Festival Review
Two Years at the Festival de Nouveau Cinéma

Agustín Rugiero Bader

The publishing schedules of *Synoptique* move in mysterious ways and the former issue was out in June, before I could offer you my review of the 2023 edition of the Festival de Nouveau Cinéma, celebrated in Montréal every October. This year, I returned to the festival with a clear picture of its nooks and crannies—the sections, the venues, the people presenting the films—and, fuelled by an inordinate amount of bánh mì (there is a nice and convenient place close to the Cinémathèque), I expanded on the ten-films-for-free starter press package to try and see everything I could. This is in no way a comprehensive review of the festival; I did not get tickets for all the movies, nor was I able to make it to all of the sections. (The National Competition and many of the retrospectives fall outside the scope of this review, for instance.)

Furthermore, to review a festival as a whole is a complicated undertaking. When we go to the cinema, there is always the temptation to think of movies as something isolated, standalone. The theatre is a self-effacing infrastructure, with darkened rooms, comfortable chairs, a big glowing screen—Roland Barthes' proverbial "gleaming vibration whose imperious jet brushes our skull" (1995, 420). But context does matter, and even if I have rewatched some of the films I saw in the past two years at FNC, the fact is that my reception of them has been coloured by it: the people with me at the screening (friends and strangers), the time of the day, and the festival as an institution. Additionally, going to FNC always entails some measure of grappling with the festival's position *not only* in the broader context of Montréal and Québec's complex internal politics—as did Max Holzberg (2023) in our last coverage of the festival—but also in the cultural life of cinema in the city. Thus, what follows is my attempt to channel the experience of the last two editions of FNC, the films I enjoyed and the things I observed, heard, and thought. Forgive me if some of

the details are foggy—I did not really keep notes.

Planning for it is almost half of the excitement. To read an entire programme, to bet on a weird-looking movie, to read online about others trying to avoid any information that will betray the plot, to find the equilibrium between making an educated guess and robbing myself of a surprise twist or turn, to calendarize (painfully aware of the inevitable overlaps), taking into account the fact that the 5:30 movie in Quartier Latin is two hours, so I perhaps cannot, alas, make it to the Concordia Auditorium for the 7:30 screening without missing something. Spending an afternoon on this may not sound exciting, but it does keep me busy.

If you are a bit less committed, FNC makes it easy by offering you the *Incontournables* section (styled as *The Essentials* in English), where you will find the usual suspects: the Weerasethakuls, Schraders, Arnolds, Kaurismakis, Triets, Rohrwachers, and Zhangkes that have paraded in Cannes, the Berlinale, TIFF, and at other massive festivals the year before. Some of these films will eventually have wide releases, and some of them will be screened at Cinema Moderne, but how *delectable* it is to have an opinion formed on *Anora* before any of your friends have seen it. And, in the case of those other films, the ones that will not have a wide release at all, this is one of the great services a festival like FNC provides: the possibility of seeing wonderful, undercelebrated films on a big screen.

That does not mean, however, that all other *inessential* sections do not include remarkable work. Last year's International Competition, for example, was host to the sparse and harrowing Chilean international coproduction *The Settlers* (Felipe Gálvez, 2023), which follows a group of three mercenaries as they go from land-prospecting to genocide in early twentieth-century Chile. The film is beautifully shot, reappropriating the western genre's landscape aesthetics and themes, explicit in its depictions of violence, often presented in a puzzling way. An example of the latter is the rape of one of the film's terrible protagonists, which reads almost like a joke. On the other hand, it offers brilliant moments, like its finishing zoom-in shot of Rosa, an indigenous woman being forced to pose by authorities for film in a set that disguises the squalor in which she lives. As the shot closes into her defying semblance, someone off-camera asks: "Rosa, do you want to be part of this nation? *Drink the tea*."

The Settlers took home la Louve d'Or despite sharing its section with the 2023 Caméra d'Or winner, and one of my favourite films from last year, the astounding *Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell* (Phạm Thiên Ân, 2023), a slow and deliberate exploration of grief and religion in Christian Vietnam. In a way, following the trace of many so-called "slow cinema" directors—your Bi Gans and Apichatpong Weerasethakuls—but so rabidly original in its framing and pace, the movie opens with a motorcycle crash that serves as an excuse to also show the lively nightlife of Saigon. The contrast between the lived quality of the images and the sudden accident makes for a positively jarring yet genuine experience, a resource the film employs successfully often. As the deceased woman's five-year-old son and brother-in-law travel into the Vietnamese countryside to give her burial, the latter goes through the proverbial inner journey that is also deeply emmeshed with the complex relationship

between Christianity and Vietnam. Thiên Ân's camera moves deftly between spaces and depths, frames and reframes funerals, lucky veterans, churches, farms, former girlfriends who become nuns, derelict buildings, shallow streams, smoking chickens… it offers everything but a clear-cut conclusion, leaving us adrift in deep waters.

