad from Holy Land Trust in the West Bank city of Bethlehem describes a childhood under occupation. He stands out as a sympathetic voice seeking mutual understanding despite it all. He went to Auschwitz to understand. He says that Jews were always attacked, and they live with a deep trauma. We have to understand each other, and that is where the healing work begins.

## An important film

The grand old man of hardcore pro-Israel activism, Abe Foxman, formerly director of the Anti-Defamation League, makes his point as well. In many ways, he represents the traditional Jewish American attitude when he considers Israel as an insurance policy. According to his worldview, Jews were persecuted for thousands of years, and Israel is a place where you can go and be safe. Miriam Adelson, whose now deceased husband, the casino

tycoon Sheldon Adelson, sponsored Birthright heavily, adds that it is up to the young generation to «be our soldiers abroad.» But it comes with their model that the only way Jews can feel safe is by making Palestinians feel that they are not. Out of 450,000 settlers in the West Bank, 60,000 are Americans.

This is a very well-made film offering a plethora of different views on this complicated issue. Noam Chomsky remarks that human will and commitment can change things, which seems a bit too obvious and rather bland, but others show a sharp analytical approach. And Simone Zimmerman, who used to work as Bernie Sanders' Jewish community liaison during his presidential campaign, is just so sympathetic and well-spoken.

Abe Foxman claims that this awakening among young Jewish Americans is a rather small camp, and he is probably right. But he should be worried that his home base of wealthy organisations with enormous clout in Washington is dwindling. A lot of Jewish Americans are distancing themselves from this issue altogether, taking no clear stand. For this reason, young people like Simone Zimmerman have a very obvious possibility of changing things for the real. In other words, this is not only a matter concerning the Jewish community in America but something that has a real chance to influence American policy vis-à-vis Israel, and this is one of the reasons that this is an important film.





# Ending the gender apartheid

**AFGHANISTAN:** A film full of controversies, from hunger, child malnutrition, natural disasters, and the declining national economy to the totalitarianism of the Taliban regime. BY MELITA ZAJC / FIFDH



**An Unfinished Journey**  
 Director: Amie Williams, Aeyliya Husain  
 Producer: HitPlay Productions, Les Films d'Ici  
 Country: Canada, Greece, France

*An Unfinished Journey*, a film that had its world premiere at the FIFDH, Film Festival, and International Forum on Human Rights in Geneva, is an important political documentary. Its central theme is Afghanistan, one of the many world conflict zones: not in the spotlight but full of controversies, from hunger, child malnutrition, natural disasters, and the declining national economy to the totalitarianism of the Taliban regime that is systematically violating women's rights.

The directing duo Aeyliya Husain and Amie Williams set out to investigate what happened after «the world's attention has turned to the following headline.» Exploring the plight of Afghan women following the Taliban's return to power, they concentrated on documenting the experiences of Afghan women leaders forced into exile. By doing so, they also introduced a different discourse. Against the common talk about the world leaders and superpowers, international conferences and declarations that usually accompany contemporary war zones and contribute to the comfortable perception of these wars as distant events that, to say with Baudrillard, «did not take place,» Husain and Williams gave a voice to the real people on the ground, the ones who are the most involved and affected, but also vitally interested in making the things better.

## Different kinds of war

«In Afghanistan, in order to have

the right to a job and the right to an education, you must first start a war with the men of your family. First, you have to fight with your father and then your husband. (...) After that (...) you have to go to war with society.» There are a lot of different kinds of warfare, we learn from the film protagonists at the very beginning. Not all of them have the same experiences because of different jobs they held in their home country before the Taliban seized power for the second time in 2021: Homaira Ayubi, a former math teacher, was a Member of Parliament from Farah Province, Zefnoon Safi was a Member of Parliament from Laghman Province, Nilofar Moradi was a TV reporter and journalist, and Nargis Nehan, former Minister of Mines and Petroleum, held many different posts in the government of the ousted President Ashraf Ghani. They are also of different ages, and not all of them can remember the first Taliban rule during the first Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1996–2001).

«In Afghanistan, in order to have the right to a job and the right to an education, you must first start a war with the men of your family.»

Information that Afghanistan has had a tumultuous past can only vaguely represent the complex history of this country that in its past witnessed numerous military campaigns, including those by the Persians, Alexander the Great, Arab Muslims, the Mongols, the British, the Soviet Union, and a so-called US-led coalition. Afghanistan is also the home of two of the most proverbially totalitarian-political groups of the second half of the 20th Century – Mujahideen, who fought against the Soviets in the Soviet-Afghan War, and the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban. Given all this, a single uncon-

tested narrative about this country is highly improbable. However, despite all the differences, the protagonists of this carefully composed documentary have one thing in common – they had to leave the country to save their lives. The story of the young journalist who refused to do so is tragic proof. And they are firmly dedicated to yet another war – to fight what they named «gender apartheid.»

## Gender apartheid

Apartheid was the legal system for racial separation in South Africa from 1948 until 1994. The word, meaning «apartness» in Afrikaans, is derived from the French term «mettre à part,» literally «separating, setting apart,» and is to this day associated with a policy that is founded on the idea of separating people based on racial or ethnic criteria. Through the subtle narration of the intimate memories of its protagonists, *An Unfinished Journey* outlines another equally abhorrent mode of setting apart and eliminating a large group of citizens from the decision-making public of the country: the separation of women. The facts are hard to believe: the Taliban regime introduced several different measures to deprive girls and women of the right to education and work, and even to restrict the presence of girls and women in public spaces. For example, female employees in the Ministry of Finance were ordered to send a male family member to work in their place; media outlets are not allowed to broadcast the voices of women; women are prohibited from appearing on television shows and are not allowed to travel more than 72 kilometres if not accompanied by a male guardian.

## Actants

These measures, which evidently created conditions similar to the former racial apartheid in South Africa, were what forced the film protagonists to flee. Some escaped in a larger group, some with just the closest family members. Moradi found her refugee in Greece; Ayubi, Safi, and Nehan in Canada. Their destinies are far from typical «success stories.» On the

contrary, the emigration was a loss for all of them, a forced interruption of their professional and intimate life journey.

Some escaped in a larger group, some with just the closest family members.

Yet they also have no desire to be the victims. Due to the distanced but also highly concerned approach of the two documentarians, we get a privileged insight into their struggle to give their life a new meaning – to prevent their displaced families from falling apart, to reconstruct their professional path, and, first of all, to build a network that can help newly arrived Afghan exiles and make them join the struggle for women's rights in their home country.

## Representative democracy

The protagonists of this documentary are also very successful in establishing international collaborations. Ayubi starts attending protests and meeting Canadian politicians the moment she arrives in Canada. She uses these meetings to pressure the international community to denounce the Taliban's restrictions and provide aid to the millions of Afghans struggling to survive below the poverty line. The meetings between the female Afghan activists in exile and the Canadian politicians we follow in the film manifest a clear division of competencies but also a firm determination of Afghan activists to have the decisive role. They are going to be the lead protagonists of their plans. This is very promising, given that in the past, in the global south, and in Afghanistan in particular, foreign interventions clamorously failed. And since we know too well that representative democracy is also not without flaws, it is a relief to see female Afghan politicians and activists eager to represent the interests of the Afghan citizens, regardless of the difficulties.



# Liberating the time

**Milada Součková:** The two experimental shorts by Andrea Culková revive the writing of the relatively unknown avant-garde Czech poet. BY MELITA ZAJC



The two experimental shorts by Andrea Culková revive the writing of a relatively unknown avant-garde Czech poet, Milada Součková, whose

experiments in language and perception of historical time indicate a compelling approach to the rising challenges of today's world, the individual responsibility for common problems in particular.

## Citizen of the World

Czech avant-garde writer Milada Součková was born in the last year of the 18th Century. After graduating from Charles University in Prague, she attended the University of Lausanne, and there she met the linguist Roman Jakobson, who highly appreciated her early experimental writing. She was a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle and, after World War II, appointed cultural attaché at the Czechoslovak Embassy in Washington. After the Czechoslovak coup d'état of 1948, she remained in the United States, where she taught Slavic literature at Harvard University, the University of Chicago, and the University of California, Berkeley, and worked as a librarian at Harvard's Widener Library.

Nonlinear streams of thought and the exploration of the intersections between personal memory and important historical events.

She wrote her first literary pieces under the influence of modernist and surrealist writers and focused on the stream of consciousness. The most distinctive features of her writing were the experiments with language and nonlinear streams of thought and the exploration of the intersections between personal memory and important historical events. Součková's collected works (prose, poetry, and historical and literary essays) have recently been published in Czech by two leading publishing houses, ERM and PROSTOR, and several are available in digital form. Still, she remained somewhat unknown to the general public.

## H\*art On

This began to change in 2016 when the documentary filmmaker Andrea Culková created a feature film *H\*art On*, an experimental documentary that was also acknowledged by Modern Times Review. The film is loosely based on the love story between Součková and her husband, Zdeňek Rykr, the Czech painter, journalist, and scenographer who committed suicide in 1940 to avoid falling into the hands of the Gestapo. Recently, Culková also created two short experimental films that are directly based on the texts written by the avant-garde author. Besides, these two films introduce a formal experimentation on acoustic and visual levels that complements the linguistic innovation of Součková's writing.

