

# Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal, 2021

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It's easy to argue that the defining characteristic of our moment is that of alienation. Certainly taking in some of what the 24th annual Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal (RIDM) had on offer would give such an indelible impression of the present as we experience it, unavoidably and inevitably in a mid-pandemic context of isolation and ennui. Only a few films engaged directly with COVID-19, but our experience of them couldn't help but be touched by the transformative effects of the pandemic on both the festival's practicalities (films screened both in-person and virtually) and the films' thematic and aesthetic reception.

All this, though, is likewise in the face of endless technological changes and so-called innovations, a perennial topic of interest for documentary filmmakers intent on highlighting what is new, fresh, never-before-seen, revealing to the audience something they couldn't have imagined was real and happening somewhere in the world, perhaps on its way to them as they watch it unfold. These two confluent factors, technological change and pandemic-accelerated isolation, defined my experience of the festival, as film after film, to varying degrees of success, depicted and narrated the strong feeling of alienation that permeates and pervades our culture. I was left

with the recognition that documentary cinema, in all its breadth, can offer a way to navigate these pulsating sensations that otherwise seem insurmountably abstract or inexact.

## All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace

If I sound a little paranoid, the series of films screened by RIDM would suggest that I am not paranoid enough. Surveillance technology offers a lot to documentary filmmakers as a theme, an issue to examine, a new source of footage. Shengze Zhu's *A River Runs, Turns, Erases, Replaces* (2021, 87 mins) is her follow-up to *Present.Perfect.* (2019, 124 mins), which collected clips from countless livestreamers in China, a pointed compilation of our shifting understanding of what it means to connect or be intimate. Her new film confronts the pandemic by showing footage from a surveillance camera in Wuhan as it charts the rapid decline in the presence of people, followed by an eventual slow return (with workers doing their jobs throughout). It is a far more pensive and melancholic film than *Present.Perfect.*, which seemed to emphasize the chaotic fragments of online life. Here, we're placed into a distanced grieving, a mournful static perspective on the missing bodies caused by the virus, alongside text taken from letters addressed to lost loved

ones. These juxtapositions of landscape film and textual intimacy offer a surprisingly stirring reminder that a place is ultimately very little without people to make it sway, flow, and move.

Surveillance footage is put to more pointed use in the short film *NAYA* (Sebastian Mulder, 2020, 25 mins) which chronicles the journey of the first female wolf to be spotted in Belgium in over a century through surveillance cameras, news footage, hunter's cameras, and more. Here, the notion of being surveilled is tied to the natural world as the film begins with a German hunter's expression: "Der Wald hat tausend Augen": "In the wild, you are never alone. One pair of eyes stares into the forest, a thousand eyes stare back at you." Of course, in this case those eyes are cameras, tracking the wolf from Germany into Belgium, as it kills livestock and causes a measure of chaos and media and citizen frenzy. This technology has encroached into the wild, the short seems to argue, becoming an omnipresence without limit, because we simply *must* see and know all—when the wolf isn't spotted for days on end, the anxiety is palpable: *where is she?*

Similarly, Haig Aivazian's *All of Your Stars Are but Dust on My Shoes* (2021, 17 mins) illustrates, using found footage and other clips, how light itself is an oppressive force in a world defined by cameras and images, always illuminating to keep control over a population (whether would-be criminals or she-wolves). As a cinematic exercise, it's a probing examination of the gaze, for of course it is only due to the screen's light hitting our retinas that we are able to take in the images Aivazian has collected for us. To see and be

seen are fundamental elements of the medium, a technological feat that is reflected back to us when the camera captures us being captured.

These concerns over privacy, visibility, and technology are of great significance to a theorist like Shoshana Zuboff, who has mainstreamed her concept of surveillance capitalism, which emphasizes the commoditization of personal data in a digital economy with the power of behavioral modification (2019). As Jathan Sadowski explains, "When targeted at people's attributes and actions, the ability for smart tech to home in on a specific factor and excise it from the surrounding context turns us into what Deleuze calls *dividuals*, or divided individuals: beings able to be divided into any number of pieces that are separated, surveilled, and scrutinized." (2020, 45). This describes our everyday milieu, alienated *dividuals* being constantly looked over and profited from, enforced into an existence that delimits the boundaries of human connection and interaction. Aivazian, Mulder, and Zhu's films have wildly different approaches to disparate aspects of this phenomenon, yet taken together they nevertheless instill an uneasy feeling about our collective desire *to see* and *to know*, and the increasingly strict separation between those with the power to surveil effectively, and those without. As the late bell hooks memorably reminded us, "Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency [...] One learns to look a certain way in order to resist." (1992, 116). In her analysis of the black female gaze, hooks unt-

angles the politics of visibility, of being visible, revealing the dominating logic of the look while maintaining hope for an alternative. Aivazian's film in particular speaks to this tender dissonance, homed in on the repressive power of being visible in the world throughout history, while drawing out unexpected connections between phenomena, desperately searching for that mutual tissue among the despair of modern systems of domination.

