



TWO OLD FESTIVALS: ANN ARBOR AND OBERHAUSEN 2017

The Oberhausen Kurzfilmtage and Ann Arbor Film Festival are *old*: Oberhausen sixty-three, Ann Arbor fifty-five. Both take place in the center of small towns in regions that developed around heavy industry which is now largely dissipated. Dignified movie theaters are the focal points of each festival, with comfortable informal meeting spaces in the baroque lobby of the Ann Arbor Michigan Theater and outside the Lichtburg Filmpalast on the Elsässer pedestrian street in Oberhausen. Despite their age, each festival is vital and contemporary, welcoming recent technologies and emerging filmmakers while acknowledging the histories of independent film, video, and other media (with some exceptions, noted below). Both explicitly promote innovation and experimentation in the moving image, with barely a nod to the entertainment industry's criteria of value and success, an attitude I deeply appreciate. These two are perhaps the most sought after film festivals by short filmmakers, and consequently they select their entries from thousands of submissions — for Oberhausen 5,494 entries for the International Competition, of which 56 are selected for screening, while Ann Arbor receives about 2500 entries, from which approximately 120 are selected. One difference, which no doubt accounts for the disparity in numbers of submissions, is that Oberhausen does not charge a fee for entering a film, while Ann Arbor does.

There are currently over 3000 film festivals world-wide, including many that specialize in genres, age of contributors, or subjects (for example, the Neuchâtel International Fantastic Film Festival, the Up-And-Coming Festival, and CINEfoot - International Football Film Festival). As non-specialist festivals, both Ann Arbor and Oberhausen embrace diversity in their programming, but in different ways. Diversity is a disputed concept, as reflected in the contrasting approaches taken by each festival to screen movies from as wide a range of practitioners as possible. Leslie Raymond, the director of Ann Arbor, announced the festival's position well before it started, (*see <http://www.secondwavemedia.com/concentrate/features/annarborfilmfestival0402.aspx>*) and to this end the 2017 AAFF included three programs devoted to specific ethnic, gender, and national identities: "The New Negress Film Society," "Out Night," and "The Video Bureau of China." Lars Henrik Gass, the director of the Oberhausen Kurzfilmtage, has not announced a commitment to the inclusion of marginalized or minority producers, but diversity in terms of geographical origin, cultural affinity, gender of maker, and type of project is unmistakable, for example,

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For detailed notes and critique of individual works, please see: Weinbren's Favorites at Ann Arbor and Oberhausen Festivals 2017 <http://www.mfj-online.org/weinbren-at-oberhausen-ann-arbor-2017/>

in the competition programs, which rarely included two works from the same country or region, with broad variation in genre, image technology and the gender, ethnicity, experience and expertise of the filmmaker. Global political issues, from the social to the geo-political are, if not center stage, an undercurrent that often surfaces in many of the programs of both festivals. Dismay at the neo-fascist developments around the world is manifest.

Both festivals include several types of programming along with the largely submission-based short film competitions, and this year I decided to favor curated events, while attending as many of the competition programs as I could fit in between.

While the idea of diversity as an expression of deliberate inclusion, especially of marginalized or under-represented groups, is certainly commendable, there are downsides. The New Negress Film Society program is a well-conceived distribution package with a powerful political punch, organized and promoted by the filmmakers involved. Widely booked, it is effective in bringing attention to a category of works and artists that might not be otherwise screened. In my view, however, to include it in the AAFF was inappropriate. Ja'Tovia Gary's *An Ecstatic Experience* (2015), the first film in the program, is one of the most compelling works I saw at the AAFF. It had indeed been screened in the open competition in the 2016 festival, and singled out by Ekrem Serdar in his MFJ No. 64 review. But the festival's domain is individual films and filmmakers. The problem with organizing programs around identity categories is that one cannot avoid regarding the films in these programs as representatives of their category, rather than artworks to be encountered solely on their own merits.