Additionally, at the 2024 festival, I managed to catch the screening of the Daniel Langlois Innovation Award recipient, Klára Tasovská's *I'm Not Everything I Want to Be* (2024). It is a delightful documentary that utilizes the photography work of Libuše Jarcovjáková in a masterful demonstration of sequential narration. The photographs are organized and edited (cut, reframed, resized) together with a booming soundtrack and stroboscopic effects to chronicle Libuše's life in Czechoslovakia and beyond in the later years of communism. These vignettes of her life are accompanied by the thoughts in her diaries, read by the photographer herself.

The section *Histoire(s) du cinema* offers, like Godard's series of the same name, a reflection of current cinema through its past. 2023's *Histoire(s)* offered a compelling pairing in Kléber Mendonça Filho's *Retratos Fantasmas* (2023) and Khavn's *Nitrate: To the Ghosts of the 75 Lost Philippine Silent Films (1912–1933)* (2023). The former is an exploration of the Brazilian filmmaker's childhood cinemas and the places where he started shooting films. It repurposes archival material, behind-the-scenes photography, home videos, and combines them with documentary-styled newly shot material of the current state of some of the cinemas. Toward the end, in a dazzling turn of events, the film turns fiction as Mendonça Filho is picked up by a cab driver who, in response to his being a film director, tells him he can become invisible sometimes. As they both drive back to Filho's home following the long route of now familiar cinemas, the cab driver disappears, and the only evidence of him still being there is the moving steering wheel.

The sometimes-porous relationship between reality and fiction is also brought into focus in *Nitrate*, where incredibly prolific filmmaker Khavn reimagines a ghostly history of the Philippines' 1912 to 1933 screens. It is a film composed mainly of found footage material, clearly inspired by early cinema, with silent wide shots, rudimentary special effects, and recognizable plots—fantastic, for the most part. The kicker here is that the found footage is in itself a fantasy, a reimagining of the films that were lost to nitrate combustion due to poor conservation during the beginning of the last century. The film is wilfully, though not unapologetically, misleading, however, and the images are confused, noisy, deteriorated. They create narrative avenues and paths never to be followed, they imply *something else*—something vanished, disappeared. Like ghosts, they appear before our eyes and, just like that, they are gone. As with *Retratos*, what is implied here is the constructed nature of history, and the very important role that "nonfiction" seems to play in it. Like in *Cocoon*, however, these films do not seem that preoccupied with a distinct argument, but with the affective quality derived from witnessing the unsettling of an assumed narrative. Khavn's film eloquently poses the question: *How many ghosts can the Cinema contain?*

Weird, yes. But if fun-weird is what you are looking for, then perhaps you might take a gander into the sections *Temps 0* and *Les Nouveaux Alchimistes*. The

former includes films that mostly play with genre cinema—"rebellious filmmakers and movies that bite"—which also makes it the perfect section for the Quentin-Dupieux-movie-of-the-year. In 2023, for example, *Temps 0* was dedicated to Bruce Lee movies, but they still managed to show *Yannick* (Dupieux, 2023), a film where the eponymous character takes control of a terrible play he's watching during his only free day of a week-long trip to Paris. Dupieux once again treads the thin line between verisimilitude and wackiness as Yannick pulls out a gun and decides to rewrite the comedy for everyone's enjoyment. I missed this year's Dupieux—*Le Deuxième Acte* (2024)—but I did get a ticket from a friend for Norifumi Suzuki's *School of the Holy Beast* (1974), a nunsploitation *pinku eiga* with indelible photography and a blasphemous sense of irony. Some of the images in it are stunning and, though narratively it is confused and misleading at times, it is funny, campy, and cutting in its depiction of goodness and evil.