### Exploitation Films

A parallel theme among this year's roster was that of exploitation, specifically that of labour in the modern world. The clearest example of this is *The Gig Is Up* (Shannon Walsh, 2021, 88 mins), which highlights the many challenges faced by gig workers around the world: drivers for Uber, delivery bicyclists for DoorDash, mini-task completers for Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Unlike most popular documentaries of its type, Walsh, a Canadian director, chooses to focus almost entirely on the workers themselves, which is to the film's great advantage as we learn what conditions they work under, what incentives drew them in the first place, and how they see themselves and the industry in general. Getting to know a white worker for MTurk who masquerades on the platform as a Republican black man to game the system since it has so much interest in that demographic's interests, we learn what these workers are trained to do in order to succeed even marginally (every cent counts). Moreover, a small montage of MTurk workers describing their jobs gets so much across simply by showing a successive run of heavy bags under eyes. Even most

journalism on the subject fails to feature actual workers to the degree that this film does, and we're also given a proper global perspective as gig work exists in the US, China, France, Nigeria, India, and elsewhere. While the film avoids getting into the nitty-gritty of how digital capitalism has upended the social contract in numerous ways, it nevertheless points to the wave of fights over labour protections, employee status, and other rights around the world. Aided by insight from scholars like Nick Srnicek (author of *Platform Capitalism*) and Mary L. Gray (co-author of *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass*), *The Gig Is Up* is perhaps the clearest and strongest mainstream effort to document the gig work struggle yet, even if it nevertheless only scratches the surface.

The best film I saw was Salomé Jashi's *Taming the Garden* (2021, 92 mins), a somewhat more abstract approach to the exploitation that not only people but also the planet suffers as a direct result of the ultra-wealthy's absurd whims. This is a particularly eccentric version of that story, as we follow the arduous journey of several century-old trees as they are meticulously dug up and transported, often by private boat, to a billionaire's private garden where he obsessively collects them. The billionaire is Bidzina Ivanishvili, former prime minister of Georgia, and there is something humbling as we watch countless labourers undertake such a monumental, nature-defying task. These are massive, gargantuan trees, which means that in many cases, the land and the people in the surrounding area have no choice but to relocate, an altogether unique

form of forced migration that follows a long historic pattern of the poor and the nature both having to change their own existences for the austere benefit of the rich. These cascading and rippling consequences of one man's obsession (we never see the man himself in the film) go beyond metaphor, simply depicting the ways in which the world is run, melancholically and patiently observing how one man's Rosebud, in this case a giant 150-year-old tree, demands all organic life to adapt to its trivial disruption.

A number of other films touch on the theme of exploitation, from the behaviour-modifying grip social media and dating apps have over young people in *Love-Moi* (Romane Garant Chartrand, 2021, 23 mins), to the consequences of climbing the social ladder in China as depicted in *Ascension* (Jessica Kingdon, 2021, 97 mins). The latter provides a wide-ranging survey of consumer culture in China, examining the latest technology, e-sports gamers, live-streaming empires, crypto mining, and much more, but with a particular focus on service industries and the changing landscape of wealth and status in the country. On the other hand, *Minimal Sway While Starting My Way Up* (Stéphanie Lagarde, 2021, 16 mins) combines techniques as old as Eisensteinian montage with the latest technology amid deep urban alienation to draw out the more hidden architectures of exploitation in our society. It emphasizes how the resources taken from below are used to create the penthouses way up in the sky, and the

extractive profiteering therein, but visually and formally the film operates on an atmospheric level, rarely showing its hand too pointedly.

Taken collectively, these films serve as confirmation of the alienation and dissociation that suffocates our present condition, inevitably tinged by the transformations still underway thanks to the pandemic. No single documentary, or even series of films, can be asked to provide answers, or alternative pathways to this problem, or glimpses of something else. Yet not once are there gestures made in this direction, as each film considers it sufficient to provide a diagnosis of the condition, whether as flies on the wall or through talking heads. Still, what this communicates is less their individual lack of imagination but instead the embeddedness and intrinsic power of the problem. If our present swallows it all, what can those that look hope to reveal?

## References

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