

festival review

FNC 2017: The Fabrication of Global Cinema

Giuseppe Fidotta and Sima Kokotović

At its 46th edition, the Festival du Nouveau Cinema continued to follow the well-trodden path taken by many big-ticket film festivals in the contemporary circuit by offering what the outgoing FNC president, founder, and programmer Claude Chamberlan has called “an audacious menu [...] that will leave you open-mouthed” (FNC 2017 Catalogue, 7). This includes a range of events: from the high-profile, attention-grabbing opening *Blade Runner 2049*, directed by Montreal’s prestige director Denis Villeneuve; to daring works by both young and established filmmakers; a program of short films; section on cult, regional, and independent cinemas; installations and performances exploring the latest technological advancements; and so on. It is thanks to such variety that in the midst of similar ever-expanding operations in a region that has recently discovered the high margins of profit assured by the culture industry, FNC has accrued over some years a reputation as a carefully curated, vibrant, and attentive festival. Of course, that did not happen overnight. At the time of its proper entrance on the official festival stage, FNC had to position itself in respect to the then highly praised World Film Festival and nothing else. Almost half century later, it has eclipsed all of its competitors exactly because of its undisciplined nature combined with an appetite for both the mainstream and the niche. More importantly, the festival has profited from its aspiration to cover the outlandish enti-

ty called “global cinema” that we will discuss later.

In many ways, these aspirations driving FNC raise problematic issues, generally overshadowed by its success as an adaptable and a crowd-pleasing format. The festival is not ambitious enough to redraw the face of the city for ten days or to claim world or even national premieres, but is still sufficiently far-reaching to provide an overview of the best art-cinema production worldwide. Alternatives to the format followed by FNC, often with fewer ambitions in size and scope and more in building political awareness, abound, though at a far different scale. This is true for the many middle- and small-sized festivals around the world that present themselves as local initiatives targeting minority (or interest) groups and fostering cohesive forms of sociality. Opposed to the scaled-down festival, FNC is currently undergoing a remarkable transformation into what one might call the “festival of festivals” format, that is, a massive growth and diversification of the offer that aims to provide the audience with an overarching view of “the contemporary state of cinema.” Openly promoting diversity (in formats, geographies, sensibilities, aesthetics, and politics), FNC does not hide its large-scale attitude, similar in scope to a church within whose walls all its devotees could gather and worship cinema in its superb variety.

With a program structured around notions of diversity and comprehensiveness, FNC operates

as a machine that grounds, promotes, and disseminates one single idea of cinema, which nonetheless claims to be hegemonic, if not unchallenged. This idea, what we call “global cinema,” encompasses different genres and formats—the festival film, the cult film, the local-flair film, the experimental artsy film, the children film, the VR installation, the restored version, the themed film party, and so on — coming from all over the world, which only through their assemblage create a single entity, having the ambition to encompass the contemporary state of cinema in its whole. Apparently, there is no outside, for the festival-container is to be all-embracing. The FNC has one main mission, co-director Philippe Gajan claims: “To be the jewel case of [all] precious gems” (FNC 2017 Catalogue, 7). Even though some pearls from, say, Cannes or Berlin may be missing, as a whole the festival affirms its capacity to “catch ‘em all” and display them in venues such as the luxurious Cinéma Impérial, or more modest settings.

Still, something cannot be caught. To understand what and why, one needs to question the festival’s frame of reference exactly at the point where its aspirations and its outcomes meet, that is, in the unquestioned idea of global cinema it promotes. In theory, the festival offers a worldwide overview, reinforced through a long list of countries of origin featured in the catalogue. In practice, however, behind that list, only two poles—Europe and North America—emerge as producers, directly through their companies or indirectly through their funding bodies (including festival funds as well). The pathways taken by films produced outside the West, as far as they do not cross Western institutions and money, guarantee them a secure invisibility. Why cannot FNC even put them in their radars? All we can imagine are two options. First, the idea of what we call “alter-global cinema,” with its myriad of filmmaking practices, forms, and infrastructures, none of them relying on the Global North, is just a collective blunder. It simply does not exist, only thriving in the minds of those who daydream of actually existing decoloniality. Second, the idea of “global cinema” that FNC and its kin are promoting is somehow impregnated with the threat, lurking somewhere in the dark of a movie theatre, of being put to the service of reproducing (neo)colonial perspectives onto the world. Perhaps, cut down to the bone, the basic question becomes “How actually diverse could this vocally boasted diversity be, given its conditions of production?”