## Then and Now



MILADA SOUČKOVÁ

*Mluvici Pásmo (The Talking Zone)*, the title of the experimental poem Milada Součková wrote between 1939 and 1940, refers to the avant-garde poetic genre and the radio of that period. The poem is a typical modernist text, dissolving the romanticist notion of the author in the figure of the spokesperson, defined as «a man with a pen in hand,» but with no name: «Nobody remembers my name, / the dead world lives in my blind eyes.» It is structured as a polyphonic composition, and the poetic effect of the words is just as important as their meaning. The topic is the dying of European civilisation and high expectations for future generations. Andrea Culková chose the text as the background for the Occupy movement and its protest against the rising social and economic inequalities.

«A new age is dawning on Earth. (...) Burn, the ancient primeval forest of cellulose, burn along with your customs and ceremonies (...).» Součková's words, written in 1939, hover over the landscape shots, ancient monuments, fire, details of flowers, and human faces. After a while, they concentrated on the large city square in front of a National Bank, where demonstrations were taking place



THE TALKING ZONE

against the bank's policy. The relevance of the old text increases as the merging of contemporary protests and Součková's linguistic experiment multiplies further. Now and then, they physically meet in the same space and time as the actress, reciting Součková's writing, joins the protesters, and the voice of the actress/poet mixes with the voices of the activists and the police.

The other experimental video, *Historic Monolog (Historický monolog)*, is based on the text by Milada Součková from 1954 and on the theatre performance *Historic Monolog (Confession of President Emil Hácha)*, directed by J. A. Pitínský. Emil Hácha, the president of Czechoslovakia from November 1938 to March 1939 and the president of the German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia after Hitler seized the country, is one of the most controversial figures in Czech history by many considered a traitor to the nation. In Součková's text, Hácha's confession is listened to by Tomáš Masaryk, the first president of

Czechoslovakia from 1918 to 1935, known as the founding father of Czechoslovakia. The confrontation of Hácha with the legacy of Masaryk's moral authority is further complicated by Hácha being played by an actress and silent Masaryk being played by an actor. During the film, the two transform into a loving couple going through various difficulties. Gradually, she, the wife, morphs into the author, Milada Součková, talking to her husband, Zdeňek Rykr.

## For alternative histories

These experimental films continue the legacy of Součková as the avant-garde poet and revive the relevance of her innovative approach to memory and history. She was blurring the border between personal and collective memory and portraying the close ties between the «I» and the «we» – between the subject and the community they live in, but also in terms of the specific historical events that constitute a backdrop for presenting Součková's own version of history and the microcosm of the characters in her stories. This shift from an external to an internal perspective drew attention to the most intimate, hidden dimensions of reality and opened up space for new versions of history, for the potential, alternative histories, and introduced a nonlinear notion of time, all of which is particularly relevant in our epoch.

On the one hand, our understanding of history results from the transformations introduced by the 'nouvelle histoire' during the 1970s. Unlike the traditional conception of history, which focused on politics and «great men,» one master historical narrative, and the old belief in objectivity, this new approach, also known as cultural history, history of representations, and 'histoire des mentalités,' concentrated on everyday life and common people, on history as experience and the importance of individual memory. On the other hand, the abandonment of linear thinking has more direct material grounds, that is, digital information storage. Writing on paper as a traditional way of storing information evolves linearly from the more to the less distant event and imposes a linear perception of time. When stored with digital technologies, on the contrary, the information is available at the same moment, regardless of how distant the events are from the present. This led to what is generally perceived as the loss of historical thinking, but it simultaneously strengthened different



HISTORICAL MONOLOG





# A symphony of human resilience

**CHINA** / Contrasting cultural richness with harsh realities under China's systematic campaign.

BY BIANCA-OLIVIA NITA / HUMAN IDFF (OSLO), FIFDH



## All Static & Noise

Director: David Novack  
Producer: Odessa Films  
Country: USA



perceptions of time and of the role of individuals in history and inspired the ideas of alternative, plural histories. All this has already been announced by the avant-garde texts such as those by Milada Součková.

### Irreversible

With her experimental films *The Talking Zone* and *Historical Monolog*, Andrea Culková contributed to a thick web of associations – between words and images, experimental and art cinema, document and fiction. Linking past and present is a part of this larger web, in which past and present, and how they are related, have been questioned too.

---

The topic is the dying of European civilisation and high expectations for future generations.

---

In *A Brighter Tomorrow* (*Il sol dell'avvenire*, 2023), the Italian director Nanni Moretti directly asks the audience to imagine how a different reaction of the Italian Communist party to the Soviet Union army's violent crush of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 might have changed the future of Italy. The fantasy TV series *Vortex* (2022) follows the attempts of the police officer, whose first wife was killed 20 years ago, to change past events to save his first wife without compromising the life he constructed in the years following her death. The impossibility of altering the course of time is a recurring theme in the films of Gaspar Noé, most notably *Irreversible* (2002). He is considered controversial, but the discontent caused by his films is, to a significant degree, a result of his magnificent capacity to portray the pain caused by the impotence of human beings when facing the irreversibility of their actions. This, of course, directly evokes personal responsibility in any of us. It was never a purely theoretical thing.

Facing the reality today, from climate disasters to world conflicts, a sense of personal responsibility is a common challenge to us all. The daring examinations of the avant-garde poet of the first generation, reworked through the perspective of the experimental filmmaker of today, timely bring the historical and political importance of this challenge into the spotlight.

---

Though they are one of China's 55 recognised ethnic minorities, they are subjected to a multi-faceted and systematic campaign against them.

---

Combining the story of Jewher, the daughter of Uyghur economist and autonomy advocate Ilham Tohti, and of Abduweli, a linguist and poet – *All Static & Noise* tells the world about who the Uyghurs are and what is currently happening to them at the hands of the Chinese government. Beyond that, it tells a story of exile, resilience, and the dignified hope one finds when accepting one's fate but not resigning to it.

### Multi-faceted suppression campaigns

The Uyghurs are recognised as the titular nationality of the Xinjiang region in Northwest China. Their culture is much different than that of the predominant Han Chinese. They are primarily Muslim. They use the Arabic writing. Their appearance is different too. Though they are one of China's 55 recognised ethnic minorities, they are subjected to a multi-faceted and systematic campaign against them. One that includes identity-based persecution, mass detentions, surveillance, forced sterilisations, labour, and assimilation.

Breaking the silence and telling the world about what is happening is crucial. The film starts with Jewher. She likes to dance. She does it when she's happy and when sad. It is also one thing her father – now imprisoned for life by the Chinese state for his views and advocacy – didn't know that she could do as she was growing up. He wanted her to focus on her studies.

### Jewher and Abduweli

The two were separated at the airport on their way to the US, and Jewher has not seen her father since. Finding herself alone, in exile, at the age of 18, she focused on her studies. But eventually, she did much more than that. Her identity became her lifeline, turning her into a human rights advocate, a voice against Uyghur oppression, and an advocate for her father's release.

In parallel, we are introduced to Abduweli, a linguist and poet, imprisoned and tortured for the simple act of teaching the Uyghur language to

children. His journey unfolds as he finds freedom in Istanbul, carrying the scars of his past.

The filmmakers weave Jewher and Abduweli's stories together with the accounts of so many others who dared to stay in front of the camera and tell their truth about what happened to them or to family members. Together, they create a tapestry of resilience, pain, and the quest for justice. Combined, all the people who dare to share their stories create a vivid portrayal of both the magnitude of the Chinese state's abuse and of what it means to survive.

### A chorus of voices

On a closer look, the film features many more people and stories because many others appear in the photos shown, in the archive footage, and in all the animations of events that can't be seen but can be recounted and vividly illustrated by these survivors and their families now in Turkey, Kazakhstan, Europe, and the United States. *All Static & Noise* is like a chorus of voices echoing the same tale of oppression, each adding a new layer. The interconnectedness of these narratives is impactful, making the film a lot more than the sum of its parts.

Coming from a place where simply living abroad can mean your family may get arrested – the act of telling the truth in front of the camera is a high risk and an act of courage. They had a choice between safeguarding the safety of their families back home and the imperative to tell the world about the abuses committed against them. And silence is precisely what the Chinese government wants to impose on them, and does not succeed.

*All Static & Noise* is for sure a necessary film because it breaks the silence. It tells the world about the Uyghur people and how they are both vulnerable and strong. And that matters. The story of their abuse and oppression, paradoxically, is both unique and also universal in the resilience and the strength of character it calls for. And for the audience – there is a moral call to action, to know and to remember, as watching this film is bearing witness from the beginning to the end.



# Against the tide

**RUSSIA** / Askold Kurov's compelling documentary *Of Caravan and the Dogs* details the final destruction of independent voices in Putin's Russia that oppose his war on Ukraine.

