



## SHORT FILM DAYS: THE OBERHAUSEN FILM FESTIVAL 2016

I was invited to review the Oberhausen Short Film Festival, or *Oberhausen Kurzfilmtage*. A shuttle picked me up at the Düsseldorf Airport, which is about a half hour from the town of Oberhausen. The festival provided four days of accommodation at a four star hotel with an outstanding daily breakfast buffet. I was issued food and drink coupons for each day I was there, and invited to a Press Dinner (with wine) at the Bombay Thai restaurant. And I received complimentary tickets for any of the programs I chose. I accepted the enticements, promising myself that I would write about the festival as I saw it, even if it resulted in my never being offered another press pass.

But my future junket invitations are safe . . . so far. I can report that Oberhausen Kurzfilmtage excels in administration, breadth of programming, parties, and in general openness and sense of community. It has

become one of the most important short film festivals in the world, under the direction of Dr. Lars Henrik Gass since 1997.

The 2016 festival consisted of multiple screenings, events and exhibitions, including thematic and single-artist programs, archival presentations by the Centre Georges Pompidou, the Center for Visual Music and the Videokunstarkivet, and other screenings.

There is no way to see all or even a fraction of the festival, since many of the events and screenings run simultaneously. So, determined to get a raw sense of the terrain and ambience, I elected to attend panel discussions and competition screenings. This would fill my schedule.

The 'Podium' discussions took place every morning at 10:30, each with four or five panelists. The subjects included film schools, distribution,

production funding, curation/programming, and the Latin American cinema. "How Green is the Grass Really?" was the headline of the panel I found most compelling. With the subtitle "Financing Programs for Artists' Films," it included two panelists introduced as "producers of artists' films." As the discussion proceeded, I learned that there is European funding for artists' film, enough to support at least a few production companies in addition to funding the works they produce. But what counts as *artists' cinema*? All the panelists accepted a sharp distinction between artists' cinema and commercial cinema, as do the funding bodies. But the paradigm of artists' cinema seems to be European Art Film, rather than self-funded, self-produced experimental/avant-garde moving image works, even if the works are designed as installations for exhibition in galleries or museums. In other words, one of Peter Wollen's notorious 'Two Avant Gardes' had vanished. Now that the highly financed, commodity-driven Art World has accepted the moving image, artists' use of the medium is finally something that funders can understand and accept, money being the common language. The Art World suppresses the precedents that animate their precious Artists' Cinema, keeping most experimental filmmakers and video artists safely tucked away in an unacknowledged cocoon of alternative micro-cinemas, university film clubs, and underground film festivals. Is this a result of the desire to restrict investment-worthy moving image art to a small and manageable number of practitioners, with an emphasis on artists with established reputations in other media? Or is a more complex ideology at play?

With so many new types of practice stimulated by emergent technologies of production and dissemination, the visual and thematic marks of this distinction are disappearing. Works classifiable as experimental film and video art, i.e. self-generated works by individual artists, were scattered throughout the screenings at Oberhausen, and difficult to discriminate — until the credit sequence — from those that declared their association with a platoon of associate, executive, and just plain producers.

The Lichtburg Kino in the town center of Oberhausen is the principal venue for the festival. The main screen of the multiplex is almost 40 feet wide, featuring finely detailed, high quality digital projection operating on a broad color palette. The image fills the viewer's visual field from much of the auditorium. Scattered throughout the cinema are a few loveseats — sofas for two with no armrest between them. These were the last to fill in the always-crowded

screenings, often seating a single viewer rather than a pair of intimates. It was largely a professional crowd of filmmakers, programmers, reviewers like myself, academics, tweeters, etc., plus many viewers from the local communities. No snogging couples.

There is no entry fee for the competitions and there are few technical restrictions, but the chances of inclusion are low. Of the 4291 films submitted for the international competition, 64 were selected, and 24 of 1295 submitted for the German competition, with 12 of the latter group shown in the local Nordrhein-westfalen subcategory. This amounts to a 1.5% probability of acceptance for the international applicant, and slightly better odds for the German. So how does a selection committee navigate this deluge of movies? What are the criteria for acceptance or rejection? My idea was to attend the screenings of the films entered for competition with an eye to uncovering the biases and predilections of the festival . . . if it is in fact possible to draw any conclusions from looking at only the selections out of the many submissions, without seeing the raw data. In fact, Oberhausen is one of the few festivals that makes *all* entries available to reviewers, including the 4227 works rejected from the international competition. To watch just the international entries would take, like the storm that caused Noah's Flood, 40 days and 40 nights without stopping, 1000 hours of continuous screening, assuming an average duration of under 15 minutes per entry. If I had had several months, I could have attempted a thorough analysis of how decisions were arrived at. Instead, I tackled an exercise of reverse engineering, attempting to ferret out the criteria for a work's being chosen by looking only at those works that were in fact chosen.

Other than a stated preference for exclusivity (in the requirement that the work is a German Festival premiere) and a duration limit (35 minutes for international entries, 45 for German), the most conspicuous programming objective was diversity. The 64 films selected for the international competition screenings originated in 32 countries, and only two of the seven screenings I attended included more than one film from any single country (two from Argentina in Program 2, and two from Croatia in Program 4). Each program consisted of a variety of types, styles, approaches, and production technologies. Many, possibly all known genres (if such a term is still salient) were represented. Each program was radically diverse with no two films in same sub-genre. If there was a potential fault in the selection, it was in this drive to include only one work of any single type, and at least

one work from as many countries as possible and ethnic groups within those countries. At its limits, comprehensiveness dissolves into tokenism. The single hand-drawn animation example must represent all animators, and the Canadian film all of Canadian film culture. Even with this (admitted or implicit) constraint, the programmers managed to avoid films with the bland appeal-to-all quality of a Steven Spielberg movie—most of the films I saw were quirky, edgy or subversive, distinctive and particular.