Gary's *An Ecstatic Experience* utilizes the well-established technique of direct marking on film material, in this case a print of a PBS program from the 1960s featuring actress Ruby Dee's performance of a former slave's account of an incident during her time working in the field, one of many "slave narratives" collected from the last living slaves, as oral histories under the WPA in the 1930s. The PBS program, at least what we see of it, was shot on a minimal set, with little attempt at theatricality beyond the actress's stellar performance. Gary's painstaking marking of

the footage, visual accents precisely placed frame by frame to surround and highlight the actress, has the impact of a halo, which, in harmony with Dee's outstanding delivery, transforms her from an actress playing a part into the daughter of a slave who underwent a religious ecstasy under the harsh abuse of an overseer, the daughter herself experiencing a spiritual epiphany as she tells her mother's story. This is brought into sharp focus by the scratches engraved into the film's surface like the horse-whip gouges into the slave-woman's back, but here they are marks of tenderness rather than cruelty and sadism. The next scene of the film re-presents the viral images of a young man in the 2015 Baltimore #BlackLivesMatter demonstration hurling a garbage can through the rear window of a parked police car. The context transforms his destructive and dangerous action into a parallel scene of ecstatic deliverance.

As one of the founders of the New Negress Film Society, in including her film in the Society's touring program Ja'Tovia Gary has chosen to spotlight her heritage. In most screening contexts, this collection is shown by itself, and one of the objectives of the packaging of these films is to get them screened despite implicit and explicit prejudices, and simultaneously to articulate their politic. As a non-American, I was recently shaken to learn, from Carol Anderson's *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (2016), unremitting details of the sustained, relentless, systematic practices of institutional repression, violence and injustice towards African Americans since the colonial era and up to the present day. I understand and support the need for all and any methods to combat this long shadow over our culture.

But the AAFF is a celebration of the moving image. In the context of the festival, Gary's brilliant film is diminished by the foregrounding of the racial identity of its maker. However, the power of its message and its reflection on history is inescapable through its pure cinematic means.

Another example is Sosi Chamoun's *Princessboy* (2017), a short film in the "Out Night" program. Outside this program, the film would immediately be understood as a delicate and touching Penelope Leach-like argument for a sensible way to treat children's activities — if your son wants to play with a



Ja'Tovia Gary, *An Ecstatic Experience* (2015), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.



Sosi Chamoun, *Princessboy* (2017), frame enlargement.
 Courtesy the artist.

doll or twirl around in a cheap princess dress that matches his older sister's, purchase one for him and let the children gambol as princesses together. It is disconcerting to limit its interpretation to an indication of the sexual choices such a child might make in later life. Placing the Swedish film in the "Out Night" program circumscribed its meaning.

Similarly for the Video Bureau Program, which I was personally delighted to see included in the AAF, since it originated with Ellen Zweig's article in this journal and was previously exhibited at Anthology Film Archives for the launch screening of MFJ No. 62. Again one found oneself looking at the films as examples of the independent Chinese video collective, rather for their individual qualities. Context is super-important, especially for the moving image medium. As film and video editors know, context is a primary determinant of the meaning and impact of individual shots and scenes in a film or video work. Reorder the sequence of shots or rearrange the scenes, and the sense of a movie can change radically. As a film viewer, one understands this implicitly, and by extension the context-dependent semantics of cinema carries over to the program as well.

In very recent times identity politics have been adopted by the regressive forces that have manipulated their way into power and are menacing the US and other western "democracies."

Ethnic identity is emphasized as an incitement of the so-called "populism" of the capitalist underclasses whose members' very survival is under threat. In this environment, ethnic, sexual, gender and national identities take precedence in those situations of group oppression when collective action is a primary and necessary defense. However, in social and artistic environments, it is more important for our interpersonal relationships to accept the multiple, often inconsistent identities, the tendencies and character traits that combine to make an individual: the other way is a step on the path to fascism. Art-making is an individual process. Each work needs to be experienced, understood, and evaluated for itself. To see a work of art primarily as a manifestation of the ethnic, gender or national identity of the practitioner is to demean the labor put into it. A related set of issues is explored in Nina Yuen's films, included as one of the retrospective programs at Oberhausen, which I discuss in the "Notes and Commentaries" section of the MFJ website: <http://www.mfj-online.org/weinbren-oberhausen-annarbor-2017>.