BY NICK HOLDSWORTH / ONE WORLD CZ, KRAKOW FILM FESTIVAL



## Of Caravans and the Dogs

Director: Anonymous 1, Askold Kurov  
Producer: Anonymous 1, Askold Kurov  
Country: Germany

It was with a sense of dread and impending doom that I began watching Askold Kurov's documentary of the destruction of independent journalism and public witness in Russia in the months preceding Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

### Countdown to war

These were days I lived through in Russia myself. As the countdown to the start of the war moved from months through weeks to days, I felt myself back in Moscow reporting on the events that fill the first part of this compelling fly-on-the-wall doc: the liquidation of Memorial, the venerable Russian human rights group that assiduously researched and revealed the dark crimes of Stalin's days; the growing pressure on the last remaining independent media: Radio Ekho Moskvy, Dozhd TV (TV Rain) and the newspaper Novaya Gazeta – whose editor in chief, Dmitry Muratov had just won the Nobel Peace Prize.

The clock counts down. Putin announces the 'recognition' of the secession of Donbas and Luhansk regions of Ukraine; those pirate 'states' announce full mobilisation; Dozhd TV reports that the war will start within 48 hours. We arrive at the morning of Thursday 24th February 2022. It is just past 6:30 am, and Tikhon Dzyadko, the chief editor of Dozhd TV, is on air announcing that the war has started. I was already up too, that morning, having slept just 3 hours after a late-night party at my apartment where fireworks celebrating 'Defenders of the Fatherland Day' (formerly Red Army Day) had resounded outside, giving the party a dread sense of celebrating the end of the world. My hangover had been interrupted by a telephone call from the newsroom of France 24 in Paris – I was the international network's Anglophone Moscow Correspondent – telling me: «It's started.



Can you be on air in 15 minutes?» I was – and barely had a minute to draw breath in the coming days, such was the demand for 'lives' updating viewers across the world on Putin's war.

«The task of educated people is to chain the government and tame it. If to do that you need to work outside of Russia, then work outside of Russia.»

The staff at Ekho Moskvy had also had a party – on New Year's Eve – where they also felt the impending doom descending on Ukraine (and their own country.) Dmitry Bykov, a writer and journalist, gave a speech full of dark humour. By late January, he had left Russia to work at an American university. At Novaya Gazeta, Muratov feels the screws tightening, and when tough new rules on media censorship are introduced, he tells staff they should consider closing down. By Day 3, he is sufficiently spooked to offer ten members of staff evacuation. That was the Saturday, my last full day in Russia, and my thoughts were also turning to what to do. By Day 4, with reporting becoming all but impossible – and potentially dangerous – my own newsroom in Paris asked me if I was in danger. I said I did not think so, but when they said I could get on an evacuation flight that evening, I decided to go. Most of my colleagues in Moscow's foreign journalist community would leave in the following days. I have often struggled with that decision. Should I have gone? Why didn't I go back? But as time has worn on, I feel I made the correct moral decision – hard as it was and remains to this day.

As Novaya Gazeta deputy editor Kirill Martynov observes as he leaves in a car for the airport to flee Russia – «Moscow is a nice city. People can live here.» It is just what I felt as I left for the same airport – on the same weekend. I thought I would be back when things settled. They still haven't, and I have no idea when I shall again see a city that I enjoyed living in for so many years, where I still have friends and layers upon layers of memories.

As Martynov says: «The task of educated people is to chain the government and tame it. If to do that you need to work outside of Russia, then work outside of Russia.»

His words are in stark, civilised contrast, to the filth that issues from Putin's

mouth, as he talks of «spitting a fly» out of his mouth in references to what he calls «scumbags and traitors» – those that oppose his appalling evil.

### «Foreign agents»

The trials faced by those in the Russian media who had always stood up for freedom – and had increasingly been labelled «foreign agents» under a draconian law only a little short of dubbing them 'enemies of the people' – may seem small compared with the death and destruction by the Russian armed forces on Ukraine and its people, but comparisons mean little for individuals whose lives are destroyed in one way or another by Putin.

Askold Kurov puts the case well, showing that there was opposition to Putin when the war started and shining a light on the damage this war is doing to Russia and Russians, as well as the Ukrainians. There is gut-wrenching telephone footage of civilians dying under Russian fire in Ukraine and images of the sheer horror of modern war.

### Continuing broadcast

Kurov's film continues as events unfold as rapidly in Russia as on the frontlines in Ukraine: by Day 7, 2nd March 2022, Ekho Moskvy is taken off air. Meanwhile, Memorial has spirited its archives away to secret – hopefully secure – locations. And in the streets of Moscow, this initially curious symbol 'Z' appears, and young, patriotic Russians hold impromptu demonstrations in support of the war. Others, anonymously, paint graffiti opposing the war: «No War! Don't Remain Silent!» the slogans on walls and lampposts state.

Ekho Moskvy chief editor Alexey Venediktov calls an impromptu meeting similar to that a few days earlier at Novaya Gazeta. There are offers to continue broadcasting overseas, he tells staff. One of the few British journalists to remain in Moscow – the BBC's Steve Rosenberg – is seen talking with Venediktov. Meanwhile, Novaya Gazeta struggles to continue publishing under censorship, but it is clearly a losing battle. By Day 8, Dozhd TV realises it can no longer function under a slew of new media restrictions and suspends operations. It later moves to Riga, and it is today broadcasting from Amsterdam, after falling foul of Latvian media regulators.

*Of Caravan and the Dogs* is a compelling and deeply disturbing account of the crushing of independent thought and speech in Russia during what is likely to one day be seen as the apotheosis of Putin's criminal rule.





# Thorsen against Islam

**RIGHTS** / Explore the turbulent world of Norway's most prominent anti-Islam activist navigating the thin lines of freedom of expression and hate speech, revealing the complexity of public discourse in today's society in the process.  
BY HANS HENRIK FAFNER / HUMAN IDFF (OSLO)



**Norwegian Democracy**  
Director: Bård Kjøge Rønning, Fabien Greenberg  
Producer: Antipode Films  
Country: Norway

This is a documentary that can't help but leave a deep impression. It is about an extremely important issue with enormous relevance in these turbulent times, and on top of this, it is just so well made. It is a masterpiece.

On the surface, it is the story about Lars Thorsen, Norway's most well-known anti-Islam activist and controversial person. In the first shots, we meet him in his car, crisscrossing the streets to put up flyers on lampposts and other public surfaces in the cityscape. The message is, «Terror is just as Islamic as pedophilia,» and that is what Mr. Thorsen is all about.

Since 2019, he has been the front person of SIAN—Stop Islamization of Norway. The far-right organization has existed since 2000, but under Larsen's leadership, it has taken a much more activist stance. Among other things, he wants to wake up the Norwegians by staging public Quran burnings, and the two directors have set out to describe how he utilises a series of manipulative methods to reach his goal.

## Freedom of expression

We follow him from one event to the next. Heavy police presence is the general picture, and in most cases, he and a small cohort of loyalists speak and shout to deaf ears. Passersby react with bewilderment, shaking their heads, and suddenly, the situation goes out of hand. On International Women's Day, they try to stage a provocation. They dress up as Arabs and shout, «Support Islam's view on women!» No Nazis in our streets shout the bystanders back, and in no time, things heat up. Shortly after, Thorsen and his people are evacuated by police.

...you get to understand that hate could arise in any person – and even in you.

It is a matter of freedom of speech. As the Norwegian constitution states, you are allowed to say almost whatever you want, and Thorsen knows his way around the law. He also knows that there is no ban against burning a Quran in public as soon as it does not endanger public order or the safety of citizens. That is part of the dilemma of counter-protesters and the small group of anti-racists. They know that Thorsen is thriving on attention and it would be best just to stay away, and on the other hand, something must be done to counter this phenomenon. Citizens interviewed in front of the parliament

building in Oslo stress the importance of being able to express their opinions without fear of being arrested. But hate speech... it is a minefield. However, banning certain types of freedom of speech might affect the same rights for others, so it is extremely tricky.

## The surface is peeling off

Part of this documentary's absolute brilliance is the way the story is told and Thorsen is presented. In the beginning, you get the impression of an easy-going man, and occasionally, he stands out as sympathetic. He seems so normal, and that is an important point.

He also knows that there is no ban against burning a Quran in public as soon as it does not endanger public order or the safety of citizens.

At one point, a young anti-racist goes to meet Thorsen and his wife/partner in their home. He is welcomed with smiles, and they have a truly civilized conversation despite their vast differences in worldview. If Thorsen were pictured as a raging monster, we would have a black-and-white picture without nuances. It would be easy to judge and discard him, leaving the viewers without answers. But Thorsen is described as a family man who has worked in tax accounting for many years before becoming a full-blown activist, and in this way, you get to understand that hate could arise in any person – and even in you.

Little by little, the nice surface is peeling off. In the beginning, Thorsen is on cordial terms with the police officers who come to control the situation during his events and political stand-offs. But the relationship turns sour.

This way of thinking is outrageous

When they ban him from burning a Quran in front of the Iranian embassy, he explodes with anger. Thorsen claims that he is not protected by the hate speech paragraph, he says in connection with another event. When stating a so-called fact, he could offend somebody and go to prison. Muslims are a protected population.

