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Dossier: International Film Festival Rotterdam 2015

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Festival reviews

edited by Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist (Film Festival Research Network)

Dossier: International Film Festival Rotterdam 2015

Marijke de Valck, Fanny Baars, Molly Bower, Marina Butt, Aidan Celeste, Aleksas Gialitis, Frances Maciver, Anne Schumacher, Lenka Suchá and Sarah Vandergeerde

From 21 January until 1 February 2015 the 44th edition of the International Film Festival Rotterdam was held. For Rutger Wolfson it was his last festival as director. A couple of weeks earlier he had announced he would step down after this edition.¹ In 2004 Wolfson had joined the festival board and in 2008 he became festival director. With a background in the arts world, Wolfson had no notable experience with film prior to his appointments at IFFR.² Moreover, in the eight years of his leadership developments in both the global arena and on a national level challenged IFFR's position as a noteworthy event on the film festival calendar. Critics questioned if Rotterdam was able to maintain relevance in competition with other international festivals. In 2014 Neil Young³ published a strong critique that gave voice to a growing sentiment among international film professionals that the festival had been steadily losing its programming edge, in particular with regard to being a platform for launching new talent.⁴

Locally the festival was troubled by declining audience numbers, dropping from a peak of 367,000 in 2007 (coincidentally or not the last festival led by Sandra den Hamer) to 274,000 in 2012, after which a modest increase set in again.⁵ That the festival succeeded in reversing a five-year decline in audience numbers is significant in light of contemporary Dutch cultural policy which has been dominated by far-reaching cutbacks across the cultural sector since the financial crisis; cutbacks, moreover, that went hand in hand with an increasing push to legitimise the funding that was maintained in terms of audience demand.⁶ Clearly it is not an easy assignment to both lure seasoned film professionals and tap into new audiences,⁷ but the IFFR is committed to offer a broad festival where vastly different cinephiles should be able to find something to their liking.

This dossier takes the temperature of the 2015 festival and assesses the quality and success of some selected programs.⁸ It is the result of work by students in the

Master of Arts program Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image at the University of Amsterdam who took part in a project on festival programming in January 2015. Divided into five groups the 16 students immersed themselves in different program sections, attending screenings, discussions, special events, analysing offline and online material, and investigating the use of the festival spaces. What follows are their reviews, edited by the course instructor.

A new program section and ‘surprising extras’

The 2015 edition saw the introduction of a new festival section titled Limelight. Limelight focuses on new releases, specifically those titles that were acquired by Dutch cinemas and distributors beforehand. Many of these films will not be released until later this year. As such, the Limelight section offers its visitors a sneak preview of what is to come. Previously these films would be part of Spectrum, the program section that ‘keeps tabs on global cinema screening recent highlights from the international festival circuit and other impressive and contemporary works’.⁹ However, this section had become too unwieldy for audiences to easily navigate. With the clear distinction between films that will and will not be available in cinema theatres at a later date the festival makes the program more accessible and specifically encourages visitors who are not primarily invested in discoveries but are rather triggered by unique screenings of relatively well-known films and to travel to the festival to be part of these premieres. Limelight (and to a lesser extent Spectrum) makes clear that film festivals are not only about films. With a very rich surrounding program IFFR placed the films in a dynamic context and allowed the audience to experience screenings as (live) events.

One highlight of this type of event programming was the Spectrum screening and world premiere of Yamashita Nobuhiro’s *La La La at Rock Bottom* (2015) at Rotterdam’s beautiful Oude Luxor theatre. The film stars Shibutani Subaru, a famous rock singer in Japan who travelled for the occasion with his band to Rotterdam to give a concert after the premiere. Even if most members of the audience had no idea who he was nobody was sitting still in the comfortable red cinema chairs once the concert was in full swing. Although Nobuhiro’s film was a bit overshadowed by the concert the example underscores that festivals are not only about showing films. The live performance by Subaru was particularly visible throughout the festival in the form of video and photo uploads that were continuously recycled in the Instagram feed into the festival’s interactive screen projection which entertained audiences before screenings.

