Critics Are Not Afraid of Rotterdam, Critics Are Afraid of Rotterdam’s Ghosts

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Rotterdam in January can be a cold place to come and commune with the cinema screen. The large, open space of the Schouwburgplein, in front of the Pathé multiplex cinema that forms one of the major screen hubs for the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR), could easily leave one thinking of emptiness and desolation. The pockmarked steel platform paving exaggerated each of my steps away from the festival’s ‘silverscreens’ with a hollow, metallic echo, as if a shadow trod carefully and cautiously behind me. Having left my final screening – the second event of a Joost Rekveld retrospective – I found myself momentarily stalled upon that slippery steel surface, my breath coldly condensing in circular formation, as if someone stood close to my shoulder, reciprocally exhaling. Turning around to once more face the cinema, and the De Doelen festival hubs beyond it, I saw there was nothing between myself and those screens. Yet I knew that what I apprehended in that moment of looking was an animate absence, as if the IFFR’s selection of films this year had somehow reconfigured the structure of my eyeballs to more keenly discern the significance of in-between spaces.

Maybe it was something to do with the colder weather. Or maybe it was a vertiginous aftereffect of the global political landscape at the start of 2017. Whatever it was, my return to Rotterdam for another year of IFFR discoveries was accompanied by a pronounced spinal tremor and an unnerving chill in the air. Algernon Blackwood could not have composed an uncannier atmosphere.

The overarching theme of this year’s festival, “Parallax Views,” explicitly asked the festival audience to consider the programmed films from more than one point of view. In the current political climate, discourses have become increasingly polarized. IFFR 2017 wanted to create a critical space in which a plurality of cinematic vistas could emerge to help deepen a sense of dialogue in these times of blistering monologue. In essence, the same thing may be portrayed from multiple perspectives, and thus the festival programme seemed particularly alive to those films that encouraged a wide variety of engagements. This attentiveness toward an evolving critical interaction with as wide a selection of films as possible has long convinced me that, of the major international film festivals, Rotterdam is the most consistently stimulating.

This year’s program explicitly tackled issues of diversity and representation in the “Black Rebels” subsection of films categorized thematically under “Perspectives 2017.” This subsection aired Barry Jenkins’s little-seen 2008 debut feature, Medicine for Melancholy. It also included awards-season fare with the same director’s Moonlight (2016) and Jeff Nichols’s Loving (2016). However, it was in the invocation of the late, great African-American writer James Baldwin that the idea of a ghostly presence running through this year’s programme first came to my attention. Mike Hoolboom’s short film, Identification (2017), showcased Baldwin’s last visit to his father, and explored complex societal attitudes toward race and racism. Baldwin then resurfaced even more explicitly in the retrospective screening of Horace Ové’s debut documentary, Baldwin’s Nigger (1968), a long-form interview with the writer (Fig. 1), as he is interrogated about issues of race and the black experience by comedian and political activist Dick Gregory. What is most remarkable about this 1968 film is
that it plays out in front of a predominantly black British audience, something that was rare for the time period (and may even still be considered a rarity).

Baldwin’s presence at the centre of “Black Rebels” focused my attention upon a common element among the strongest films at this year’s IFFR. I discovered that the best festival films had some kind of spectral absence haunting the edges of the frame, asking the viewer to look, and then look again. I have never before come across such a concentrated selection of films that consistently asked me to reconsider and recontextualize what I was watching, as I was watching it.

Foremost among these films were the challenging and profoundly haunted and haunting road movies of the “Bright Future” features, *Children Are Not Afraid of Death, Children Are Afraid of Ghosts* (2017) and *Sexy Durga* (2017), both of which walked away with awards. The former film, an uncompromising Chinese experimental documentary from artist and activist Rong Guang Rong, examined the 2015 group suicide of five young children in a rural village in the Chinese province of Guizhou (Fig. 2). Initially, Rong intended to make a documentary that investigated the social conditions that had compelled these children to take such desperate measures; however, on arriving in the province, Rong was arrested, intimidated, and had his existing footage seized. The resulting film attempts to navigate these seemingly insurmountable difficulties, finding increasingly poetic ways of approaching both the original subject and the problems of making a film on that subject. I found Rong’s creation of an all-pervasive atmosphere of fear and uncertainty particularly striking. At first, the film appears incoherent, but as sections repeat and the extent of interference in the filmmaking process becomes apparent, Rong cedes control of his film to the ghostly presences of the dead children. The camera becomes less compelled by documentarian inquiry than by childlike fascination and horror. It made for an engaging and deeply unsettling meditation on neglect, cruelty, and authority that deserves to find a wider audience.