For even weirder, try *Les Nouveaux Alchimistes*. As their website highlights, the N in FNC stands for "New" (FNC, n.d., "Mission & Commitments"), and the festival has been quick to include the latest trends in filmmaking throughout its history, from showing video and TV episodes early on to embracing experimental cinema and its concerns with innovation (FNC, n.d., "History"). *Les Nouveaux Alchimistes* continues this work by screening daring projects by new filmmakers. Such is the case of Emilia Beatriz's *barrunto* (2024), which was prefaced with a video introduction by the filmmaker, who leaned on the underlying themes of their film (the relationship between arms testing and the life of landscapes at large) to comment on the current mass murder being perpetrated by Israel in Gaza. Beatriz's movie is a patient exploration of two separate landscapes, those of Puerto Rico and Scotland, which are both places where they have lived and where NATO has tested arms, particularly nuclear weapons. A film that reads more like poetry, *barrunto* imagines a sentient nuclear entity that moves between both landscapes, querying about the meaning of life (our life, their life) and existence, both in this world and beyond. Though confusing at times, the film is short and abrasive in such a way that it can nonetheless produce a concentrated effect. It shines the most when it fully commits to its own discourse and embraces its own materiality; that is, when it resorts to actual celluloid developed with the waters and materials of the landscapes it records. There, images are subject to the arbitrariness of nature, a contingency that frees *barrunto* from the many ideas it attempts to convey and plunges it into the indeterminate, experiential register where, curiously enough, its apparent message is clearest.

Utterly inscrutable in its own way is Cristóbal León and Joaquín Cociña's *The Hyperboreans* (2024). The pair established themselves through the success of *The Wolf House* (2018) and the Ari Aster co-produced *The Bones* (2021), and they remain solidly audacious. León and Cociña's latest feature follows a *mise-en-abîme* structure of intermingling parallel worlds where their trademark puppets coexist with real human beings in an increasingly weird matrix-slash-invasion-of-the-body-snatchers-like Chile that exists only in the minds of its inhabitants and is controlled by a supposedly pure master race, the Hyperboreans, of which Cociña and León themselves are part. The Hyperboreans hold ties to Hitler, who did not die in World

War II but escaped to Antarctica. (Now, I can write that up again, but it will not get any clearer. Which brings me to the question: *should it?*) The film is a staggering experience, not just because of its plot, but because of the myriad techniques and resources being employed in it: from collage, to stop motion, to puppetry, to virtual and visual effects, and the admittedly hilarious twists and turns of plot and characters (starring an actress/psychoanalyst and a romantic metal-head white-knight hero), the deadpan delivery of Pynchon-esque rewritings and over-writings of history, and the always creeping awareness that a *real* fascist Chile might be lurking beneath the surface, à la Bolaño. Quite the experience.

The other animation film I saw this year is *wunderkind* Gints Zilbalodis' *Flow* (2024), which looks to be Latvia's entry for the 2025 Academy Awards (Hipes 2024). The film is shown in a section called *International Panorama* (a bit of a catch-all) but it is also advertised in the *P'tit Loups* section, which led to the Cinémathèque being populated by many more children than I suspect is usual. On that point, I want to say that I am definitely in favour of teaching children about complex realities through cinema. And yet, I could not stop thinking about how distressed I would have been as a child had I watched *Flow*'s incredibly cute early 2010s videogame-graphic cat come close to drowning, again and again, for what must have been (or at least felt) like 70 percent of the movie. The film in itself is beautiful at times, the imagery is expansive, the waters flow naturally, and the animals are admittedly well portrayed, even if I disliked that, as the film went on, they became progressively more humanized—this might seem a personal preference, but the film very much deals with what humanity looks like after human beings are gone, so it is not entirely beside the point. Despite all the animals in the film being in risk of mortal danger for most of it, and the pervasive feeling that one of them might stray and lose whatever safety and reassurance they have gained from each other's company, the most not-for-kids moment is the unexplained/allegorical death/disappearance of one of the members from the crew. None of the animals talk so there is really no making sense of this beyond what one can immediately imagine. This is no shortcoming of the film, however. In fact, the film's best moments appear in the unexplained/unexplainable being encountered by these creatures that can only really engage with it matter-of-factly and have no use for explanations—which may perhaps be suitable for a human child. Or for very moved me, who really wants to know whatever happened to the white secretary bird.

On that note, let us return to where we began: *Les Incontournables*. On the last day of the 2024 edition of the FNC, Zoé Protat, director of programming for the festival, presented Andrea Arnold's *Bird* (2024). She explained that the last screening of the festival is always a film that she finds particularly interesting, and that she makes it a point never to miss it. This year, it was clear why. Arnold's film moves nimbly in the stark contrast between whimsy and heartbreak. A dark comedy embedded in an even darker drama, it deals in an impressive way with the intrusion of grown-up realities into the life of a child forced to come of age too soon.