Other notable instances where the festival aimed to move beyond simple screenings and the well-known question-and-answer format was a series of events



Fig. 1: IFFR's interactive screen. Photo by Molly Bower.

inspired by Limelight premieres. A chess tournament at the festival's main venue De Doelen rounded off the screening of this year's audience award-winner *The Dark Horse* (2014) by James Robertson, a crash course in sign language accompanied Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy's *The Tribe* (2014), and Alice Rohwacher's wonderful *Le Meraviglie* (2014) was sweetened by a honey tasting opportunity. These events invited audiences to linger a bit longer and also added educational entertainment to the experience.

More traditional festival events were to be found in the form of IFFR's Big Talks and Q&As. Big Talks are public discussions with one host interviewer – this year Hans Maarten van den Brink – and a prominent director or actor *before* the screening of the film. The interviews, though perhaps over-staged, were screened on the local television channel later at night. Also feeling very scripted were the introductions and Q&As with actors and filmmakers that were part of the IFFR Live screenings at the Rotterdamse Schouwburg (see below). In stark contrast to these staged, live, broadcasted performances stood several regular Q&A sessions. For example, the short discussions after the screening of Rolf de Heer's *Charlie's Country* (2014) or Midi Z's *Jade Miners* (2015) suffered from an obvious lack of preparation by the programmer/presenter in charge.

It was not only Rotterdam's most popular programs that were adorned with special events. On the margins of the festival a new section called IFFR+ aimed to offer 'surprising extras' as well.¹⁰ Here we can discuss The (return of the) Critics'

Choice and the Scopitone Café. The (return of the) Critics' Choice was a program led by two well-known Dutch film critics: Dana Linssen (editor-in-chief of *De Filmkrant*) and Jan Pieter Ekker. They invited seven critics to screen any film of their choice and make an audiovisual essay to be screened as accompaniment to the selected film.¹¹ Unfortunately the program did not impress. It was Linssen and Ekker's ambition to rebut the crisis in contemporary film criticism by putting the professional critic at the forefront and striking back with digital tools.¹² The intro-



Fig. 2: Fenno Werkmans next to one of his scopitones. Photo by Sarah Vandergeerde.

duction of an audiovisual essay made by the critic was specifically meant to incite discussion with the audience. This unfortunately did not happen and most discussions felt rigged from the beginning.

Ironically it was the innovative format that prevented the critics from being placed on equal footing with the audience, instead affirming the 'authoritative' voice of the critic who had been granted the privilege of expressing his/her response to the film on the big screen. Moreover, as introductions and discussions revealed, all critics belonged to the same in-crowd of festival professionals.¹³ Although it was clear that an effort was made to diversify cinematic content with surprising titles the program got stuck on the level of a rather narrow showcase of ideas shared by a small network of critics, and Linssen and Ekker's good intentions were buried beneath the conflicting and confusing roles of editor, coordinator, and mediator.

The Scopitone Café was located in the small auditorium of the Rotterdamse Schouwburg (a theatre building) and offered free access to 'a different music documentary and musical experience every day'.¹⁴ Each screening was part of a spectacle. Every night private collector Fenno Werkmans gave a demonstration of his scopitones – a sort of jukebox topped with a small screen – and other guests performed or answered the audience's questions.

The variety of the presentations reflected the complex nature of cinema. The Scopitone Café can be seen as part of Rotterdam's broader attempt to present alternative cinematic experiences. The event's cabaret-like atmosphere stripped the film of the sacred character that cinephiles of the 1960s had endowed it with by emphasising the performative nature of cinema. However, the links between the different acts were relatively weak. Furthermore the schedule seemed improvised, which led to some clashes between the guests such as an unexpected battle for the floor between Werkman and another DJ. As the post-screening event was not mentioned in the program many people left after the film, losing part of the experience. Such managerial and curatorial issues significantly weakened the program. The case of the Scopitone Café made it clear that the festival prioritised some program sections over others and that IFFR+ was not high on the agenda. Although it was worthwhile and could create a special festival experience for the average moviegoer its potential was not fulfilled.

