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## Festival Review: 35th Fribourg International Film Festival

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# Festival Review

## 35th Fribourg International Film Festival

At this year's Festival International de Films de Fribourg (FIFF, 16–25 July 2021), the artistic director, Thierry Jobin, and his team presented a rich and varied selection in the international competition for feature films. The twelve films dealt with diverse subjects using different stylistic approaches and narrative strategies. This diversity was also reflected in the evaluations of the juries for this category, which all awarded their prizes to different films. Nonetheless, recurring topics can be clearly identified.\*

In the first place, several films tell stories of petty criminals, disenfranchised, exploited and excluded people. *LA NUIT DES ROIS* (NIGHT OF THE KINGS, CI/FR/CA/SN 2020) by Philippe Lacôte, winner of the main award given by the International Jury, is a special kind of “prison film”. It leads us into the world of the MACA, a notorious Ivorian prison that is ruled by its inmates. Its title immediately suggests that this film is also about power games and intrigues, the struggle for authority and sovereignty: *La Nuit des Rois* is the French translation of the title of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Lacôte's production shifts the power struggle – one of the trademarks of Shakespeare's dramas – to a prison, a place where hierarchies and power dynamics are abundantly clear. In this prison, a complicated system of unwritten rules, sanctions and rituals regulates the retention of power and assigns to each prisoner a specific place and a specific function in the prison community. One of these rules states that a weakened sovereign who is incapable of governing must give up power and take his own life, reminding of the figure of the god-king, described by the anthropologist James Frazer, who must be ritually killed as soon as his divine effectiveness threatens to be diminished by age or illness.

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In the film, the sovereign's (lack of) power is closely linked with the power of storytelling. In fact, the rules of the MACA state that the sovereign can choose a storyteller who has to entertain all occupants with a story on the nights when the moon turns red. If the story displeases or ends before sunrise, the narrator is killed. Barbe Noire, the terminally ill sovereign of the MACA, invokes this rule when he appoints the pickpocket Zama as a storyteller to gain time and postpone his own fatal deposition. Zama is clearly reminiscent of Scheherazade from *One Thousand and One Nights*, a figure that Lacôte combines with the West African figure of the griot, a professional singer, poet and instrumentalist who recites epic texts in a specific form of singing as a professional singer, storyteller, teacher or entertainer.

When Zama learns that he will be killed as soon as his story ends, he begins to expand the plot with flashbacks. What began as a realistic story about a petty criminal gradually turns into a fairy tale. Zama's story offers the director the opportunity to escape the walls of the prison and bring the vast landscapes of West Africa onto the screen, where real events merge with myths and legends. What is unique in Lacôte's film is the back and forth between a primary *narrative space* and secondary *narrated spaces*. Indeed, what Zama tells is not only visualized with the help of flashbacks but also staged performatively and physically by the inmates. For Zama and the other prisoners, voice and body become means of spiritual (admittedly only temporary) escape from their precarious circumstances.

The power of narrative and fictionality is also at the center of ZHELTAYA KOSHKKA (YELLOW CAT, KZ/FR 2020) by director Zheltaya Koshowa. In this tragicomic, sometimes absurd work, whose characters are at times reminiscent of those from Aki Kaurismäki's early films, the former criminal Kermek dreams of building a cinema in the middle of the mountains of the Kazakh steppe. The film is also an homage to, if not a remake of, Tony Scott's TRUE ROMANCE (US 1993): in ZHELTAYA KOSHKKA too, a cinephile protagonist falls in love with a prostitute, comes into possession of a considerable amount of money (or cocaine in Scott's film) owned by the local gangster boss, and escapes with his lover. There are many references to film history in ZHELTAYA KOSHKKA – for example, the characters recreate Jean-Pierre Melville's LE SAMOURAÏ (FR/IT 1967), Martin Scorsese's CASINO (US 1995) and Stanley Donen's SINGIN' IN THE RAIN (US 1952). For Kermek and his beloved Eva, cinematographic fictionality is not just a place of refuge where the hardships of life in the Kazakh steppe become bearable. Rather, fictionality is a means of resistance against inhumanity and mutual exploitation in a society

ruled by corruption and brutality. Even if, unlike TRUE ROMANCE, ZHELTAYA KOSHKA has no happy ending, its protagonist still seems to win: he refuses to dehumanize others and reminds us that without fictionality, without the ability to tell stories and to be affected by them, human beings forfeit their humanity.