This way of thinking is outrageous, but when served in the right way and with a deep knowledge of where the legal limits go, it gets scary. And Thorsen is a bright man with a huge bank of information and statistics collected in his computer through years of consistent and dedicated work. In the end, though, the authorities seem to have the upper hand. Despite a ban from entering the city centre, he gets there and is planning to stage another Quran burning. But while one bystander snatches the book from his hand and runs away, the police officers grab him and lead him to a waiting police van, where they shut the door. The show is over – or is it?

An astonishing piece of cinematic work on a deeply worrying phenomenon!





# Intersections of flesh and code

**REPORT** / When CPH:DOX opened its doors for its 21st instalment between 13 and 24 March 2024, it centred on issues ranging from fertility, ableism, discrimination and trauma, regarding the body as a site of socio-political conflict. BY STEVE RICKINSON / CPH:DOX, COPENHAGEN



When CPH:DOX opened its doors for its 21st instalment between 13 and 24 March 2024, it did so, embracing the theme «Body Politics.» Centring

on issues ranging from fertility and ableism to discrimination and trauma, the Copenhagen festival delved deep into discussions regarding the body as a site of socio-political conflict. The event probed into inquiries such as: What constitutes the «normal» body, and to what extent has society constructed barriers for those falling outside the so-called «ordinary body» parameters? On this topic, Marie Erbs Ørbæk, the Programmer and Head of Live Events at CPH:DOX, reflected, «The autonomy of the body is under continuous negotiation, and nowadays, our grasp of both rights and infringements is ever more connected to our direct bodily experiences.»

Across an independent film programme focusing on the body and three days with «Body Politics» as the focal point when the festival's three theme stages open, CPH:DOX also included in its annual INTER:ACTIVE programme to sit alongside this theme. The INTER:ACTIVE sub-theme for this year, «Who Do You Think You Are: The Body Reexamined,» further delved into the complexities of our bodily perceptions, experiences, and interactions in an age profoundly shaped by digital advances. «Much of this work comes from members of marginalised communities – those most impacted by technological change – using embodied media to present a deeply visceral experience of how we relate to ourselves, our natural and digital environments, and society at large,» curator of the INTER:ACTIVE Exhibition and Head of Studies at CPH:DOX said of the programme.

In this year's INTER:ACTIVE exhibition, CPH:DOX explored the rich fusion of art and technology, featuring 17 immersive bodily-focused narratives across various mediums, from the intimacy of web-based chatbots to the expansive realms of virtual reality. Augmented reality installations and interactive games merged the physical with the digital, while experimental video art and sound installations deepened the experience. As Modern Times Review explored the INTER:ACTIVE exhibition, held mostly in the Upper Foyer of CPH:DOX's festival centre Kunsthal Charlottenborg, several connective themes occurred under the broader exhibition umbrella.

Firstly, in the exploration of disabilities, bodily functions, gender, and desire, *Antipsychotic* by Matt McCorkle immersed audiences in the nuances of bipolar disorder, blending sound and visual art to navigate the complexities of mental health. Rebecca Merlic's *Glitchbodies* was a game that championed diverse body transformations and LGBTQ+ identities. Jess Coldrey's *Into the Rabbit Hole* offered a mixed-media reflection on endometriosis. Poulomi Basu & CJ Clarke's *Blood Spoke* employed VR to critique gender and oppression, while *The*



ELSEWHERE IN INDIA, AN IMMERSIVE CONCERT BY MURTHOVIC & THIRUDA



GLITCHBODIES, A GAME BY REBECCA MERLIC



UNBUILT ENVIRONMENTS, A VIDEO LOOP BY ALISTAIR GENTRY



I SEE IT, SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO, A WALL HANGING BY CECILIE WAAGNER FALKENSTRØM

*Sound Voice Project* bridged live opera with synthetic voices to delve into the intrinsic connection between voice and identity.

The interconnectedness between human bodies and the natural world was brought to life in *Garden of Ghost Flowers – The Embodiment Archive* by Untold Garden & Lundahl & Seidl. This VR experience explored the symbiosis between technology, humans, and nature, symbolised by the growth of virtual ghost flowers responsive to human interaction, advocating for a harmonious coexistence between the natural and the digital. The INTER:ACTIVE AWARD winner, *Intangible*, explored the paradox of digitally reconnecting with nature, engaging users with simulated natural phenomena through touch. Our strained relationship with the environment was confronted by offering a digital means to fulfil the innate desire for natural contact. On the project, the jury trio of Helene Nyborg, Peter Fisher, and Sofie Hvitved commented it is «an immersive experience that is a playful, physically convincing and instantly satisfying experience that challenges the expression of contemporary art and left the jury wanting to come back for more.»

Cecilie Waagner Falkenstrøm's *I Saw It, So You Didn't Have To* exposes the veiled challenges that micro-workers faced in the AI industry, merging machine learning with Jacquard weaving to reflect labour dynamics reminiscent of the early industrial era. Similarly, Nouf Aljowaysir's *Where Was I From?* embarked on a genealogical journey, contrasting personal stories against the backdrop of an AI «narrator» to unearth the biases and stereotypes inherent in AI systems. *Anamnesis*, created by Petr Salaba & Ondrej Hrach, was a web-based chatbot game that probes into empathy levels for an AI-simulated being. *Vocalize* by Halsey Burgund & Francesca Panetta introduced an AI voice coach within a narrative that explored both the potential and challenges of AI in the voiceover industry, probing the blurring lines between human and artificial intelligence, and stirring contemplation on identity, empathy, and the future of our digital selves—a particularly apropos project given the recent focus on AI technology of last year's U.S. actor's strike.

The speculative work, *The Pathogen of War*, dived into the real science of antibiotic resistance, depicting how a benign bacterium was transformed into a lethal pathogen by the ravages of war. *Elsewhere in India*, by Murthovic & Thiruda, offered an immersive musical narrative pondering the dystopian effects of technological progress on cultural heritage, set in a future where global cultures were on the verge of extinction. Astria Suparak's *Finite Horizon* provided a critique of Asian futures as envisioned by Western filmmakers, employing elements from science fiction cinema to interrogate cultural appropriation and stereotyping.

Several project developers featured across the INTER:ACTIVE exhibition would also present themselves as part of the 2024 INTER:ACTIVE SYMPOSIUM. Held as part of the 2024 CPH:LAB, the SYMPOSIUM



brought together a selection of invited guests from across the creative spectrum to explore the intersection of art, technology, and documentary storytelling in a conference-style setting. The symposium kicked off with Astria Suparak, who, as the keynote speaker, introduced her thought-provoking project *Asian Futures*. This initiative questioned the implications of white filmmakers crafting futures heavily influenced by Asian culture but devoid of Asian presence. Further enriching the discourse, Alistair Gentry discussed his collaborative works with disabled communities outside traditional art venues, while Poulomi Basu shared insights into her post-colonial artistic and activist endeavours, emphasising the urgency and impact of art created in crisis situations.

The symposium's narrative arc expanded as Avinash Kumar took the stage with *Elsewhere in India*. His speculative narrative performance with musicians Murthovic & Thiruda, drew from a futuristic perspective, delving into the decolonisation of global entertainment narratives via advanced AI art techniques, illustrating a keen eye on the future of cultural production. The discussions throughout the day reflected a deep dive into how technology intersects with societal themes, highlighting issues of inclusion, representation, and the transformative power of art. The day culminated in the CPH:LAB Prototype Pop-Up exhibition at the Odd Fellow Palace, where attendees were treated to a tangible showcase of the nine innovative ideas and future possibilities discussed. For projects featured at past CPH:LAB's were ultimately included in the 2024 INTER:ACTIVE exhibition—*The Pathogen of War*, *Vocalize*, *Garden of Ghost Flowers* and *Anamnesis*.

The entirety of the 2024 CPH:DOX INTER:ACTIVE exhibition was a coherent and consistent journey through its body-central theme. With an increased focus on underrepresented markets, the Global South, and physical and mental bodily focus, it was one of the more well-rounded interactive presentations MTR has experienced across the festival landscape. Our frequent criticism is that much of the new media that is displayed comes from the wealthy North, which has both funding and infrastructure in place. However, the marginalised and underrepresented indeed use their respective new media presentations to present narratives beyond the commercial and easily accessible. The ongoing reckoning of AI as a foundational aspect of modern Big Tech remains a concern. Whether the Unreal game engine, the hardware of VR headsets, or the frequent reliance on tablets, smartphones, and systems produced by some of the world's premiere technological monopolies, it still seems that new media must create and operate within its own space of independence.

For Modern Times Review, several projects stood out, primary amongst them was the never-the-same live performance of *Elsewhere in India*. Additionally, the intricate physical tapestry of *I See It, So You Don't Have To* was a grand and almost imposing presence within Kunsthal's Upper Foyer. Its tactile presentation of digital data is an interesting combination of modern labour, moderation, and technological dynamics. The psychotropic cyberpunk of *Antipsychotic* also hit a nerve, given the prevailing and consistent misunderstandings around mental health. Its high-fidelity sound and poetry offered a window into the complexities of bipolar disorder, pre and post-treatment. In a way, cyberpunk aesthetics also found their way into the speculative skyline of Asian futures in *Finite Horizon*.