To answer to this question, we will focus on an extremely popular theme at the 46th edition—that is, human migration—somehow imbued with the same set of contradictions. Before doing that, we need to ask why this question matters. Otherwise put, why could not we limit ourselves to praise a festival that in terms of offerings, organization, warmth, selection, and, again, diversity is almost stellar? For us, what is at stake is more than numerical representation, the number of Indian, Senegalese, and Taiwanese films the festival could and should show. Nor is it the essential need to guarantee the possibility of seeing, recognizing, and discerning filmmaking traditions outside of those circulating within the festival network, generally otherwise inaccessible. The main problem, for us, is that the idea of “global cinema” projects an understanding of cinema firmly situated within the economies of Global North and, in doing so, posits them as global only in this sense—ecumenical and totalitarian. If this is all we can ask for because there is and can be nothing else, then we cannot but think of filmmaking practices and strategies as divested from power and external to any non-bottom-up geopolitical relation. At the current moment, North-South relations are formed by histories of colonialism and imperialism, and, even more importantly, of the struggles against them. Extractive multinationals, backed up by governments and supranational institutions, are reshaping the economies of the South, making them dependent from and vulnerable to the North. The global cinema industry, fully integrated in these dynamics, could produce dissent only if we are prone to imagine that meaningful resistance could come from within, say, the 2-3 French companies that operate in a state of monopoly in the whole Francophone Africa. By offering well-curated cinematic bites, carefully listed in the “audacious menu,” from distant and not-so distant places around the world, the festival does not only flatten the globe, but it also projects an image of it deprived of the colonial history that has shaped it. It is in this sense that the worlding of cinema—the creation of “global cinema”—that the festival engenders appears to be nothing but a firm mechanism of universalization of the economies of the Global North.

If this is what the festival does, one should not assume that the films themselves, with their own distinct strategies, are blind to the post-colonial situation from which they emerge. It would be an exaggerate oversimplification to imagine that

European or North-American funding renders all of the films simple mouthpieces of European and North-American market ideology. On the contrary, those with a more openly political stance are firmly engaged in rendering visible the different state, juridical, and economic apparatuses that that very same ideology naturalizes and therefore occludes. In offering the possibilities to understand different scales, registers, and movements, these films offer us a glimpse into our present geopolitical condition. This is to say that if the workings of a metropolitan film festival like FNC are inescapably patterned by broader post-colonial and neo-imperial dynamics, it is exactly the myriad of cinematic practices that it exhibits that provide inroads for understanding and analysing those dynamics themselves. Thus, migration becomes a generative theme, potentially illuminating those workings. Several films of the 46th edition, in fact, focus on the movements of people (mostly), goods (occasionally), and capital (rarely) across the world. What they do all have in common are a more or less effective strategies of visualizing what remains erased, and ultimately invisible, in the attempt to give intelligible form to the contemporary world and its inner flows. It would not come as a surprise, given the politics of the festival we just discussed, that most of the films focusing on migration come from Europe.

Nicolas Klotz and Élisabeth Perceval's *The Wild Frontier* (*L'Heroique lande, la frontiere brule*, 2017) stands out when one compares the distance that filmmakers had to traverse in order to make the film with the kilometres crossed by those that film centres on. The film focuses on the infamous Calais "Jungle," a refugee settlement that housed around 6,000 migrants in October 2016, just before French authorities evacuated and demolished it. In their efforts to reach the British coasts, thousands of people from Eritrea, Sudan, Syria, Kurdish Iraq, and so on, found temporary shelter in the first camp with showers, electricity, and toilets in Calais area. Being the French town closest to England, as well as a massive port and the Eurotunnel terminal, Calais was home to several similar camps ever since the late 1990s, all bulldozed or closed down over time. Following their previous efforts with *Pariah* (*Paria*, 1999) and *The Wound* (*La Blessure*, 2004) to make migrants' livelihoods and experiences visible on terms other than those dictated by the French juridical system, Perceval and Klotz shot a film alongside and with people residing in the settlement. Based in

Paris, around 300 km from Calais, they would have come to the camp regularly between January 2016 and February 2017. One of the main characteristics of life in the settlement, close proximity, has found its way into the filmmaking process. In an interview, Perceval described this as making the film together with people they get to know in the camp. Because the camera was never hidden, the director recollects, those who were interested in participating in the shooting were able to approach them and question their presence in the camp along with their film's goals. As time passed, the filmmakers and some refugees grew closer and started working together to film this crucial event of our epoch, as Perceval and Klotz referred to it during a press conference. With a length of 225 minutes, the film patiently allows the complexity of the everyday life in the camps to unfold, navigating between the need to bear witness and to give the protagonists a space to tell their own stories. The experience of life in the camp in this manner becomes the organizing impulse of the film. Although the sense of insecurity and instability shapes the underlying spirit of the film as much as the life in the camp itself, the sense of relentless energy that has propelled those people's movement towards a "better life" awaiting somewhere in Europe testifies to a vitality that cannot be regulated by governmental bodies of the EU.