IFFR Live: Can innovation save a festival?

After the stir caused by Neil Young's critical piece on Rotterdam in *Indiewire* in 2014 speculation about the merits of the 2015 edition began before the festival opened. Scott Roxborough contributed to this climate with an article entitled

'Can Innovation Save the Rotterdam Film Festival?' in the *Hollywood Reporter*. It quotes Wolfson strongly denying the allegations of the festival not being tuned into industry needs, pointing at two new initiatives that the festival launched in 2015: IFFR Live! and Tiger Releases.¹⁵ IFFR Live! is a five-night event where screenings of a film occur simultaneously in nine countries at 40 theatres as well as on VOD platforms. The introduction and discussion with the cast and crew are streamed live in all cinemas and audiences can participate by asking questions via Twitter.¹⁶ Tiger Releases is a collaboration with the Infostrada group to make Tiger competition films available on VOD platforms.

The recent explosion of social media websites like Twitter has opened up new ways of engaging with audiences. The IFFR seized this opportunity to experiment with a new screening model through IFFR Live!. The creation of this section was motivated by two factors: the pan-European broadcast of each title and the significant funding from the European Commission's Preparatory Action on 'Circulation of European Films in the Digital Era'.¹⁷ The investment of IFFR in the new program section is evident in its elaborated staging at the Rotterdamse Schouwburg. IFFR Live! host Marten Rabants (Head of Eye Film International) did his best to make the events memorable – appearing in a wet suit for the screening of *Atlantic* (Jan-Willen van Ewijk, 2014) and trying to foster a sense of community among viewers across the 40 cinema theatres by considering them members of 'the Clan of the Tiger'. However even if Wolfson, who dropped in for every screening, reiterated on multiple occasions that IFFR Live! is meant to expand festival excitement across countries the format clearly has not been tested yet. It was often quiet on Twitter and for audiences in Rotterdam the limitation that questions could *only* be asked via Twitter seemed to kill the mood to participate in the discussions.

The films selected for IFFR Live! shared a broad appeal for diverse audiences.¹⁸ Two were world premieres: *Erbame Dich – Matthaus Passion Stories* by Ramon Gieling (2015) and *The Sky Above Us* by Marinus Groothof (2015). Two were European premieres: *Atlantic* and *Melody* by Bernard Bellefroid (2014). The fifth, *Speed Walking* by Niels Arden Oplev (2014), was released in Denmark and screened at festivals in Chicago, Thessaloniki, Tallinn, and Göteborg prior to Rotterdam. Despite the characterisation of the IFFR Live! selection as audience films it must also be noted that the festival did not abnegate its profile as a festival for new talent. Three of the live titles were made by first or second-time directors.¹⁹

The most important program section for emerging new talent is Rotterdam's flagship competition: the HIVOS Tiger Award Competition. This year 15 films by first or second-time directors were presented. The Tiger Award Competition has been the most heavily criticised by international professionals in recent years. Even if Rotterdam continues to be a player in the professional field with the

Hubert Bals Fund (for emerging world talent) and Cinemart (for new projects by the more established names of global art cinema) people note how the festival has not been able to present any remarkable talent in its main competition.²⁰ This year's selection was no exception, with no surprises and a program that seemed repetitive. Despite the variety in subject matter and regional origin the selected films shared an interest in marginal characters that find themselves constrained by certain situations as well as stylistic preferences for minimal dialogue, hand-held camerawork, and a heavy mood.

Letting cinema history take centre stage

Apart from launching new initiatives and offering events on the side, just as any large international film festival Rotterdam offers audiences ample opportunities to explore and reflect on cinema's past. Key programs in this area are the recurring Signals: Regained section and the retrospective, which placed a spotlight on Korean filmmaker Jang Jin in 2015. We will begin by looking at Signals Regained.