## A question of balance

**HEALTH** / A deep dive into the dark side of the Norwegian mental health system.

BY MASSIMO IANNETTI / HUMAN ODFD (OSLO)



### The Recovery Channel

Director: Ellen Ugelstad  
 Producer: Twentyone Pictures AS  
 Country: Norway

Norwegian filmmaker Ellen Ugelstad's ability to combine genres and challenge traditional production structures to explore the subtle interweaving between mental 'illness' and 'health', 'sanity' and 'insanity', care and treatment and the charged power dynamics underpinning these often threateningly vague words is complemented by her personal connection to the subject matter, given her experience as a caregiver for over 25 years.

This finely tuned equilibrium is at the core of her latest effort, *The Recovery Channel*, titled after a fictionally constructed news channel for mental health aiming to shed light on the challenges related to modern psychiatric treatment in Norway. This central narrative is further intertwined with a multiplicity of factual perspectives and fictionalised stories, from the channel's editorial team meetings to educational and historical sections to news anchor Randi's life off-air, where she struggles to keep in contact with her sister Ylva, who will not accept help from the healthcare system.

### Between realism and fiction, truth and truthfulness

«This is a film, the images are from reality»: the multifacetedly blurred approach the film employs is immediately revealed by the director, who sets the scene by declaring her intentions of making a film about a made-up news channel sharing the truth on the coercive measures that both healthcare professionals and the state are allowed to use against

patients with mental health issues. These include forced hospitalisation, forced medication and restraints, such as straps and physical violence, which are often used as preventive measures rather than «last resort» solutions. This «seamless and poetic transition between documentary and fiction» also helps situate the audience in this viewing deception whilst disclosing a painfully hidden reality, where fiction and fact commingle in a slow-burn, uncomfortable reveal.

These include forced hospitalisation, forced medication and restraints, such as straps and physical violence, which are often used as preventive measures rather than «last resort» solutions.

By exploring specific cases, official reports, and the country's history of mistreatment and conceal, Ugelstad subverts the traditional documentary structure, constantly challenging (and sometimes even joking about) the ethically tricky question of mental 'balance' in patients as well as the asymmetry in the power balance of the Norwegian healthcare system. By employing the Recovery as a channel solely aiming at presenting news about mental health, the film takes an extreme, wholistic and unflinching look at the subject matter, a human right constantly violated by lack of resources and training, outdated medical regulations and policies, and a general misconception, in a country where opting out of compulsory medication and the radical practices it entails is impossible. Testimonies from lawyers, experts, doctors, relatives and former patients reveal a backward system of coercive mechanisms that creates fear and terror among an already vulnerable group.

These intimate and honest portraits provide us with a nuanced insight into a normally closed-off and taboo topic, taking us even closer to the people who have been deprived of their freedom and let their authentic yet 'mediated' voices and experiences emerge.

### Media-tic injustice

Part drama, part documentary and part participatory video experiment, *The Recovery Channel* is a hybrid meditation on the contradictions inherent to this unstable system and the attitude to justify its questionable actions. But it is also a reflection on the contested picture of the media, playing with the often naive and nuanced approach of news aesthetics, commenting on their role, power and relevance in defining how we receive information about mental health, on its format, whose brevity hinders any possible in-depth examination of the topic, and on a view deemed «loud and prejudicial,» not driven by journalistic interest but dramatic reaction. In this way, the film functions as an allegory of how people can experience being dehumanised in the face of institutionalised and mediatic systems, depicting what it is like to be deprived not only of one's own freedom but also of voice, self-image and credibility.

### Calling out for a new future

Through its unique, personally rooted perspective and innovative approaches, Ugelstad's filmmaking challenges current practices and aims to set the agenda and break boundaries, both thematically and cinematically. Blending the personal and the political while calling for a more all-encompassing view on mental health, the film uncovers the most painful truths about the outmoded use of coercion in Norwegian psychiatry as well as paving the way for a more humane version and truthful awareness of what mental health really is.

In the end, we are left facing a roaring cry for hope, a wake-up call, a very 'unbalancedly' clear statement asking for a change: «There is no health without mental health, and there is no mental health without human rights.» Are we ready to stand up for this?





Aurélie Piet © Disclose Films • Premières Lignes Télévision

# Are we being fooled by IKEA's promise

**CAPITALISM** / Ikea, consuming a tree per second, acquires vast lands globally, endangering ecosystems and becoming the forest's most formidable foe. BY MARGARETA HRUZA

## IKEA - The Tree Hunter

Director: Xavier Deleu, Marianne Kerfriden  
 Producer: Disclose Films, Premières Lignes  
 Country: France, Belgium, Switzerland

Although the furniture giant IKEA claims that «taking care of the climate is a key part of IKEA's corporate responsibility,» one must not forget that as a corporation, nothing surpasses its commitment to global expansion. Since the '70s, IKEA has become the world's biggest company in furniture production, and it continues to expand from Latin America to North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Such expansion has a high price, as revealed in *Ikea - The Tree Hunter*. The documentary questions IKEA's deceptive claims about environmental merits and its impossible promise of sustainability.

### Affordable design for the masses

Most of us have experienced shopping at an IKEA store. We have felt trapped in its maze of showrooms, and we leave buying a little more than initially planned because there is always something new to discover at IKEA. No other seems to be able to deliver such practical, modern, ready-made interior designs for such an affordable price. By making modern design available to the masses, they have, in fact, «democratised design,» as they call it. There is no doubt that IKEA has

introduced mass consumption to the world of interior design, and they continue to create a hunger for more, as if the planet has unlimited resources.

### IKEA's growing hunger for wood

As the world's largest wood consumer, IKEA significantly impacts the world's forest industry. Almost 60% of the products manufactured by IKEA are made of wood. According to Earthsight, the organisation that monitors the environmental impact of businesses, IKEA uses 21 million cubic meters of logs every year. That means that one tree is logged every second for an IKEA product.

Nonetheless, IKEA claims to be committed to no deforestation by 2026 and has worked out a sustainable strategy to become «forest-positive.» By becoming one of the largest private landowners of forests worldwide, they want «to improve forest management worldwide by 2030.» Others call this IKEA strategy forest colonisation, as IKEA is applying the much-criticised Swedish logging policy worldwide.

### Fast furniture at a high cost

Back in 1944, when Ingvar Kamprad started his business, furniture was built to last generations and passed down within the family. Already in 1969, Kamprad said in a television interview, «I want to change our mindset. Before,

we bought a suit that was going to last 20 years; now, we buy a suit perhaps twice a year, and the same will happen with furniture.» Kamprad was inspired by the fashion industry and made a revolutionary move when he focused on trendsetting rather than long-lasting quality. IKEA creates over 2000 new designs yearly, and since IKEA furniture is not built to last more than about 15 years, the quick turnover has been labelled as «fast furniture.»

IKEA likes to promote itself with the fact that it keeps on pushing its prices down. If one picks up an IKEA catalogue from the '80s, one will soon see that the classical IKEA designs are still being sold today but at a much lower price than four decades ago. One reason why IKEA can set such low prices is that it has outsourced its production to cheaper nations.

During the Cold War, Kamprad made lucrative deals with the communist regimes that guaranteed him very cheap wood by exploiting the virgin forests of Russia and Poland. During the last eight years, IKEA has been logging in the Carpathian Forest, one of Europe's last virgin forests, which stretches across eight nations and is considered Europe's oxygen tank. It is home to wildlife such as wolves, lynxes, and 40% of the European bear population.

There has been a growing protest by locals and environmentalists against

exploiting these virgin forests. Recently, IKEA got into a direct dispute with the Lithuanian government over its aggressive logging practices. These conflicts led IKEA to create a new strategy to serve its hunger for wood. By becoming the largest private owner of forest land worldwide, IKEA plans to significantly influence how the politics of logging forests will develop in the future.

Although IKEA claims to only use wood harvested in a renewable way, according to a retired personal assistant of Ingvar Kamrad, this is not true. «We were very much aware of the fact that we were utilizing illegal timber from then-communist countries such as Poland and China. It is not possible to meet the demand when the products we offer are as cheap as they are.

Now, IKEA is going after one of Europe's largest remaining old-growth forests, which lies in Romania. Illegal logging is rampant in Romania, where the mafia still holds significant control over forestry, which means it is easy to exploit woods in an area where it is difficult to monitor timber trafficking. Environmentalists, forest rangers, and journalists have been killed in their attempts to document illegal timber trafficking. The result is that Romania has lost over half of its virgin forest since 2007, even though IKEA is the largest private owner of forests in Romania.





# of a greener future?

## «Sustainable forestry» versus biodiverse forest

Ever since the 1980s, when everything associated with Scandinavia became a trend on a global scale, IKEA has been using «national branding» for all it is worth. Outside Sweden, most people associate it with welfare, equality, and ecology, which are also qualities IKEA promotes on its website. The question remains if doing things the Swedish way will be of any help for the future of our forests.

Despite Scandinavia's image of being ecologically minded, it practices the most aggressive logging practices in Europe. The character of Swedish forests has changed drastically over the last couple of decades. The old trees are gone, and almost everything has been replaced by young trees. What the Swedish government calls «sustainable forestry» is forestry that has lost its eco-diversity.