By comparison, *Sexy Durga* was a more conventional feature film, yet its road movie format set in motion an unnerving trip into the worst and most threatening aspects of Indian chauvinism. This third feature film from Malayalam director Sanal Kumar Sasidharan has a fascinating production history, which may explain the film’s relentless narrative momentum. Sasidharan drafted an outline for the film, setting it in the strongly patriarchal southern Indian region of Kerala. From this outline, the director then acquired minimal production funds and put together a wholly improvised series of narrative sequences that were shot over the course of one night. These improvisational elements are interspersed with footage of a Hindu Thaipusam festival involving the religious practice of body mortification and piercing. It eerily reminded me of all the lurid headlines about physical and sexual abuse of women by men that
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have come out of India in recent years. The eponymous female character, travelling at night with her male partner, draws the unwanted and insistent attentions of multiple males, all of whom eventually prove themselves to be sinister and threatening. Patriarchal privilege and hierarchy are built into the oppressive nature of the Indian state; though the predatory sexual advances of the various men require the couple to seek aid from the authorities, the encounter with police creates an even more chilling scene. The festival footage that informs moments at the start and finish of the film complicates the gender politics further by showing the supplicatory nature of Hindi-Indian masculinity when presented with the woman as goddess, the woman as an object of awe and worship. Sexy Durga was a bold and divisive choice as the winner of the festival’s main competition award, the Hivos Tiger. However, I fully endorse this decision, as there is undeniable breakout potential for this film with the right marketing and distribution.

The haunted and haunting qualities of the program were further explored through films that trained the viewer in particular ways of seeing. William Oldroyd’s wonderful directorial debut, Lady Macbeth (2016), relocated Nikolai Leskov’s 1865 Russian novel, Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District, from Siberia to Northumberland, England. The film adaptation of the novel seems well suited to Oldroyd’s background in theatre and opera, as it had been adapted into an opera in 1934 and into a film in 1962 by the legendary Polish filmmaker Andrzej Wajda, who passed away in late 2016. Remarkably, Oldroyd migrates the source text by focusing upon its potential to challenge and disrupt particularly rigid Victorian societal gender divisions, and offers new insights into the racial diversity of nineteenth-century Britain. The film benefits from a tremendous central turn by Florence Pugh (The Falling [2014]), who plays Katherine, a young woman forced into a society marriage with a cold and distant Northumbrian industrialist and landowner.

Fig. 3: Leading actress Florence Pugh as Katherine in Lady Macbeth (2016).
The opening shots of the film establish an oppressive, panopticon-like domestic sphere that is dominated by masculinities, even when no men are present. Katherine is shown to be truly self-possessed and self-aware, as evidenced by the looks she gives that go beyond the stifling restrictions of the fixed frame. As Katherine locks her gaze on points beyond the camera – and the frame in which the camera fixes her – her look implicitly challenges the domestic circumstances that seek to imprison her (Fig. 3). Her gaze clearly reflects the multifarious ways in which this domestic female body is itself looked upon, not only by the dominant male figures of the society, but also the female figures, who inadvertently become avatars for male control and jealousy. This kind of film, with its confident innovations in cinematic subjectivity and bold articulation of colonial counter narratives, makes me believe that British filmmaking could be on the cusp of a creative renaissance.

Another form of haunting emerged within the unlikely context of a New York City comedy about a family of African-American women. Stella Meghie’s 2016 feature debut Jean of the Joneses breathed fresh air into a nearly exhausted subgenre. Taking the New York conversational relationship comedies of Woody Allen and Noah Baumbach as a template, Canadian filmmaker Meghie gives viewers a relatively unusual film experience, namely a comedy about solidly middle-class African-American women. Jean (Taylour Paige) is a published author in her thirties, who comes from a family of seemingly high-achieving women. Struggling to complete her second book as her relationship with her filmmaker partner Jeremiah (Francois Arnaud) falls apart, she finds herself wallowing in self-pity and moving through the homes of her mother, her aunts, and her grandmother, all of whom have nothing but criticism to offer her. Even within such a conventional, if exceptionally well-written, comedy of manners, I found myself confronted by the ghostly. Oddly, a film filled with so much vibrant back-and-forth bickering, is, at its core, a film about absence and omission. When Jean finally connects this absence to a forgotten family figure, it forces out a series of painful truths that are both very honestly tackled and provide much of the humour in the latter half of the film. Meghie’s film not only gives a screen presence to middle-class African-American women, but also manages to further empower her characters by giving us an African-American femininity divorced from patriarchal structuring. As a result, I find myself curious to see how the director will navigate the adaptation of romantic bestseller Everything, Everything, to be released in 2017.