The 60-minute compilation *Vanity Fables* forms a significant part of Signals Regained 2015. Comprising five short films lasting between 10 and 20 minutes this anthology of found-footage pieces truly exemplifies the festival's radical approach to film history. Rather than simply showcasing the best of cinema's past *Vanity Fables* highlights the dynamic relationship between the past and present. As programmer Edwin Carels notes these films seek to 'reflect, recycle, reconfigure or reinterpret the history of cinema in a contemporary fashion'.²¹ In doing so *Vanity Fables* reimagines the traditional festival retrospective and avoids the kind of inert nostalgia such encounters can often produce. Rather, *Vanity Fables* serves as a spirited excavation of the past where the memory of cinema becomes the inspiration for new and original works.

In a festival ripe with innovation and new talent programmes such as these offer a sanctuary for classic cinephiles. From reinterpreting unrealised film scripts to reconstructing the mythical filmic figure of *Salome*, *Vanity Fables* reveals the wealth of archival images waiting to be unearthed and reassembled. It is perhaps Mark Rappaport's video essays that offer the classic cinephile unadulterated pleasure; lingering close ups of Anita Ekberg and encounters with Douglas Sirk allow the audience to both relish and reappraise these iconic figures in a contemporary festival setting. Indeed the very inclusion of audiovisual essays in a festival is a bold choice, considering that such essays usually occupy a liminal space between academic enquiries and fan-made tributes. However, it is the decidedly discerning yet unassuming tone of Rappaport's work that inspires one to embark on an all-night Sirk marathon or find out how one can recreate Ekberg's luscious locks.

Vanity Fables reminds us that the memory of cinema need not be mournful, for in the relics of film history lie opportunities for rediscovery and rebirth. With the materiality of film shifting in favour of digital images the future of cinema as a whole is often brought into question. A humble programme like *Vanity Fables* demonstrates that as long as it is remembered with vigour and curiosity cinema can never truly die.

The Signals Regained strand this year also presented a specialised Made in Taiwan section that focused on a brief but influential period in Taiwanese cinema. The seven Taiwan New Cinema films screened were all made between 1983 and 1986 and are framed by the documentary *Flowers of Taipei* (2014), the first feature by the Taiwanese-born director and IFFR programmer Chinlin Hsieh. Instead of taking a historiographical approach *Flowers of Taipei* focuses on the legacy and impact of the Taiwanese new wave on contemporary filmmakers 30 years later. Despite the small number of films produced while the movement lasted their contribution to redefining Taiwanese (and indeed world) cinema is undeniable; the filmmakers introduced locally relevant narratives and successfully competed with the propaganda films, rom-coms, and kung-fu fare imported from Hong Kong at the time.

Being both the director of *Flowers of Taipei* and the section's programmer Chinlin is able to influence and shape how the films are presented. Every screening was followed by a talk co-presented by a critic or programmer who either knew some of the filmmakers personally or could provide important theoretical context. The discussions were often scholarly in character and the variety of opinions and approaches presented provided an added value to the experience of watching a film, which is an important element in a festival context. Furthermore, some audience members attend multiple screenings and have a keen interest in the topic, asking the guest critics insightful questions. It seems that the talks were programmed with these viewers in mind. The key strength of how Made in Taiwan was handled lies in Chinlin Hsieh's active participation and her involvement as a programmer. She was born and raised in Taiwan, grew up watching the new wave films, and as a former direct collaborator of Hou Hsiao-Hsien and other key personalities of the movement she was able offer vital insight. Alongside the critics' talks her input played an integral part in (re-) introducing the Taiwanese new wave to the festival-goers.