Another recurring theme in the films selected for the international competition is the struggle about and for children. In the black comedy LA NOCHE MÁGICA (BAD CHRISTMAS, AR/UY 2021) by Gastón Portal, which was awarded the Special Prize of the International Jury, a thief becomes friends with the girl whose house he tries to burgle on Christmas night. This friendship brings to light a dark, terrible family secret, and the thief functions almost like a divine authority in order to bring about justice. ASA GA KURU (TRUE MOTHERS, Naomi Kawase, JP 2020) also deals with the topic of family or, more precisely, with the question of the definition of “true” motherhood. The film, which was awarded the Ecumenical Jury Prize, sensitively recounts the story of adoptive parents who one day are called by their child’s birth mother, who asks for money. What at first looks like blackmail soon turns out to be a desperate act by a young woman who was pressured by her parents to give birth to her child secretly and to put it up for adoption. But now she would like to see, get to know and love her son. This film is visually remarkable above all for the softness of the natural light that graces characters and landscapes at the same time. It manages, without ever becoming pathetic, to create a strong emotional bond between the audience and the boy’s “true” mothers.

Although children only appear prominently at the end in Jasmila Žbanić’s QUO VADIS, AIDA? (BA/AT/RO/NL/DE/PL/FR/NL/TR 2020), their central role must not be overlooked if one wants to understand the ethical and political power of the film. Žbanić’s forceful work won the COMUNDO Youth Jury Prize and the Audience Prize. Aida, played by an outstanding Jasna Đuričić, works as a translator for the United Nations and accompanies us through the terrible events and wrong decisions that resulted in the Srebrenica massacre and the killing of more than 8,000 Bosniaks. The film is set apart from many other war films by providing a woman’s view on the spiral of events that, through the complicity of the United Nations, led to the latest genocide in European history. At the same time, it is also a memorial film that not only asks us not to forget, but also guides us to reflect on how to deal with terrible memories. Quo vadis, Aida? Where are you going, Aida? Why is she returning to Srebrenica several years after the events of July 1995? How

can she bear to live in the same place as the murderers of her own family, friends and neighbors? In the last scene, we see Aida, who is now working again as a primary school teacher, as she had done before the war, looking at the faces of the murderers during a school performance – that is, looking at people who were capable of the most cruel and inhuman acts and are now happily and lovingly watching their children. Here the children, eternal symbols of innocence, there the beasts, who no longer seem like beasts, but are like normal fathers. The exchange of looks is wonderfully staged here: the men’s brief, fleeting glances at Aida reveal that they would like to forget but cannot, because she, the survivor, is there. Aida is their memorial, the one who makes it impossible to forget and who, despite everything, still appears able to believe in the possibility of reconciliation, because humans, the film seems to tell us, are not born as beasts, but become beasts when they are fed with hatred, racism and brutality. Aida has returned because the children of those who have become beasts are not to be blamed and have the right to grow up in a world worth living in.

Another film that deals with murder, cruelty and brutality is Michael Franco’s *NUEVO ORDER* (*NEW ORDER*, MX/FR 2020), set in the near future. In reaction to a popular uprising, a coup d’état is taking place in Mexico, during which the corrupt military and the no less corrupt political and economic elite do not hesitate to use any means available to oppress and exploit the population. In the society shown here, almost all individuals – insurgents, common soldiers, generals, politicians, poor and rich – act only out of pure greed and egoism. In several interviews, the director states he was inspired by works such as *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE* (UK/US 1971) by Stanley Kubrick, George Orwell’s *1984* and Alfonso Cuarón’s *CHILDREN OF MEN* (UK/US 2006). Especially in comparison with *CHILDREN OF MEN*, however, the film’s weaknesses become apparent. The quality of Cuarón’s film lies in, among other things, the fact that it does not “anthropologize” political violence, but rather depicts it as the result of a complex power network in which both ideological attitudes and economic-political interests play important roles. Cuarón critically examines state and “revolutionary” violence but does not simply present it as an expression of a universal human inclination to brutality. Franco’s film, by contrast, is a superficial and unintended caricature of the Hobbesian state of nature, where all are *homo homini lupus*, that is, wolves exploiting each other. In Mexico, the film was rightly criticized for the stereotypical portrayal of the rich and poor, which ultimately only reproduces the classism and racism against which the director claims to

fight. In addition, the film was also criticized for the reactionary portrayal of demonstrators as wild anarchists. In fact, the film discredits social protests insofar as they are represented as the prelude and cause of the coup and thus the establishment of a fascist military dictatorship. I agree with these critics in my view that this film is an expression of a very reactionary, very bourgeois fear of the mob, of the crowd, which if not disciplined will only create chaos and disorder.