In 2023, FNC's last screening was held in the magnificent Cinéma Imperial, currently closed for renovations, and facing an uncertain future (Bongiorno

and Ngala 2023), perhaps the greatest loss of this year's festival. The screening in question was Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* (2023), which needs practically no introductions. The truth is that a considerable amount of films selected for *Les Incontournables* find themselves precisely in that situation, be it because of the awards they win, like Justine Triet's *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023); the names behind them, like *May December* (Todd Haynes, 2023); or the fact of their belonging to a cultural zeitgeist that seems to engulf everything else, like Sean Baker's *Anora* (2024). I am sure you will read your fair share of opinions about those films, and there is no real need to throw mine in the pile. But it still bears mentioning that *Les Incontournables*, in the end, is designed as a list of recognizable films and artists, and that the work organizers like Protat put into this design is more than worth our attention.

Without providing too protracted a review, then, allow me to at least highlight some of the films that make up this section of the festival. 2023's *Evil Does Not Exist* (Ryūsuke Hamaguchi), first of all, was a prime example of what an audience does to a film and vice-versa. The film is, following the director's previous, *Drive My Car* (2021), a deadpan exploration of the vicissitudes of different interrelated characters, this time in a little rural town caught up in in a debate over whether or not to attract tourism through "glamping" (glamour camping, in case that took a second). The film explores the pernicious means tourism (and capitalism at large) employs to restrict dissent and reconvert it into profit, all of which is brutally cut short by a shocking, sudden ending that left members of the audience audibly gasping (and myself thanking that this was not an experience I was having on my own). I experienced a similar feeling throughout Albert Serra's *Afternoons of Solitude* (2024). In this, his latest feature, the Catalan *enfant terrible* abandons fiction and turns to documentary, following Peruvian Spanish bullfighter Andrés Roca Rey during a few *corridas* in Spain. The film is violent, terrifying, and does not spare the audience any sort of details in its portrayal of the *corrida*, but it also very interestingly dissects the liturgy and male chauvinism inherent to the bloodsport. Serra's unflinching commitment to sustained contemplation pays off in a series of truly brilliant moments (the ritual of dressing the *matador*, an off-hand remark, a tear), the only issue being that one is forced to sit through a bull's dying gaze to see them. Perhaps the act of watching it with others softens the blow.

Jia Zhangke's monumental *Caught by the Tides* (2024) revisits the filmmakers' own work as a way of considering the changes China has undergone during his tenure as one of its greatest filmmakers. Utilizing archival footage from different sources, materials from his previous films (in which actress Zhao Tao was a pervasive presence), and newly shot scenes, Zhangke rethinks and hones some of the themes that, we can now see, have always been latent in his oeuvre. China changes at breakneck speed but Zhao ages slowly. Monumental and human times converge. Throughout the film, Zhangke keeps his frame on the love story between Zhao's character, Qiao Qiao, and Guo Bing (played by another Zhangke regular, Zhubin Li), and everything that happens around them moves so fast that they both appear to be in stasis, endlessly waiting for each other.

An opposite dynamic is explored in Aki Kaurismäki's *Fallen Leaves* (2023),

as Ansa and Holappa seem themselves to be caught in the unbreakable circle of post-and-permanent-recession capitalism in Finland. Kaurismäki's reworking of his own usual obsessions utilizes love as a way of discussing salaried work, alcoholism, and solitude, among other subjects. It is, regardless of what it might seem, a charmingly shot comedy that redoubles on Kaurismäki and his actors' knack for perfect timing and delivery, his poetic portraiture of humble living conditions, and his fantastic musical moments. It even throws in a charming little dog for a change.

There have been very few works at FNC that I really did not like, and I feel that—counter to what criticism is usually supposed to invest itself in doing—there is not much sense on discussing disappointments when the overall experience has been so thoroughly rewarding. Such comments would only serve to muddy the overall impression that I am trying to share. The fact is that personnel at the festival work really hard to make it happen, and this is clear from the experience that attendees have. All the projections I attended were presented by someone (sometimes more elaborately, sometimes less), and the selection clearly has its own identity, despite its resemblance to many other auteur festivals around the world (*D'A* in Barcelona, for example, offers a similar flavour). Whether you are looking for the latest Cannes heavy-hitter, a weird new experimental work on the politics of landscape, or a fun little comedy that cross-examines capitalist society, come October, pop into the Festival de Noveau Cinéma. It is always nice to see what is up.

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