Each year IFFR presents at least one director-centered retrospective. Much like Nils Malmros last year the choice of the Korean filmmaker Jang Jin this year was not about remembering or honouring a forgotten genius. Rather, it attempted to discover the contemporary unknown and give the filmmaker an opportunity to reach a wider audience beyond that of his home country.²² Jang's work fits well into the Korean Wave category which started in the 1990s and has contributed to

the expansion of the commercially-successful Korean film industry. Standing out from other directors of the wave Jang Jin's films tend to be rich in dialogue and, while using commercial Korean cinema trends, talk about important social and political issues. The use of poetic language in his films highlights the problem of appropriate subtitling for international audiences and the director apologised for the poor quality of the subtitles and film prints during his guest appearances. Due to the director's presence the screenings were imbued with an event-like atmosphere and audiences seemed pleased to be able to watch his rarely-screened films – even if the retrospective felt somewhat marginalised in the overall festival program, the mediocre quality of prints and subtitles being a case in point.

So what is the value of the Signals Regained section and retrospective at IFFR in general? We can say these sections let cinema history take centre stage. They are directed at a perceptive and open-minded audience interested in discovering something new or seeing older and familiar films in a new light. The strand receives little press and advertising coverage, thus it feels like the target demographic is expected to be willing to make an effort to attend screenings in more remote festival locations, unlike the films directed at a more mainstream cinema-going public that are prioritised and therefore situated in larger, more accessible venues. Regardless, both demonstrate that IFFR attempts to stay true to its mission of providing quality fare for the more discerning audience, where exposing oneself to unfamiliar films is encouraged and the film experience is enriched through discussions. These films target audiences interested in niche genres and topics that rely on contextualisation to unlock their true potential.

The use of space at IFFR

The screenings and events at IFFR are spread out over 17 festival locations in Rotterdam's city centre and on the edge of the North River bank. The so-called heart of the festival is De Doelen, a concert hall venue where the central ticket office, the press centre, industry desk, video booths, Cinemart, and a special festival catering service are located. There are also screenings in one of the on-site auditoriums. This place represents less a physical centre of festival locations than a hub for visitors getting into and out of the multiple festival spaces. Closest to the train station and public transport stops, flows of movement from de Doelen fanned out to venues, restaurants, and other festival sites further south and east. During the festival the atmosphere is not limited to cinema screens or even the interior of screening venues. The streets surrounding the festival's headquarters are marked with flags, posters on walls and in windows, tiger-shaped light projections, and restaurant chalkboards advertising special 'IFFR menus'. Inside the