In order not to end the festival review with these critical remarks, I turn to a last film that in this age of increasing ecological catastrophes is highly topical because of its representation of the relationship between humans and nature. Filmed in Moerdaoga National Forest Park in Inner Mongolia, China, Cao Jinling's directorial debut, *MO ER DAO GA (ANIMA, CN 2020)*, tells the story of a community of poor loggers. They earn their living by slowly but systematically cutting down a thousand-year-old virgin forest on behalf of the government. The exploitation is becoming more and more aggressive. We can observe the consequences of economic growth at different levels. On the one hand, the film shows us the unbalanced, profit-oriented use of natural resources. On the other hand, we see how the traditional way of life of the Evenks, an indigenous people of North Asia with a particularly pronounced animistic worldview, is thrown into crisis through the exploitation of nature and human beings.

The film includes numerous scenes of breathtaking beauty: massive trees, filmed from above, make us feel tiny; snowy landscapes gilded by the rays of the sun at dawn; fog rising in the thick forest. The shots inside the lumberjacks' hut, where huddled bodies move in the smoke and steam, are particularly striking. The plot revolves around the two brothers Tutu and Linzi, who work in the same lumberjack team. As a child, Tutu killed a bear – a taboo for the Evenks, a sacrilege against the spirits of the forest – to save the life of his little brother. The close relationship between the two is disrupted when Tutu and Linzi fall in love with the same woman, who chooses Linzi and marries him. When Tutu kills another bear, trying in vain to win the woman's heart, the fundamental and irreconcilable difference between the two brothers becomes visible: Linzi's deep, spiritual bond with the forest and its creatures collides with Tutu's urge for self-affirmation and a much more profane worldview. The dispute intensifies because Linzi's belief in the sanctity of the forest leads him to oppose his workmates, including his older brother. Despite his desperate attempts to save the forest, the consequences of the systematic clearing soon become apparent. One day, after

a thunderstorm, masses of water flood the logging settlement and destroy it. Linzi's daughter is killed in the process. This event finally breaks up the already tense relationship with his wife, who cannot forgive that instead of staying with his family in the hour of need, Linzi went into the virgin forest to prevent his colleagues from cutting down the last part of it.

The film is very topical because it shows us the catastrophic consequences of the excessive clearing of forests not only in terms of climate change but also in terms of people's concrete lives. In the summer of 2021, when enormous amounts of rain devastated large regions of Europe and Asia, this film should be understood as an important alarm call: this is not happening for the first time and, according to climate research, it's likely to happen more and more often. It remains to be seen whether an animistic re-sacralization of nature can be sufficient to counteract ecological destruction. The fact is that warning signs have been around for years and they are increasing in number. It is time to finally take these warning signs seriously – not only in the cinema!

## Filmography

- A CLOCKWORK ORANGE (Stanley Kubrick, UK/US 1971).
- ASA GA KURU (TRUE MOTHERS, Naomi Kawase, JP 2020).
- CASINO (Martin Scorsese, US 1995).
- CHILDREN OF MEN (Alfonso Cuarón, UK/US 2006).
- LA NOCHE MÁGICA (BAD CHRISTMAS, Gastón Portal AR/UY 2021).
- LA NUIT DES ROIS (NIGHT OF THE KINGS, Philippe Lacôte, CI/FR/CA/SN 2020).
- LE SAMOURAÏ (Jean-Pierre Melville, FR/IT 1967).
- MO ER DAO GA (ANIMA, Cao Jinling, CN 2020).
- NUEVO ORDER («NEW ORDER», Michael Franco, MX/FR 2020).
- QUO VADIS, AIDA? (Jasmila Žbanić, BA/AT/RO/NL/DE/PL/FR/NL/TR 2020).
- SINGIN' IN THE RAIN (Stanley Donen, US 1952).
- TRUE ROMANCE (Tony Scott, US 1993).
- ZHELTAYA KOSHKKA (YELLOW CAT, Zheltaya Koshowa, KZ/FR 2020).