Within this pointed diversity of genre, style and region of origin, each international competition screening I attended loosely shared a thematic direction. Identity. Ethnology. Architecture and Construction. Death & Absence. Women directors/feminist issues. Films driven by language. After a few hours, one clear distinction began to emerge. Works by experienced filmmakers were patently the best of a rich vein of offerings. They were sophisticated, surprising, and original in many directions at once, and, most of them subversive, or at least iconoclastic, in one way or another. In the German programs I managed to attend, I particularly liked Christoph Girardet's *Synthesis*, and Clemens von Wedemeyer's *Die Pferde des Rittmeisters Harald Vietinghoff-Riesch, 1939-41*, and in the international programs, Richard Dinter's *Snow*, (Sweden), Deimantas Narkevicius' *3D 20.July 2015* (Lithuania), Nina Yuen's *Narcissus* (USA), and Sonja Wyss' *She / Her* (Netherlands).<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, the films by students and emerging filmmakers sparkled with enthusiasm and joy of discovery, but were often predictable in plot, structure or subject, and, counter-intuitively, less subversive than the works by more mature filmmakers. Taking on just *one* of the many compound elements demanded in film production sufficed in many cases: for example, gaining access to a usually hidden or unavailable site or culture, such as Sarah Drath's *Telefon Santrali*, shot in the architecturally distinctive telephone switchboard office of a company in Turkey, but with little of interest other than the strange setting; or Louise Carrin's *Venusia*, filmed inside a brothel in Switzerland, which offered a rare inside view of a location and characters who usually remain in the shadows. However, beyond the truly remarkable feat of gaining permission to shoot the sex workers in their own environment, *Venusia* is desultory and lax, like the characters themselves in their languorous, unfocused, self-indulgent discussion. Other works by emerging filmmakers captured their straightforward delight in the glorious 4K DCP image with its full-bodied sound on the huge screen. But

this thrill does not sustain. On the other hand, one of my favorite films in the festival was just right for a youthful filmmaker: humorous, self-effacing, joyful, and unpretentious. Renata Gasiorovsk introduced her film with these words: "A little animated film about masturbation. I hope you will find it fun." In the hand-drawn work, a snout-nosed character's vulva separates from her body and scampers around like an inquisitive hedgehog, looking for a suitable surface to rub itself on, until finally reuniting with the body it belongs to in a glorious abstract Happy Ending. In contrast, in the opulent 4K DCP environment, the few 16mm self-consciously 'experimental' films looked dull, flat, pretentious, drained of life. Perhaps it was the quality of film projection . . . but then if one type of projection is inadequate, why include works that require it, beyond the goal of maximum diversity?

Perhaps there were two separate sets of criteria for acceptance: one for student or emerging filmmakers, one for more experienced artists. In concept, complexity, and general power over the medium, the distinction was pronounced, and as a result many of the programs seemed uneven and unbalanced. Perhaps it would be better to divide the competition into two separate groups, "Up-and-Coming" and "Masters." The problem is only aggravated by the fact that actual image quality was by and large uniformly excellent. Most works were in gorgeous full color HD, DCP encoded, and free of glitches, artifacts, stutters, burns, scratches, or dirt. Though high-end moving image technology has been available for only a few years, many practitioners have access to the relatively inexpensive equipment required, but sophistication in controlling the medium, communicating with subtlety and authority, and fulfilling the artist's intentions are goals hard won, only achieved with practice and patience. Experience shines, as do resources in such non-technological areas as casting, production design, screen composition, and writing. On the other hand, the excitement, freshness, and simple pleasure in the fact of the moving image on the big screen is a delight in the works by artists at earlier stages in their development, as long as viewers adjust their expectations the moment the next film begins.

One last general comment. Those films that incorporated an explicit or underlying politic consistently leaned left. Not one of the programs I attended included works that would, on ideological grounds, appeal to a Tea Partyer, a Brexit Leaver, or Marine Le Pen enthusiast. Irrespective of where my own sympathies lie, it is of concern to me that our world is



Louise Carrin, *Venusia* (2015), frame enlargement. Switzerland. Courtesy Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen.



Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Die Pferde des Rittmeisters Harald von Vietinghoff-Riesch, 1939-1941* (2016), frame enlargement. Germany. Courtesy Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen.

to an increasing extent divided, driven to some degree, I believe, by the multiplicity and Balkanization of media and the internet. One looks exclusively at those sites and programs to which one is already sympathetic. I certainly do. And how are these sympathies formed? – by inheritance, environment and personal circumstances, reinforced by consuming the materials that fortify one's biases. The era of enlightenment and rationality has passed: there is hardly a possibility of even impacting the views of the other side. I'd like to see as ambitious and influential a festival as Oberhausen Kurzfilmtage contribute to overcoming this stalemate, perhaps by including one or two works with an underlying

ideology with which the majority of the audience, including myself, might disagree, but which might find some scattered support and incite a discussion. It would be consequential if some of the divergences in outlook that seem so unbridgeable were at least open to argument in the friendly sunshine of the plaza outside the Lichtburg Cineplex.

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<sup>1</sup> A list of these and other favorites with short descriptions is online at <http://www.mfj-online.org/weinbrens-favorite-oberhausen64-films/>