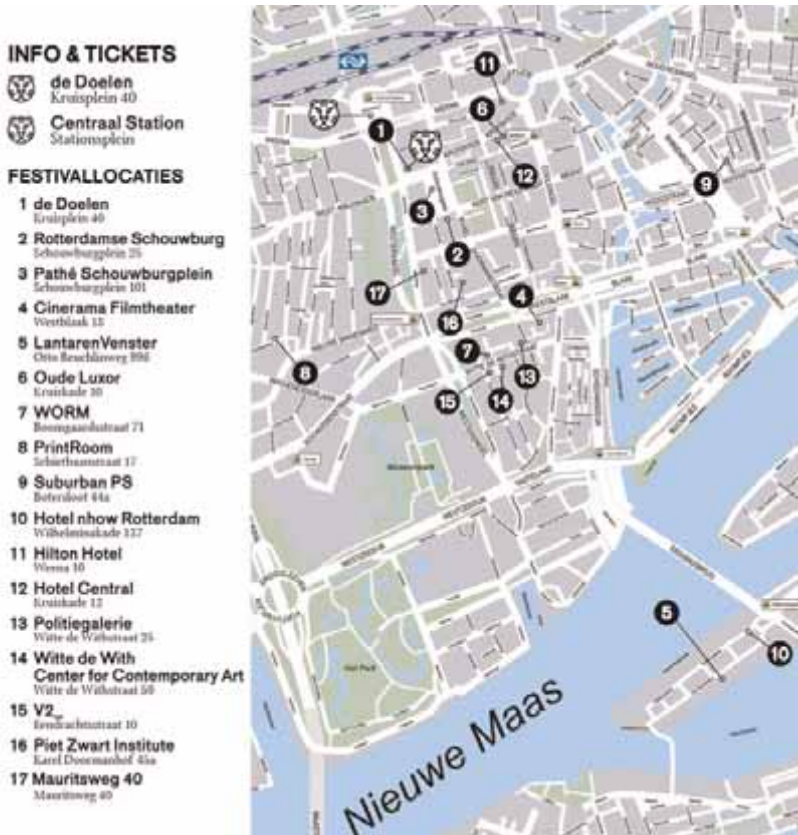


Fig. 3: IFFR 2015 festival map. Courtesy of IFFR.

venues flyers, postcards, merchandise, the *Daily Tiger* newspaper, and free IFFR-sponsored Wi-Fi contribute to the creation of festival spaces.²³

The spatial dimension of the programme significantly contributed to the construction of the festival. The presence of IFFR images and materials turns buildings, squares, and restaurants into festival spaces. In addition the distribution of official festival materials and the live feed of social media posts that featured on cinema screens as audiences waited for films to start encouraged visitors to fill their free time with reflection on festival events, creating an intangible atmosphere of festival attention. The proliferation of festival materials in all their forms successfully serves to create a borderless but perceptible space of festival magic within Rotterdam's city centre. Most interesting, however, is perhaps what the spatial decisions seem to reveal about the way Rotterdam prioritises its 15 program sections. The program parts that received little attention in publication material and at times felt lacking in organisational rigour were often also marginalised in terms of location. For example, the Tiger Awards Short Competition and

Signals: Bruce McClure programs were confined to the secluded LantarenVenster location – not within easy walking distance of the centre and psychologically separated from the rest of the festival due to its location on the opposite side of the river. Limelight, the Tiger Award Competition, and IFFR Live!, on the other hand, were presented in the main venues De Doelen, Pathe, and Rotterdamse Schouwburg.

On a final note we can add that while many different types of sites in Rotterdam were taken advantage of festival materials and presentations rarely referred to Rotterdam itself. Wearing his wetsuit at the IFFR Live screening of *Atlantic*, Martin Rabarts joked ‘it’s a shame this city filled in its canals’. This was an exception and the overall impression is of an event taking place in a temporary bubble. In this light it is somewhat remarkable that IFFR’s business director Janneke Staarink insists that the next festival director ‘should have a really good sense of Rotterdam and Holland.... It cannot be somebody from a faraway place that has never been here.’²⁴ It is clear that whoever becomes the new director will continue facing challenges: managing the mosaic of Rotterdam’s programs; pleasing local audiences while keeping the interest of festival veterans who have seen it all; knowing how to navigate the contemporary Dutch and Rotterdam environment; staying true to the festival’s artistic commitment to alternative voices, world cinema, and the festival’s own glorious past.

Looking back at the 2015 edition there are things that the future leader should take note of. First, programs like IFFRLive! and IFFR+ encourage the continuation of experimenting with new initiatives. Even if only a few of these ‘start-ups’ will take root festivals offer excellent testing grounds that ought to be taken advantage of. Second, if the festival wants to prevent the alienation of certain target audience groups it would be wise to address the feelings of marginalisation that they experience, both by dedicating more organisational effort to sections that might not draw big audiences and by seriously looking into the issue of the spatial seclusion of certain program sections. Finally, despite the significance of surrounding events and surprising extras let us not forget that at the heart of any film festival are the films. Invest in programming, connect to many different territories, value relations with (new) filmmakers, and celebrate cinema thoroughly and passionately.