The middle-class African-American metropolitan experience contrasted a more tenuous African migrant existence at the economic sharp end in a forgotten corner of Europe. Migratory African presences stalk the peripheries of Elene Naveriani’s I Am Truly a Drop of Sun on Earth (2017), a Swiss production set in the director’s home city of Tbilisi, Georgia. The film focuses upon peripheral migrant experiences within the capital city of a nation that is still living in the divisive shadow of Cold War-era ideas of ‘east’ and ‘west.’ Naveriani portrays Tbilisi as a city caught between the remnants of an ugly Soviet past and the crude capitalist reimaginations of American-led ‘westernism.’ This short, carefully crafted debut feature tells a story of interstitial existences. April (Khatia Nozadze) is a prostitute, who at the start of the film has just spent the night in jail. Back on the outside, she accepts a dare to sleep with a young Nigerian immigrant, Dije (Daniel Antony Onwuka), who finds himself stuck in a rut after mistakenly settling in the country of Georgia, thinking it was Georgia in the United States (Fig. 4). Both characters are viewed as pariahs by the society that surrounds them. April finds the majority of her clients among the business, criminal, and political elites that frequent the exclusive hotels and nightclubs of the city centre, while Dije works as a low-paid labourer.
on the various building developments around Tbilisi, as well as a vendor and delivery man in the local marketplace. The film, shot in black and white, captures the disparities of capitalist development and its central characters who demonstrate that the ‘pariah’ is an essential part of this development. Naveriani confrontationally details the hostilities and suspicions faced by these two characters within the society they inhabit, yet delicately complements this with a focus upon April and Dije’s gradual intimacy. In the end, it makes for a meditative exploration of ‘nowhere’ spaces and the peripheral existences trapped within them. The credits contain the tragic detail that the film is explicitly a haunted document, as the lead actor Onwuka passed away shortly after filming was completed.

Perhaps the best film of the festival was also the first film I saw. *All the Cities of the North* (2016) marks the feature debut of Bosnian-born filmmaker Dane Komljen (Fig. 5). It is a film about utopias, intimacy, love, and cohabitation. Watching it slowly, gently, and intently weave its way through a history of disappered spaces from Lagos to Brasilia to Montenegro gave me an initial sense of the festival’s focus on ghostly programming.

In the film, an abandoned holiday complex on the Montenegrin/Albanian border developed by a communist Yugoslav construction firm, Energoprojekt, becomes home to two men. This same construction firm was also responsible for helping to develop the sprawling infrastructure around the Lagos International Trade Fair complex built in Nigeria in the mid-1970s; the film attempts to weave together an exploration of repurposed spaces through Energoprojekt’s work on these sites. Both the holiday complex and the International Trade Fair buildings have barely served the purpose for which they were initially designed, and have since been co-opted and refashioned by local populations. The two men lead a quiet, idyllic life, tending to livestock, gardening, berry-picking, and performing general maintenance and making structural improvements to the buildings of the complex. The film depicts a surprising and compelling intimacy between the two characters. I have never before seen a film that is so atten-
tive to the ways in which physical contact communicates genuine feelings of love. Even the arrival of a third man – the director himself – cannot upset the blissful equilibrium that these men have established. Komljen plays a version of himself, a documentarian chronicling the quiet lives of these two men. His presence disrupts their intimacy; however, where a lesser film would have wrung easy drama and tension from this scenario, this film offers a different idea. Komljen’s character is not an external source of disruption and chaos, but rather, an opportunity for the men to examine how their community of two may adapt to the accommodation of more people.

Despite this impressively optimistic depiction of a utopic vision for humanity, the film is still infused with the fear of absence. Detours into the lost community of the workers’ village that was submerged under a lake on the completion of the construction work that founded the city of Brasilia – a subject of a documentary film by Komljen – emphasizes a sense of loss that is felt when the human scale is overwhelmed by the grand designs of progress.

There are also underlying hints of elegy in the allegorical aspects of the film vis-a-vis the dissolution and fragmentation of the Yugoslav state. The new nationalisms of the Balkans have yet to rediscover the commonalities of that earlier era, and the bleakest elements of this film suggest that they may never do so. The critical, questing spirits of Jean-Luc Godard, Simone Weil, and new-wave Serbian musician Vlada Divljane also impose themselves upon Komljen’s conception of a world of utopic spaces long since lost to humanity. The bulk of the voiceover narrative directly quotes these sources, whilst the late Divljane’s cult band Idoli play over the end credits, with their track Ime Da Da, a song that explores just how people can make a world that is mutually meaningful. What is clear is that Komljen has given us a minor masterpiece that does all that it can to approach ‘the other’ as something other than a stranger, a phantom, or a haunting figment of our imagination.

From the mainstream comic sensibilities of Jean of the Joneses through to the askew horror stylings of Sexy Durga, this year’s IFFR seems to have found
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films that are possessed of something more than the mundane reworkings of genre and trope that bedevil so much of contemporary independent and mainstream cinema. This is an account of just a handful of films that found something of interest in interstitial spaces, where character and place could be examined from unique and unusual vantage points. Despite this predominance of unusual perspectives – the parallax views of the festival’s programming theme – an uncanny aspect crept into so many of these cinematic encounters. So much of the content of these films was familiar: a literary adaptation, an investigative documentary, a longform interview, a social comedy, and a road movie. Yet each film found a way to reinvigorate and refresh these elements. Their unique viewpoints are predicated around an examination of something lost, something that has slid out of view or has become obscured. The manner in which the eye is drawn to cinematic spaces in which absence ghosts close to presence, was what made this year’s theme so rewarding.

Works Cited

All the Cities of the North. Directed by Dane Komljen, performances by Dane Komljen, Boban Kaludjer, and Boris Isakovic, Dart Film, 2016.


I Am Truly a Drop of Sun on Earth. Directed by Elene Naverian, performances by Khatia Nozadze and Daniel Antony Onwuka, Alva Film, 2017.


