

Festival Review

2024 Fantasia International Film Festival

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The 28th edition of the Fantasia International Film Festival took place in and around Concordia University's downtown Sir George Williams Campus between July 18 and August 4, 2024. The festival continues to dominate the Montreal film scene, touting itself as the largest genre festival in North America, and attracts a dedicated community of filmgoers to its quirky and eclectic global programming. The attendance at this year's edition—and the buzz that the Fantasia name still carries—proves that the appetite for a venue which takes seriously the work of oft-maligned, so-called lowbrow fare is as large as ever.

The festival has found a secure footing inside a cluttered cinema culture which now looks to be increasingly dominated by niche streaming platforms and social networks dedicated to film. And several works at this year's festival reflected this ongoing shift—from the physical to the digital. As our lives move, piece by piece, app by app, into the screen-based realm, filmmakers are confronted with the challenges inherent to representing the vast and ephemeral landscape of the digital. It is principally a challenge of making the invisible visible—rendering images of the hidden electrical impulses that drive our communications technology—or of *re-representing* the platforms and interfaces we use to engage with such media. But these digital spaces now represent the dominant site of most moving-image consumption and an increasing share of social interaction. Although we may shun social platforms as inherently uncinematic, they drive our culture and politics much like television did before them. And filmmakers need to face them, and work with (or against) their concurrent aesthetic, moral, and political modes.

In Lucía Puenzo's *Electrophilia* (*Los Impactados*, 2023), which had its North American premiere at the festival, the central character is electrified by a lightning

strike, marking and transforming her body and leading her to a group of fellow strike survivors. Here, the moment of electrocution—of *electrification*, maybe—instantly destabilizes Ada's (Mariana Di Girólamo) life. This process of transformation by technologies of energy and of communication winds its way through several of this year's Fantasia highlights. But the change they reckon with is much more subtle: the slow, but persistent, production of a new social and political order driven by screen-based media technologies.

This concern is taken up most directly, and certainly most playfully, in *The Code* (2024). Loosely inspired by the diaristic form of Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's 1956 novel *The Key*, this satirical feature is a caper of surveillance, paranoia, and obsessive self-documentation. In a post-screening discussion, American director Eugene Kotlyarenko said he wanted to play with our “new forms of voyeurism,” like those brief glimpses we get of someone's phone over their shoulder. He deploys the ironic disposition and cloying, hyperactive aesthetics of TikTok in his comedy; the film is composed entirely of footage from spy cams, webcams, phones, and social media content. Millennial couple Celine (Dasha Nekrasova) and Jay (Peter Vack) decamp to the California desert in a last-ditch attempt to resuscitate their sexless, mistrustful relationship. Along the way, Celine takes up their trip, and floundering love life, as the subject for her nonfiction film project. Upon arrival they meet zany property manager Parthik (Vishwam Velandy) and are later joined by Celine's unhinged friend, Colette (Ivy Wolk). Through escape rooms, jacuzzi tussles, and covert Viagra drugging, the film echoes the random, restless comedy that propels algorithmically-driven social media content. This is TikTok as cinema. The film, much like its characters, seems too disinterested in the morality of its action to mount anything like a critique. In spite of a few anti-vaxx gags and cancel culture jibes, the messed-up fun-and-games of it all seem too enjoyable to insist on explaining or justifying itself. Yet it takes on the Contemporary Moment with a welcome ironic distance, clearly set on satirizing the frantic digital culture as much as it embraces it. It is the rare pandemic film to be shot a few years after lockdown was lifted and, as a result, it does not treat the moment like a gimmick, but rather a reasonable *framing device*. In recognizing the role the health crisis played in supercharging the platform economy, the film is able to embrace the restless aesthetic in a way that feels natural.

Kotlyarenko has long played with our landscape of new imaging technologies to advance a novel, contemporary aesthetic. His 2020 feature *Spree*, starring *Stranger Things*' Joe Keery, was composed almost entirely of dashcam footage from inside the vehicle of a reckless rideshare driver. Through his willingness to use the oft-neglected mundane, practical moving image technologies, like the spy cam or dashcam, Kotlyarenko's work starts to construct a new cinematic language of our digital age. But it is more than just a novel aesthetic: new narrative shapes emerge from this, too. *The Code* culminates in a twisty, overwrought codebreaking sequence designed by Celine, as genius as it is deranged. In doing so, the film's narrative gestures toward the internet's information surplus and obsession with investigation, spiralling like a compulsive content rabbit hole. The film wears its narrative thread loosely but, like most popular web content, does not need a neat story structure to keep its audi-

ence engaged: when images flow this fast, we do not dare look away.

Fantasia has long maintained its status as a jewel amongst North American festivals for its programming of Asian cinema. This year's edition saw the Canadian Premiere of Filipino animation *The Missing* (*Iti Mapukpukaw*, 2023), written and directed by Carl Joseph Papa and submitted as the Philippines' entry to this year's Academy Awards. Combining digital rotoscope animation with crayon-sketched sequences, the film introduces us to Eric (Carlo Aquino), himself an animator, and his work-crush Carlo (Gio Gahol). Eric is asked by his concerned mother to check on his uncle and, upon discovering his deceased body, is flooded with a wave of memories of abuse at his hand. The film's visual design captures the nuances of its difficult subject: Eric's survival of child sexual abuse and the ensuing trauma. Through rotoscoping, Papa is able to centre the film with a grounded, realist aesthetic upon which surrealist components are mapped. His animation makes visible the physical manifestations of Eric's trauma: his mouth is visibly absent from his face, materializing his inability to speak; later, limbs and other parts literally fall from his body and scurry away as his shame prevents their use. Flashbacks in the film, which explore the horrific source of Eric's trauma, employ an innocent, drawing-like animation style which flickers like a faded memory in contrast to the clean visual schema of the digital rotoscoped image. The film's structure allows this resurfacing of abuse to unfold to us as it does in Eric's head, continually reframing earlier events in the light of later memories. These cartoon sequences amplify, of course, the innocence of young Eric, but also introduce the motif of alien abduction, a visual metaphor which functions to underline the limits of comprehending and coping with such abuse as a child.