With the thousands of submissions for the Oberhausen and Ann Arbor programmers to choose from, each work in the competition programs had something to recommend it. There were two things that stood out for me. One is that almost every movie selected grabbed attention with an arresting opening,



Nina Yuen, *David* (2010), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

like the standard template for crime fiction and James Bond movies, which begin with a violent or fast paced scene, multiple story strands left incomplete. The opening scene remains with the reader or viewer until the mystery is solved, the identity of the killer revealed, the motive uncovered. It is unsettling to see one short film after another front-loading in this way. But the reason is obvious. Programmers, and especially the (often volunteer) pre-screener, do not have time to watch entire films. Elimination has to be based on sampling, else screening for next year's festival would have to begin before this year's is over. (7000 entries for Oberhausen, conservative average length 15 minutes, 91 screened. Do the math.) Of course, using digital technology, pre-screener could scan to look at samples throughout a work, but I suspect they do not. In a straightforward feedback loop, filmmakers seem to have adapted to the festival culture. Only the invited, individual artist programs in both festivals included films characterized by a slow build on an inauspicious opening to a gratifying or surprising conclusion.

The downside of Oberhausen's approach to diversity stems from the range of sophistication about and awareness of experimental film history in the works selected for the competition programs, for which there is a patent requirement to promote as broad a geographic reach as possible. Some films, especially from

cultures that have only recently begun to acknowledge the moving image as an artistic medium, re-examine familiar tropes of avant-garde cinema. However, in addition to this sense of *deja vu*, I also felt some affection for the reinterpretation (or plain repetition) of familiar experimental film strategies in works from non-Western cultures. Filipino artist Khavn's prodigious oeuvre, for example, includes films that fall into this category. I discuss Khavn's work and some of the other artists and titles that struck me at AAFF 55 and Oberhausen 63 online at <http://www.mfj-online.org/weinbren-oberhausen-annarbor-2017> (list next page).

Were I to offer advice to both festivals, it would be to exclude student films. There are plenty of festivals that show them, Up-And-Coming in Hannover, Germany, for example, which is restricted to applicants under 28. Though Up-And-Coming provides a stimulating week of screenings, it is noticeable that first-time filmmakers frequently emphasize one aspect of production: access (e.g. to sites or people), performance, production or post production virtuosity, or set and costume design are each difficult enough pull off. Mature filmmakers understand that each of these elements plays a part in a great work, and ultimately concept and execution are key.

GRAHAME WEINBREN

STANDOUTS ANN ARBOR

Yuan Gua Ming's retrospective program

Tom Schroeder, *The Sparrow's Flight*

Blair McClendon, *America for Americans*

Pat Oleszco, *Quit Draggin'*

Irina Pathavian, *Socrates of Kamchatka*

Joiri Minaya, *Siboney*

Brian M. Cassidy and Melanie Shatsky,
*Animals Under Anesthesia: Speculations
on the Dreamlike of Beasts*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Tom Schroeder, *The Sparrow's Flight* (2016), frame enlargement.
Courtesy the artist.

Blair McClendon, *America for Americans* (2017), frame enlargement.
Courtesy the artist.

Irina Pathavian, *Socrates of Kamchatka* (2016), frame enlargement.
Courtesy the artist.

Joiri Minaya, *Siboney* (2017), performance still. Courtesy the artist and
Colección Eduardo León Jimenes de Artes Visuales, Santiago DR.

STANDOUTS OBERHAUSEN

Thema (Theme): Social Media Before the Internet
curated by Tilman Baumgärtel

Retrospective Programs of Nina Yuen & Khavn



LEFT COLUMN

Images from the exhibition *Social Media Before the Internet*:

Cristina Perincioli, *Für Frauen - 1. Kapitel* (1971), frame enlargements.
Courtesy Deutsche Kinemathek.

Nam June Paik, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* (1984), frame enlargement.
Courtesy Internationale Kurtzfilmtage Oberhausen.

ABOVE

Khavn De La Cruz, *Happyland* (2017), performance stills. Courtesy
Internationale Kurtzfilmtage Oberhausen.

Nina Yuen, *Switch* (2016), frame enlargement. Courtesy Internationale
Kurtzfilmtage Oberhausen.