Ala Eddine Slim's *The Last of Us* (2016), the Tunisian entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 90th Academy Awards, tracks the travel and travail of one character from Tunisia to the mystical woods he finds himself in once he crossed the Mediterranean. While Perceval and Klotz barely commuted from Paris to Calais, Slim had traversed the common route that less established contemporary filmmakers have to take in order to secure sufficient funding for their projects—in this particular case, Doha, Dubai, Marseille, Paris, and Rotterdam (non-incidentally all festival funds). The travel for funding is not dissimilar from the one that the film traces, establishing an eerie analogy between different attempts to succeed in the wealthy North. Nonetheless, the film seems less interested in the materiality of the travel, including its own, than in the lyrical aspects of the travel itself. Although it employs the visual vocabulary of observational filmmaking, with the camera silently tracking its main protagonist through the topographies of African migrant routes, *Last of Us* focuses mostly, if not exclusively, on contemplating the relationship between humans

and nature. As a result, it operates as an experimental film often toying with forms of mysticism while subordinating the world to its overworked, well-crafted image. Once again, the comparison with *The Wild Frontier* is compelling. Perceval and Klotz jettison the structuring conceptions (and conventions) around which filmmaking common sense is built (e.g. the proper feature-length format, the carefully devised production plan, and so on) by positioning themselves at the centre of this lived environment, and are receptive to the everyday encounters, uncertainties, and perils that this position implies. By doing so, *The Wild Frontier* renders the harshness and complexity of migrant lives by cinematic means. *Last of Us*, on the contrary, by assuming the form of a cine-philosophical treatise, refuses to acknowledge the material, geopolitical, and economic dimensions that in the last instance have made it possible.

The more conventional format of the feature-length art film provides to the question of migration a significantly different shape. The two experimental films discussed so far, as well as others on the same topic presented at the festival and produced on the fringes of film funding infrastructure, shed a light on migrants' lives and experiences, so foregrounding travel as a constitutive impulse of life, and hence of cinema. Films such as Aki Kaurismäki's *The Other Side of Hope* (*Toivon tuolla puolen*, 2017) and Kornél Mundruczó's *Jupiter's Moon* (*Jupiter holdja*, 2017), on the other hand, focus on Fortress Europe from the perspective of the local communities inhabiting it, although at its remote borders (Finland and Hungary, respectively). Adopting a similar narrative device, both initially reconstruct the peculiar ordinariness of local communities, using the arrival of one migrant as a narrative trigger disrupting the usual state of things. The crises that ensue, rather than reflecting (on) the shortcomings of multiculturalism, play out exclusively as new vectors within the internal dynamics of the communities. In this way, by staging the encounters from the perspective of those who live in the elective destinations, both films offer a commentary on and from Europe, far more concerned with the cultural and political underpinnings of the alleged crisis that is affecting the continent than with the actual experience of migration itself. Taking the two films' production contexts into account, it becomes clear that these films exemplify prestige "national" art cinema. Their national character, rather than their perceived cosmopolitanism, are worthy of em-

phasis. In spite of their idiosyncratic, complex, and rich auteur visual vocabulary, as well as narrative syntax, they both engage in close dialogue with their local mainstream media in relation to dominant representations of the alleged migrant crisis. Clearly, they openly counter these discourses, which tend to equate the presence of migrants with the socio-economic disruption of the local community. By the mere fact of employing (and exploiting to exhaustion) the same trope, they pretend to reinforce the social-problem rhetoric through which this current geopolitical moment has been commonly analyzed within the European public sphere. The arrival of the migrants troubles an already struggling community, both mainstream media and the two films reiterate. However, ultimately the latter stage their own oppositions to the tones put forward by the national media through their forceful cinematic language. The migrants in both films act as catalysts that provide the communities an opportunity to rediscover themselves. Though not travelling, but on the contrary playing like a community-wide kammerspiel, both *The Other Side of Hope* and *Jupiter's Moon* propose a significant reflection on migratory movement from the milieu of their final destination.

These films can tell us something about the festival as well. Taken in isolation, they articulate original and yet variably problematic discourses on the contemporary postcolonial condition, creating experiential entry points to understand its multifaceted articulation. Taken together in the context of the 46th edition of the festival, instead, they become specimens of "global cinema"—plural, humanitarian, engagee, topical, urgent, and innocuously dazzling in the last instance. Could it have been different? Hard to know. When FNC decided to adopt the "festival of festivals" format, however captivating it might have been, it should have been aware of the fact that that carries with itself the danger of neutralizing the political potentials of programming and transforming it into a bulimic appetite for "gems" to be resold to the acquiescent audiences. The production of "global cinema" depends on the extractive operations of a cultural institution that functions without apparently questioning how programming affects the films themselves. Driven by the urge to gather enough products to satisfy the taste of all potential spectators, the festival embraces what in the long run seems to be nothing but consumer market logics projecting the shadows of the North all over the globe.