The horrors of the film are handled with a deft sensitivity, in large part due to the tender love story at its core. Carlo and Eric's queer romance brims with the awkward gentleness of new love, and a mutual care made all the more profound as Eric's memories continue to resurface. Like *The Code*, it deals, albeit with much more subtlety, with the role of digital technologies on relationships. Its rotoscoped animation style makes the integration of digital screens and text bubbles onto the screen feel seamless and natural. Likewise, Eric's inability to communicate verbally foregrounds these technologies as a necessary tool for fostering connection. Whereas *The Code* presents digital media as technologies of excess—overstimulating and absurd—*The Missing* brings to the foreground their capacity to retain the human voice, even when it might be literally absent.

As usual, the festival effortlessly balanced the harrowing with the jovial. Japanese director Hiroaki Matsuyama has produced a slick and funny whodunnit based on Yumi Tamura's popular manga *Don't Call It Mystery* (2023), which played to an exuberant audience at the festival. The manga now stretches over a dozen volumes, and the story has been taken up as the basis for a television series starring Masaki Suda. Suda reprises his role as detective Totonō Kunō for this film, which positions itself as a standalone from the series. Reminiscent of the *Knives Out* mystery series, the film drops Kunō in the middle of a family feud concerning the inheritance of a large fortune, which can only be obtained by one person after completing a puzzle box-like challenge. As a standalone tale, we are spared any flabby backstory or tire-

some set-up. The film is spare and operates with a charming, steady pace, keeping the stakes of the drama low (where they ought to be).

The presentation of the film at this year's Fantasia demonstrates the importance of cross-media work in the streaming age. The film was commissioned by the same television station, Fuji, which launched its counterpart series, and the show became popular in this part of the world after its introduction on streamer Viki. Clearly, building a mini-cinematic universe, bridging graphic novels with moving image media, has fostered a wider international audience. In spite of the film's televisual roots, it remains dazzlingly cinematic. The film's crisp, sharp aesthetic aligns itself closely with popular prestige crime cinema, which plays nicely with its quirky and heterodox characters.

The prevalence of films dealing directly and tangibly with the problems of the digital becomes most apparent when confronted with such technologies' absence. Watching the Kazakhstani thriller *Steppenwolf* (2024), we sense we might not find a screen for several hundred miles. Set in the Kazakh desert, the absence of any media technologies suspends the film in a kind of atemporal state, reinforcing the timelessness of its genre. Adilkhon Yerzhanov's film is sparse in its visuals, characters, and narrative, but this minimalism serves to heighten the inhumanity of its context. Tamara (Anna Starchenko) is mute and despondent after her young son has been taken by organ traffickers. Soon, the "Steppenwolf" (Berik Aytzhanov) appears, without much fanfare, and travels with Tamara across a war-torn landscape to find her boy. The mission is bloody, and the film relishes in its powerful action sequences and vengeful brutality. Both central performances shine in a feature light on dialogue but heavy on affect.

The film drips with a cool, detached machismo produced in part by its crisp landscape visuals and slow rhythm, reminiscent of classic U.S. westerns. But here there are no cowboys, though maybe that is for the best if the merciless *Steppenwolf* is floating around. Yerzhanov separates his film from the often-polemical moralism that drives the earliest entries into the western genre canon. His film, like *The Code*, does not care to dwell on the righteousness of its characters. Despite its vast, vacant desert setting, *Steppenwolf* feels crowded by inhumanity, by the cruelty of the violent state within which its action unfolds. This effect is amplified by the film's almost fetishistic deployment of wide shots, which also help capture the bodily nuances of Aytzhanov and Starchenko's performances as an unlikely pair, sutured together by past trauma and the promise of retribution. Starchenko's performance in particular is remarkable for its subtlety. The excess of violence and action within the film is grounded by her quiet, sincere presence. Her character utters nothing more than the name of her son under her breath, often seemingly mentally adrift from her physical environment, but this serves to anchor the film in its humanity, the sensitive core that keeps it from drifting too far toward mere gore-porn.

As usual, it is Fantasia's versatility—its capacity to combine the high with the lowbrow, the meditative with the destructive—that reinforces its place at the heart of Montreal's film culture. This year's selection brought several of the underlying cultural shifts which threaten its very existence to the surface. Moving image

media will continue their migration toward web-based platforms, under the totemic march of the attention economy. But this year's edition demonstrated it is cinema itself that might offer the best tools with which to counter this advance. Its power lies not just in the bodies on screen and their complicated relationship with the black boxes of glass and circuitry in their pockets, but in the bodies *before* the screen: a community of passionate, weird, and dedicated festivalgoers who drive Fantasia year after year and make it all worth it.