As a Swedish forest ranger explains in *Ikea – The Tree Hunter*, «A forest does not only consist of trees, it is the home of hundreds of species, and they are gone for good. It takes 200 years for these species to settle back if they ever do. When trees are cut every 50 – 60 years, it is impossible to achieve the state of a tall-grown forest.»

Sweden is the region in Europe that is losing its primary forests at the fastest rate. Almost one-fourth of the remain-

---

We must ask ourselves whether we want to support a company that may be deceiving us with greenwashing.

---



---

By becoming the largest private owner of forest land worldwide, IKEA plans to significantly influence how the politics of logging forests will develop in the future.

---

ing unprotected old-growth forests were logged between 2003 and 2019. If logging continues at this rate, all of these unique and ecologically valuable forests will be gone in about 50 years.

## «Sustainable forestry» on a global scale

IKEA plans to open stores in Brazil and New Zealand by 2025. As a part of their preparation, they bought vast forests in these countries where they applied their «sustainable forest management.» The strategy was to replace valuable virgin forests with fast-growing pine trees, which would be ready to log in 50 years. The locals call it a form of forest colonisation, as it has become apparent that this strategy poses a direct threat to the ecosystem of native forests, causing environmental disasters.

In Brazil, IKEA is being taken to court for bringing ecological damage to that country's forest. As one of the lawyers put it, «We are on a highway to ecological hell.» Until now, IKEA has been hiding behind contractors, but it is IKEA at the end of the economic chain that sustains and supports the ecologic degradation of the native forest. Like with everything that is fast, fashion, food, or furniture, «when the price is very low, you always can be sure that someone is paying that price.» In this case, it is our biodiversity that is

paying the price. We must ask ourselves whether we want to support a company that may be deceiving us with greenwashing.

## We should not view primary forests as national property

*Ikea – The Tree Hunter* unveils the truth about how IKEA manages to lower its production costs by exploiting pristine forests worldwide. However, it does not provide us with solutions to halt this devastation. We can not lay this responsibility on the individual consumer alone.

At the European Parliament, Sweden, Poland, and Romania have positioned themselves as pro-timber nations, while the rest of Europe recognizes the importance of preserving Europe's remaining wild forests. The problem is that forest policy falls under national politics and economic management, creating a need for a united European Forest Policy to prevent further degradation. If IKEA is strategically aiming for a significant impact on global forest management, it is essential to establish a global forest policy that protects primary forests worldwide.

*Ikea – The Tree Hunter* was a FIPADOC World Premiere and broadcasts on Arte on 27 February 2024





## Still life

**UKRAINE** / Filmmaker Maciek Hamela provides a singular and emotional snippet of the war as he drives Ukrainians over the border into Poland. BY MASSIMO IANNETTI / THESSALONIKI DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL



### In The Rearview

Director: Maciek Hamela  
 Producer: Affinity Cine, Impakt Film, SaNoSi Productions, 435 Films  
 Country: Poland, France, Ukraine

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many filmmakers have attempted recording its horrors from several angles and adopting alternative perspectives, in both form and style, from a student-led civil rights movement in *Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom* to a small Russian village's controversial and dichotomous stance on the war in *The Last Relic*, all the way to journalistic firsthand footage of destruction in Oscar nominee *20 Days in Mariupol*, to name but a few.

Joining this growing number of documentaries, *In The Rearview* focuses on the experiences of Ukrainian refugees being evacuated from the nation's war zones and fleeing an unrecognisably familiar environment. Driver-turned-filmmaker Maciek Hamela's intimate portrait of a life entirely torn apart by war is a heart-wrenching road trip where stories, pain and hopes are shared in the backseat of a van, in between present loss and future prospect of a regained freedom.

### The unseen faces of war

Rolling past wreckage, destroyed military equipment, collapsed bridges and bombed-out homes, Hamela's car cruises through military checkpoints and U-turns away from minefields, while receiving the latest information on the exact position of new passengers waiting to be picked

up and the Russian army's roadblocks. While traversing hundreds of thousands of kilometres, new souls take place in the cramped seats, and new faces take turns in front of the camera.

Many families (mostly women and children, for men have stayed behind to fight) have left a house they may not find upon their return, or other family members who firmly opposed to leaving their country, or beloved animals which tears are shed for. A surrogate mother, who is waiting to register her pregnancy after she could never connect back with the 'biological' parents when war broke out, wants to use the money to open a bakery. A Congolese woman who is being taken to a waiting ambulance in Germany, with a bullet still lodged in her ribs following a Russian shooting, confesses she would like to come back «when things calm down». And then children, who suffered the most immeasurable traumaby being exposed to war way too young, now casually speak about it as if it were their every day, completely desensitised to it. And yet their brief moments of joy and playfulness amidst this shattered landscape represent the sign of innocent resistance Ukraine is still holding on to.

### A platform for a briefly shared existence

Whether Hamela picks up his passengers from city tower blocks or rural villages, whether he welcomes poor or aristocratic families, there is an ever-present familiarity in the stories these people share. The car acts as a safe space, protective of the outside, terrifying world, yet creating a detached closeness in having people sitting side-by-side with strangers, without looking into each other's eyes, allowing them to open up about their fearful experiences, but also their hopes and dreams. The director becomes a guardian angel as much as a witness to the most painful moments in their lives, providing a reflective account



of the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. This raw, minimalist journey thus represents an initial, if hesitant, reckoning with the horrors of the invasion, and a constant reminder of the tangible, logistical threat and suffering victims are forced to face.

*In The Rearview* focuses on the experiences of Ukrainian refugees being evacuated from the nation's war zones and fleeing an unrecognisably familiar environment.

Composed almost entirely of stitched-together shots of the director's camera, perched between the driver and the front passenger seat, as if Hamela is observing his characters from the rearview mirror, the film thrives on a quietly powerful editing which ensures that, while we never spend more than a few minutes with each group, we get a real sense of who they are, giving them the space to

exist as human beings rather than mere subjects. Simultaneously, they also represent a blurred handful of the millions of people attempting to escape, unknown faces battling for attention, compared to the many that will not, playing with our sense of powerlessness in front of a tragedy we grew so numbly accustomed to accept.

### Looking to the future

*In the Rearview* is a remarkably delicate documentary in its shaping of temporary, car-bound still microcosms. Hamela's tenacity as a driver and director has turned a van into a portal between past and future, between loss and hope, offering a moving collection of individual squashed-in-a-backseat stories and a sublimely universal reflection on humanity amid an invasion that drove more than 15 million people in search of safer places to call home. A home which they hope to one day return, and which they have not given up on.

In the end, the car is framed completely empty. Is this a sign of danger or success, of hope or hopelessness? Is freedom still possible, or is it too late? The car is still moving forward. Ukrainians are still focusing on the road ahead.



# Reverberations through time and space

**PALESTINE** / Four generations of Palestinian women take us on a journey through family, war, memory and identity. BY MASSIMO IANNETTI / HUMAN ODFF (OSLO), CPH:DOX



## Bye Bye Tiberias

Director: Lina Soualem  
 Producer: Beall Productions, Altitude 100 Production, Versus Productions, Philistine Films  
 Country: France, Palestine, Belgium, Qatar

How are motherhood, motherland and mother tongue connected? Where is the 'border' between past and present? How do those who animate our memories define who we are today? These and many more questions pile up, blend and keep coming back in Lina Soualem's intimate and deeply personal family portrait, spanning the lives of four generations of Palestinian women and their temporal and spatial relationships, fractures and recollections. By tracing back the history of her mother and actress Hiam Abbass, who 30 years prior left her native village Deir Hanna on the banks of Lake Tiberias to follow her dream of becoming an actress, Soualem crafts a layered diary of her lineage as much as that of her country, as the first woman in her family born outside of Palestine.

### Mother and motherland's bloodline

Interweaving family and archive footage, retrieved readings and direct witnesses, Lina unveils hidden secrets, unspoken departures and never-entirely healed fractures, opening «the gate to past sorrows.» Accompanied by the director's voice, we are guided through her personal investigation of what occurred before the handful of childhood home videos she still jealously keeps hold of, as she excavates the memories of «women who learned to leave everything and start anew.»

Starting with her most distant ancestor, her great-grandmother Um Ali, whose life was shattered by the Israeli-Arab war in 1948, forcing the family to relocate to Deir Hanna. Her grandmother Hemat, an authoritarian, intimidating school teacher, who had been accepted in a school run by nuns and off to a bright future before her dreams were put an end to by Israeli occupation. Aunt Hosnie, stranded in Syria, in one of the biggest Palestinian refugee camps, and only getting to see her loved ones 30 years later in secret, who introduced Abbas to the idea of freedom. Hiam, a mother in exile in Paris, whose life choices clashed profoundly with her parents' traditions and had her completely severed the ties with the family, only to reconnect with them following the birth of Lina, «the angel that reconciled us.» And Soualem, who «was born out of this departure, of this fracture, between two worlds» two languages, two cultures and two histories.

