

Festival Review

Festival International du Film Ethnographique du Québec 2024: Reimagining Museum Space

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In May 2024, Festival International du Film Ethnographique du Québec (FIFEQ) celebrated its 20th anniversary. Curating two streams of programming each year across Montréal and Québec City, FIFEQ offers free admission to the public for the five days of its run time, providing an opportunity to enjoy ethnographic cinema both from Canada and all over the world. This year I had a chance to attend two curated screenings in Montréal, which I will discuss further in my review. However, first I would like to provide some insight into the structure of the festival and highlight additional events FIFEQ offers to its audiences. Taking place at three main locations—Cinema Public, McCord Museum, and Cinema Moderne—this year, the festival offered some additional activities and panels for patrons to attend. These activities included a collaborative workshop, titled Sensorial Memories, where, with no prior experience required, patrons could design their own artwork by recording sounds and images of their environment. These would later be edited together to showcase the particular emotion the participants had chosen to evoke. This workshop provided a beautiful hands-on experience of haptic memory preservation, which brings one closer to understanding the process of ethnographic filmmaking and demonstrates the creative potential of our everyday setting.

In addition to audience engagement in filmmaking practices, this edition also offered two thematically curated screening streams: Retrospective and Autochtonie. The Retrospective offered cross-screenings of films by Chantal Akerman and Alice Diop, focusing on the intimate and personal as the guiding themes for the film presentation. By curating these two iconic directors together, the festival created a connection between them beyond the formal stylistic elements, most importantly through shared emotions and feelings in the films. The Autochtonie section included

the KISHKISHI program, selected and curated by Jack Belhumeur with the support of Indigenous film studio Wapikoni Mobile and McCord Stewart Museum. The KISHKISHI program presented a variety of Indigenous films that deal with topics of identity, culture, heritage, and tradition both from Canada and internationally.

Apart from the opening and closing nights, as well as the special thematic screenings mentioned above, each show followed the same structure: a main feature accompanied by three to four selected shorts, sometimes also followed by a Q&A session or a discussion afterward. Both the museum screening room at McCord and the intimate, smaller theatre space at Cinema Moderne bring together members of the Montréal community, students, and cinephiles in an atmosphere of highly personal stories told through images and voice-over narration on the screen. In this review, I will address the two screenings I had an opportunity to attend, and discuss how the questions of identity, memory, personal archives, and their preservation function differently based on the films' topics and locations. I will retain the discussion of the original programming of the films, and I will address them in the contexts in which they were intended to be seen by the festival.

The first screening took place at McCord Stewart Museum and consisted of four films in total, one feature documentary and three shorts, one of which was animated. *The Memory of Glitch* (2023) by Suzanne Elizabeth Schaaf addresses the topic of loss and recreation, engaging with the larger themes of climate change and environmental struggle. Schaaf returns to her childhood home in Oregon, which has suffered from and is currently under constant danger of wildfires. She attempts to recreate her past through a combination of Google maps, weather patterns, strangers' photos online, and personal videos. The unreliable nature of the sources, as well as the lack of material, fails to restore the pre-fire landscape of her hometown in its entirety. However, the director employs her memories, emotions, and nostalgia to fill in the blanks through voice-over narration to emphasize the importance of her personal connection to the place, which many would only be able to access through media. The contrast between surveillance-style Google Maps footage and individuals' experiences of the land and forest demonstrates the limitations of technology and artificial intelligence in recreating history, as some things will inadvertently be "lost in the glitch." The film demonstrates how environmental disasters do not only destroy landscapes and physical objects, but erase the traces of human emotion, connection, and presence.

Lake Baikal (Baikal Nuur, 2023) by Alisi Telengut focuses on the restoration of language and visuals, almost creating a learning guide for the Buryat-Mongol language through animated sequences of Baikal Lake, located in Russia. The images of nature, fire, and landscape merge with the voice-over, creating a deep connection between the physical manifestation of land and the linguistic element that describes it. The merging of the two solidifies culture with the landscape, making them virtually inseparable. Once again, the theme of nature and emotions merge to showcase the feeling of potential loss, both signifying the environmental hazards for the lake and the endangered state of Indigenous languages in Russia.