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Notes

1. See for example Mitchell 2014.
2. Previously Wolfson was director of arts venue De Vleeshal and worked as curator at the contemporary arts centre Witte de With.
3. For more information on Neil Young see the interview with him in this issue.
4. Young 2014.
5. The numbers for the following years are: 280,000 (2013), 287,000 (2014), and 302,000 (2015).
6. IFFR depends on public subsidies for almost half of its budget. For the 2014 edition the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science contributed €1,287,970, the municipality of Rotterdam €1 million, and another €480,872 is listed under 'other public subsidies'. The total benefits for 2014 were €6,711,112. 'Balans en exploitatieresultaat 2013-2014', available at: <https://www.iffir.com/Assets/Uploads/Documents/Jaarverslagen/Balansexploitatieresultaat20132014.pdf>.
7. In its subsidy request for the period 2013-2016 IFFR explicitly commits to keep existing and tap into new audiences. International Film Festival Rotterdam, 'Subsidieaanvraag Culturele basisinfrastructuur 2013-2016, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Beleids- en activiteitenplan', p. 10, available at: <https://www.iffir.com/Assets/Uploads/Documents/Jaarverslagen/Beleids-%20en%20activiteitenplan%20IFFR%20festival.pdf>.
8. The 2015 edition featured no less than 15 program sections: the Hivos Tiger Award Competition, Tiger Awards Competition for Short Films, Bright Future, Spectrum, Limelight, As Long As It Takes, Signals: 24/7, Signals: Bruce McClure, Signals: Everyday Propaganda, Signals: Jang Jin, Signals: Really? Really, Signals: Regained, Signals: What the F*?!, IFFR+, and IFFR Live.
9. International Film Festival Rotterdam, 'Programme sections 2015', available at: <https://www.iffir.com/en/iffir-2015/sections/spectrum>.

10. International Film Festival Rotterdam, 'Programme sections 2015', available at: <https://www.iffrr.com/en/iffrr-2015/sections/iffrr-plus>.
11. The seven films screened were: *Dockeur Jekyll et les femmes* (Walérian Borowczyk, 1981), selected by Adrian Martin and Cristina Álvarez López; *Laggies* (Lynn Shelton, 2014), selected by Hedwig van Driel; *Life Itself* (Steve James, 2014), selected by Keven B. Lee; *Die Lügen der Sieger* (Christoph Hochhäuser, 2014), selected by Rüdiger Suchsland; *When Marnie Was There* (Yonebayashi Hiromasa, 2014), selected by Kees Driessen; *White Out, Black In* (Adirley Queirós, 2014), selected by Roger Alan Koza; and the short film *Three Minutes, Thirteen Minutes, Thirty Minutes* made by Bianca Stigter and based on a short archival film.
12. See the thread on slow criticism in *De Film Krant*, specifically the first entry (Linszen 2009).
13. Some critics were already acquainted with one another through similar projects like [in]Transition. See <http://www.mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition>.
14. International Film Festival Rotterdam, 'Events 2015', available at: <https://www.iffrr.com/en/events/scopitone-caf/>.
15. Roxborough 2015.
16. See <http://live.iffrr.com/>.
17. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/culture/tools/digital-circulation_en.htm.
18. *Atlantic*, *Erbarme Dich*, *Melody*, and *The Sky Above Us* are Limelight titles. *Speedwalking* is a Spectrum title.
19. *The Sky Above Us* is Marinus Groothof's first feature film. *Atlantic* is Jan-Willem van Ewijk's second film. *Melody* is Bernard Bellefroid's second feature film. Bellefroid previously directed two documentaries.
20. Young 2014.
21. Carrels, 'Signals: Regained – An introduction by Edwin Carrels'.
22. Looking at the history of Jang Jin's appearances in Europe and his connections with particular programmers it seems quite clear that IFFRR programme advisor and Asian Cinema expert Tony Rayns is one of the major (if not sole) figures behind this particular selection. Even though Jang is very popular in Korea his first international festival appearance took place right after he was discovered by Rayns.
23. An awkward and needlessly techy gift card-style cash replacement system seemed to be another attempt to enclose and define festival spaces and to fulfill the festival's 'innovation' trademark.
24. Macnab 2015.

About the author

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