Through these interlacing stories, we are confronted with the difficulties of separation, for choice or circumstances,



and with the attempt of reuniting with a family that was considered lost, vanished or estranged, but also with the impossibility of coming to terms with the reality of «a place that may disappear any day now.» This story of «vanished places and scattered memories» is one of violence, displacement and annihilation but also of a rooted sense of belonging, cultural preservation and epiphanic border crossing, which, thanks to each family member's account, takes on new meanings.

Interweaving family and archive footage, retrieved readings and direct witnesses, Lina unveils hidden secrets, unspoken departures and never-entirely healed fractures, opening «the gate to past sorrows.»

### Between past and present, recollection and projection

Aided by a score lurking from the depths of memory, by a combination of intimate handheld camerawork and lyrical static shots, and by a subconscious-driven editing style, Soualem's work attempts to give her country, her family and herself a spatial and temporal shared history, to keep its different, spanning elements together,

to retrace its coordinates. Blending personal and political, Lina's intricate patchwork of images, odours and colours outline the contours of a world where history has impinged on story, past on present, constantly feeding into and reverberating through each other, threatened by a future that put them at risk of sinking into oblivion.

Lina's research thus appears also one of a cinematic self-awakening, the realization that the «treasure that you don't want to fade» has already been reimagined and reworked, and the act of filming can help make sense of these «hazy bits of information,» a «way to find ourselves fully in a world we invented.»

### Time-space continuum

What does remain, then? At a time in history when the need for reflection on identity seems evident, *Bye Bye Tiberias* unravels both like a personal diary, an intimate and troubled journey of the rich tapestry of Palestinian history and the personal stories embedded within it, and an examination of time and space through images.

«I have never known happier times than those lived in Tiberias» seems a sentence each and every one of these women and all Palestinians could have voiced at least once. Soualem's work is able to reconvene all these stories lost between borders, enforced limitations, separated families, and generational divides into one single place, embracing a universal dimension of nostalgia and hope and paying homage to the hi-story of the women who came before her as much as that of a country on the terrifying verge of losing its. This could not be more timely.





# The bot economy

**TECH** / Discover the silent drain on global ad budgets with *Unclickable*, an investigative documentary revealing how digital ad fraud impacts not just companies but the very fabric of society and democracy. BY ALEKSANDRA BIERNACKA



**Unclickable**  
 Director: Babis Makridis  
 Producer: Neda Film, Felony Productions, Building on Bond, BuzzFeed Studios  
 Country: Greece, Cyprus, USA

Revealing the behind-the-scenes of a relatively unknown and unaccounted-for world of digital ad fraud, Babis Makridis's investigative documentary adds yet another point to the ongoing debate on the necessity of antitrust action against Big Tech. Dynamically constructed and relying on multiple experts' points of view, *Unclickable* opens up a new area of discussion that until now has escaped public attention even though its approximate losses amount to hundreds of millions of dollars per year, or – on average – at least 20%-30% of the total digital ad budgets of all the world companies, including the very notable cases of multinationals like Uber.

## The mechanics of deception

Structured around a digital ad fraud operation, the director carries on with a few collaborators; the film gradually unravels an astonishing scale of the phenomenon facilitated by bots and the self-generating, and in the majority,

nonsensical content of the multiple websites. Within a week or two, one can easily launch an internet site by scraping content from other already existing web pages. It is enough to launch several sites and generate traffic (with the bots) to get Google and Facebook ads that, from now on, pay for a site's functioning. Technologically, it is an easy task, and once activated, a site draws ads from the ad agencies automatically. With a speed of light beyond anyone's control. The main catch is the number of ad clicks generated by the bots. Noticeable in vast gaps between the numbers of the ad clicks and the actual visits to the web pages' traffic analytic programmes, like Google Analytics, the bots-generated traffic leaves a significant fissure – the 20%-30% of clicks (on average, and by conservative estimates) are disappearing. Since the laws still do not regulate digital ads, capturing the ads by digitally-generated content sites, and hence the ads' money, are not theoretically illegal. Once Google or Facebook bans a given site due to its offensive or nonsensical content (which happens rarely), it just closes down, and the next ones appear in its place.

## From clicks to chaos

The crucial importance of the law and government regulations becomes especially visible on the other side of the spectrum of digital ad fraud. To legitimise a site's traffic (which, after all, also needs some «real people» to cover the bots-generated clicks), apps are encoded to automatically connect to a site and click on the ads once downloaded on an individual's phone. Examples of people living in countries with loosely regulated

mobile phone markets (Brazil, RPA) show how they pay extremely high prices for internet data that, in considerable part, are made of ads. It happens without a phone's owner's knowledge or agreement. On the one hand, advertisers (big and small alike) pay for 100% of the clicks on their ads placed on various sites by ad agencies through Google and Facebook (who share the vast majority of the substantial digital ads worldwide market).

One can easily launch an internet site by scraping content from other already existing web pages.

On the other hand, individual mobile phone users pay for ads they don't see due to malicious mobile apps downloaded from Google Play. In all these operations, Big Tech takes its cut off. Since it earns a considerable amount (digital ads make 98-99% of the total Facebook revenue and over 80% of Google's), it is not interested in checking out or testing the truthfulness of the number of reported clicks.

## Beyond the screen

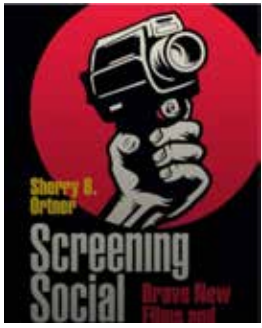
Although seemingly we might not care about the ad spending of the world companies, in the long run, and at such a scale, it does affect the very core of the public space and, hence – democracy at a few levels simultaneously. The overcrowding of the internet by sites bringing in nonsensical, false, or extremist news financed by the ads takes money away from reliable, honest,

and socially responsible journalism, as numerous bankrupted local news outlets show. Consequently, there are often no dependable sources of information on local government activities or other significant problems and events. The press's basic *raison d'être*, a function of control over other participants in public life, is diminished to the point in which the auto-generated fabrications completely dominate the picture, leaving the most shocking abuses of power without a comment.

Additionally, millions of dollars go to radical, extremist, hate speech sites, further spreading, supporting, and, in a way, legitimising these views. They influence political elections and the choices of people who do not know what to think in a situation of information overload and unreliability. The scale of the digital ad fraud phenomenon has grown in recent years to a vast and alarming extent, and in a split second, in a virtual space far from human eyes and ability to comprehend, it encompasses the whole world escaping the laws of particular, even the most powerful, nation-states. The global spread of these operations circumvents the attention of all the parties involved except Big Tech, who, as the only player, has the tools to trace, control, and regulate the practice. It just apparently does not see a need to do so.

A detailed and wide-ranging journalistic investigation, like *Unclickable*, is the only way to reconstruct and display a mechanism of fraud crossing borders and law orders and affecting democratic life in many regions of the world, especially as it takes place in a constantly evolving area where digital technologies rule.





**Screening Social Justice. Brave New Films and Documentary Activism**

Author: Sherry B. Ortner

Publisher: Duke University Press, USA

# Changing the world through documentary

**BOOK** / Cultural anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner provides an easy-read introduction to the logic and visions behind Brave New Films, whose documentary production is non-profit and distributed through social and political networks with the articulated goal of mobilising resistance against capitalism, racism, and fascism. BOOK REVIEW WRITTEN BY NINA TRIGE ANDERSEN

Brave New Films is a documentary film company that produces, distributes, and screens critical political documentaries for non-profit. Their self-declared mission is to encourage and support (leftist) activism through documentaries that investigate and reveal power relations, money flows, and social and economic injustice. The measure of success for a Brave New Films production is impact – that it mobilises its audience.

## Documentary and social activism

Cultural anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner is, in her new book *Screening Social Justice*, interested in how the documentary production company specifically works with this goal. To understand this, she analyses selected documentaries and follows the work behind the productions, distribution channels, and screenings. What happens when people get together to watch a Brave New Films production?

Ortner frames the narrative with a short history of the relationship between documentary and social activism. On one end, we find the idea of a neutral documentary that simply shows reality as it is. On the other end, we find a documentary that openly commits to the goal of intervening in reality.

Brave New Films is part of a hundred-year-long tradition of «committed filmmaking» that commenced with «early communist dreams of the future,» with the Soviet Union as one of the centres.

## The golden age

According to Ortner and other researchers, documentary film has had a golden age since the beginning of the 21st century. Eight of the ten most successful documentaries in history were launched in the first decade alone. And most of these were openly political in some sense. Ortner reminds us that documentary has always been the least popular form of cinema and that large parts of the audience have been not just uninterested but outright repelled by the genre, which makes its growing popularity in recent years all the more remarkable.

Ortner (and others) partly explain this with the credibility and popularity crises of other types of media during the same period. Printed media has entered a death

spiral almost everywhere, and «the sheer absence of reliable information is part of the problem; another is the lack of critical perspective on what is going on,» Ortner writes.

Leading Brave New Films is Robert Greenwald, who was making a career in the commercial film- and entertainment business when the Iraq war began. The political situation made him take a «life-changing decision,» as Ortner frames it, namely to engage full-time with critical political documentaries. The first he directed was *Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the Iraq War* from 2004, about the fabrication of evidence of weapons of mass destruction, and two years later, *Iraq: The War Profiteers* about the outsourcing of military functions to private contractors driven by profit.