Leyla Jafarova's "*We Live with Maybes*": *Searching for Missing Relatives in Post-*

War Azerbaijan (2023) is a documentary that tells the stories of mothers whose sons disappeared during the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the first war of Nagornyi Karabakh in the 1990s. The screening's timing, on May 9, was ironic, as it is the date for the Victory Day holiday that commemorates the end of World War II, which is celebrated in the majority of the countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union. Made in a classic "talking head" tradition, the film takes its viewer into the intimate home space of women who have not lost hope of finding their sons. The memories preserved through pictures, belongings, and, most importantly, their own emotions serve as the last connection they have to their disappeared relatives. The film actively promotes the notion of community, not simply as an entity based on location or spoken language, but rather as something formed through collective grief and emotion. When faced with the absence of any hope for physical evidence, the most important form of archive becomes the spiritual one, as visits to a fortune teller and dreams serve as proof of their sons being alive. These mothers have nothing but memories, photographs, and trust in their dreams to support their convictions. In an attempt to commemorate their experience, they create their own spaces of memory, grief, and connection: a dedicated space at the graveyard, installed by the state, or a plaque at the local school, become physical manifestations of their loss. These objects are interpreted differently by each of the film's subjects and, at the same time, become larger symbols of commemoration and loss. The archive in "*We Live with Maybes*" is something one cannot physically hold on to, but what exists in the heads and minds of the individuals, and yet is at the same time shared by the whole community.

The next day, on the evening of May 10, the screening took place at Cinema Moderne. This time, the program included four films which, each in their own way, deal with the reconstruction of the past and re-tracing of one's identity, by re-imagining physical evidence to construct a new vision of history or the contemporary world. In the short film *Kaua'i 'ō'ō* (2023) by Samy Benammar, the director uses the recordings of the extinct bird species Kaua'i 'ō'ō layered over the last recorded visuals of it, to reanimate and temporarily bring it back into existence. Using found footage and audio, Benammar revives the bird for the audiences, well aware of its life's limited temporality. Similarly, *Solar Book* (2023) by Azar Saiyar meticulously examines the objects stored in a museum, questioning what is lost or gained when something becomes an exhibit. Contrasted with the found footage, the objects, carefully picked up and demonstrated to the camera in complete silence, are decontextualized in the archival space, nevertheless bearing the traces of their lifespan in nature.

Also set in a museum space, *Broken View* (2023) by Hannes Verhoustraete traces the story of the magic lantern, a technological device used to show pictures of the Belgian-occupied Congo in Europe. The film creates a collage of historical footage, with its form gradually transforming from the slides of the magic lantern to film reels, and finally, VHS cassettes. Constant, overt manipulation of these mediums challenges the conventions of flat documentary images, distancing the viewer from the topic. Verhoustraete creates a palimpsest of experiences, centralizing black bodies as active objects, constantly reminding the viewer about the context

and colonial background of the photographs on display. Ever present in the film is a voice-over narration, which utilizes decolonial discourse and theory to reframe the history and context of the exhibition of these images. *Broken View* reverses the typical ethnographic approach of depicting racialized bodies by confronting the viewer with the subject looking back at us. The very map of the African continent in the film is reconstructed from the enslaved bodies, highlighting the “resources” that could be extracted from the region, constantly reminding us of the capitalist aspect of colonialism. In contrast, images of religious education—the equally violent ideological side of colonialism—show Congolese men and women behind desks while the pastor preaches to them. The photographs, and the magic lantern itself, are represented throughout the film as methods of control and oppression, taken out of the “neutrality” of the museum exhibition space. *Broken View* further deconstructs these photographs by reversing the gaze. In the latter half of the film, the viewer is presented with pictures of poverty-stricken white families back in Belgium. The people stare blankly from the screen, as the narrator states that these pictures would have never been shown in Congo or the salons of the bourgeoisie. Layered and complex, *Broken View* demonstrates the inseparability between colonial violence and technological modernity, actively challenging the way one approaches the inventions of the past.

In the closing film of that evening, *The Rootless* (2023), Finnish director August Joensalo attempts to retrace her Karelian heritage, by engaging with the personal archive of her grandparents. The memory journey is tragically interrupted by her grandfather passing away, which makes the director wonder about preserving his history and his own identity in the current age. The documentary, tragic and nostalgic, is filmed in the style of a poetic family blog, capturing the three doing household chores, picking mushrooms, and investigating old photographs. *The Rootless* is a beautiful story of loss, identity, and love that presents history as a highly personal and temporary entity, one we may never be able to truly know or control.

As the credits started rolling, the light came on, and people slowly exited the building on a warm spring day, I could not help but think about how we conceive of archives, museum rooms, and exhibition halls in our everyday lives. Highly depersonalized, they appear to us as containers of the past, dry facts on plaques, and abandoned artifacts. The films that I have engaged with in this review demonstrate precisely the opposite: quotidian objects become full of feelings and memories, as they are revived through the lens of the camera and the editor’s skills. History—a catalogue of faceless dates and names—becomes full of intimate fleeting moments that one cannot preserve or restore, even with the help of the most advanced technology. This year, FIFEQ has invited the public into a new world of seeing and engaging with the past, and I, for one, cannot wait to see what they will offer its Montréal and Québec audiences next year.