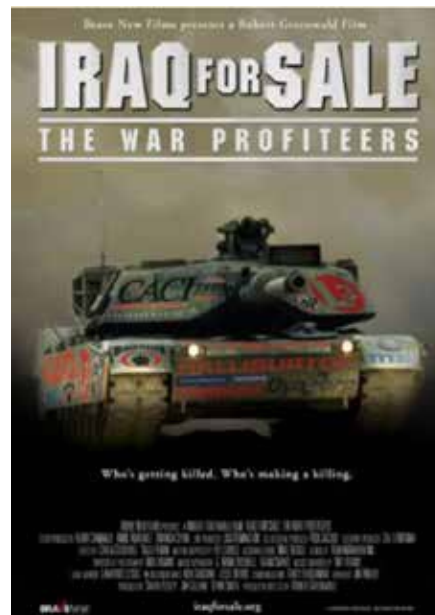
## Radical vision

When Greenwald founded Brave New Films, it was, according to Ortner, with several radical visions regarding both production and distribution. One of them was speed: Brave New Films aims to produce documentaries that can mobilise intervention in events as they occur. Not just uncover what happened after the fact.

Another is reach: The documentaries should be watched by as many as possible. This requires a distribution- and screening concept that is broadly accessible economically and socially and, in turn, requires networks. Brave New Films productions are not primarily screened in documentary film festivals or cinemas but in community houses, churches, and private homes – and they are available for free online, full-length.

For this reason, the production company has no revenue and instead finances its activities through funds and donations. Around half of their economy is used to facilitate screenings, often in collaboration with organisations and groups.

A third vision is a particular understanding of truthful filmmaking. Brave New Films does not simply reveal factual truths but «the deeper truths of the systemic nature of capitalism, racism, and (proto)fascism.» In that sense, Ortner contends, «one of the most important forms of impact generated by Brave New Films and all the other work of the documentary movement may be the remobili-



The measure of success for a Brave New Films production is impact – that it mobilises its audience.

Brave New Films productions are not primarily screened in documentary film festivals or cinemas but in community houses, churches, and private homes

sation and revalidation of the importance of truth-telling itself.»

## Finding «truth»

Naturally, she is not uncritical about the concept of truth, and a chapter of the book is dedicated to discussing various understandings of truth, which also refers to other recent publications about the same topic, for example, *Where Truth Lies*, reviewed in *Modern Times Review* in 2021.

Brave New Films productions often follow the same formula, interchanging between personalised stories and facts and statistics, and where one or more elements in the narrative must incentivise action. A documentary must not leave the audience with a feeling of hopelessness in the face of oppression and power, no matter how grotesque and overwhelming the injustices.

Furthermore, the documentaries always move between the specific and the systemic. It's not enough to show how Walmart exploits its employees – it must be clear how this exploitation is part and parcel of a larger unjust system that we call capitalism and, thus, how exploitation is built into the very DNA of the company.

«We tell the story so people can connect the dots, so they understand how systemic many of these things are,» Ortner quotes Greenwald.

The fieldwork that sustains Ortner's analysis and description of how Brave New Films function and the impact its documentaries have is not exactly impressive, which in part is because it was cut short by the pandemic and Ortner chose to write her book based on what she had already collected. This makes *Screening Social Justice* occasionally rather weak, with too many banalities, and where some not very interesting facts and occurrences are given more attention than they rightly deserve.

Nevertheless, the book offers an easy-read introduction to a radical documentary film company, which Ortner characterises as part of «one of the primary lines of defense against the possibility of totalitarian governance in the United States and, indeed, most other parts of the world.»





# The camera as the weapon

**PALESTINE** / Receiving both awards and death threats, *No Other Land* is a poignant exploration of resistance, solidarity, and the quest for justice in a land marked by conflict. BY FRANCESCA BORRI / HUMAN IDFF (OSLO)

## No Other Land

Director: Basel Adra, Hamdan Ballal, Yuval Abraham, Rachel Szor  
 Producer: Yabayay Media, Antipode Films  
 Country: Palestine, Norway

This story is actually more outside the cinema than in.

Inside, it is of Basel Adra, 29 years old, from Masafer Yatta—South of Hebron. Like many Palestinians, his first childhood memory is of a searchlight being pointed at him by a soldier as Masafer Yatta is one of those bits of the world where life looks like an Amnesty International report. In Arabic, it means «nothing» as it is nothing but a bare flow of hills of earth and sand dotted with briars like pinpricks—briars and shepherds' shacks scattered around and isolated. And for the settlers, there is no easier prey. In 1983, it was declared a Military Zone. And now, there is a demolition order looming over every house of its thousand or so inhabitants. In Masafer Yatta, the battle is not one of M16s or tanks but bulldozers and lawyers. That's why Basel Adra graduates in law, trusting in justice. But the courts are the Israeli courts. They are a weapon among weapons. «We are only carrying out the instructions,» the army repeats. «It's all legal.» And from shacks, Palestinians ended up in caves.

### A most emblematic area

«I started to film when we started to end,» he says, for he has nothing else: only his camera. He wants his images to become evidence before a different type of judge—public opinion. He runs from one spot to next, one attack to next, «I'm filming you! I'm filming you!» he shouts to the IDF and the settlers, night and day. And when he starts filming, Yuval Abraham, 29 years old, starts filming him. He is from Be'er Sheva; he is «a human-rights Israeli,» as Palestinians say caustically, basically, and skeptically. And when he is there, in the middle of nowhere, among these Palestinians who, after all, are total strangers and for whom he could be a target, you cannot help but think: he is braver than the entire IDF; than all those who are now on the front line in Gaza.

Masafer Yatta is one of the areas most covered by the media. Israeli and Palestinian activists are shoulder to shoulder—but, above all, because it is a

most emblematic area: daily, nothing special seems to happen. A torn pylon here, broken pipes there. Because here, Gaza is not the rule; it is the exception. The rule is this daily drip that exasperates you, causing you to leave of your own free will. Suddenly, there is a fight around a generator. And Harun Abu Aran, its owner, remains quadriplegic because of this—a generator. That's Masafer Yatta. That's what Israelis and Palestinians are today. Apparently, they live next to each other; some drive cars with yellow plates, and others with green plates, but Israel controls both. Deciding for both where you can or can't go. Harun Abu Aran will die due to lack of treatment after two years of agony.

### Co-resistance

«Ours is not coexistence; it is co-resistance,» said Yuval Abraham at the Berlinale, where on 26 February, *No Other Land* won the Documentary Award. Stirring up a storm that is still ongoing. He has been accused of anti-Semitism. A Jew whose family was exterminated in the Shoah.

Between the dead and the missing, 2% of Gaza's population has now been killed. As if in Europe, we had had 9 million victims. And many festivals found themselves in between the outrage for 7 October, for Hamas, and for the response to them. But the Berlinale has always been political. And so, when its executive director Mariëtte Rissenbeek, on its eve, said that «it doesn't position itself politically, especially in times when we don't know where politics is heading,» many were

After all, isn't this the role of artists and intellectuals? Tackling controversial topics?

taken aback. It stood with the Arab Spring, against Trump, for Ukraine. For Mahsa Amini. Why not talk about Gaza as well? After all, isn't this the role of artists and intellectuals? Tackling controversial topics? The problem is that Yuval Abraham did not limit himself to a hollow call for peace. Anyone who lives here knows it is not about peace but justice. That only from justice will freedom come, and only from freedom will security come for everyone. And so, he instead talked of equality. Explaining that once back home, he would be subject to a different law than the one Basel Adra is subject to, civilian law, rather than military law, even though they live just 18 miles away. The result: he never went back home because of tons of death threats.

### Europe's internal conflict

Germany is not just any country, of course. After the Holocaust, unconditional support for Israel is «staatsräson,» reason of state, and any discussion on Israelis and Palestinians has to be based on the so-called «*erinnerungskultur*,» the culture of remembrance. But it is the same throughout Europe: any criticism of Israel is branded as anti-Semitism. Especially now that the far-right is on the rise everywhere. The AfD, the Alternative for Germany, has 78 deputies out of 736 in Germany. In Italy, Mussolini's heirs are in government. And anti-Semitism has not disappeared. At all. But it's marginal. While this undeclared ban on any criticism of the Occupation fuels radicalisation. Germany is also the country of Samidoun, a network of activists strictly monitored by Interpol for their connections to Hamas. Sometimes, honestly, listening to them is like listening to bin Laden. In Berlin, Justice Minister Marco Buschmann spoke of criminal prosecution, yes, but because while Yuval Abraham asked for equality, the fans in the stands called for a Palestine free from the river to the sea. Which means a Palestine without Israel.

Instead of mediating the conflict, Europe has sparked one within the conflict—pro-Isrealis versus pro-Palestinians. Or maybe, pro-nothing. Because in the end, in Berlin they talked more about themselves than about Masafer Yatta.

While here, Israelis and Palestinians, together, try to sort this hell out.

