

Festival Review: 71st Locarno Film Festival, Switzerland, 1–11 August 2018

Religion, Politics, and Transcendence in New Cinema – Highlights One Year after #MeToo

Religion is once again a robust topic in international filmmaking. Several films in the competition at the 71st Locarno Film Festival (1–11 August 2018) dealt explicitly or implicitly with religion, politics, and transcendence. Outstanding films were *A LAND IMAGINED* (Yeo Siew Hua, SG/FR/NL 2018), which won the Golden Leopard, and *M* (Yolande Zauberman, FR 2018), which deals with child abuse in a strictly Orthodox Jewish community and was awarded the Special Prize of the International Jury. The Ecumenical Jury of *Signis* and *Interfilm* decided to award its prize to *SIBEL* (Guillaume Giovanetti / Çağla Zencirci, FR/DE/TR 2018), the story of the emancipation of a young woman in Turkey. In general, women played a prominent role in the festival's program, not least because a pledge of gender parity was signed by festival officials, a sign of where we are one year after #MeToo. In this festival review, Dietmar Adler from *Interfilm* and Charles Martig from *Signis* offer a taste of the film program at Locarno, explore religious, political, and social aspects of the films, and provide insight into the work of the Ecumenical Jury.

THE WINNER FROM SINGAPORE

The Asian film *A LAND IMAGINED*, directed by Yeo Siew Hua, was considered an extraordinary elaboration of its topic by both the International Jury (it won the Golden Leopard) and the Ecumenical Jury. The film is set in Singapore, where migrant workers labor on land reclamation sites. A worker demands his wages and disappears. Another one, Wang, is killed. It was he who had discovered the body of the other worker. Only Lok, an honest policeman, starts looking for the missing worker: a dreamlike non-logical storytelling starts into a film-noir mystery. The film shows how dependent the migrant workers are: they cannot return to their home countries, they are indebted to their employer, and, moreover, they don't have their passports. The film uses the aesthetic conventions of dreams and internet games to blend time and space through artistic

editing. Thus, Wang dreams that Lok will investigate his murder. The Ecumenical Jury recorded, “This is the pretext for a reflection on the meaning of borders, national sovereignty and economic exploitation in a globalized world, as well as on the real possibility of solidarity between people from different places and cultures.”¹ Yeo Siew Hua’s victory at the festival was perhaps surprising for some, but if we look back at earlier years of the festival we see that Asian cinema has always been very strong in the competition.

YOUNG WOMEN AS THE FOCAL POINT OF THE FESTIVAL

The international competition included great portraits of women. Five of the 15 films have a female first name as their title. Carlo Chatrian, who was artistic director of the Locarno Film Festival until 2018 and has now taken up that role for the Berlinale, was asked during a conversation with the Ecumenical Jury whether the film selection followed programmatic guidelines concerning gender equality. He responded that this was simply how it had turned out: the program was developed gradually, and the main criterion was always the quality of the film.

SIBEL, by the Turkish-French directors Çağla Zencirci and Guillaume Giovannetti, the winner of the Ecumenical Jury Prize, was also awarded the prizes of the International Federation of Film Critics *Fipresci* and the Youth Jury. Sibel (Damla Sönmez) is in her mid-twenties. She lives in a village in the Turkish Black Sea region, a mountainous, green area where the people grow tea. Sibel does not speak, but she is not deaf. She communicates with the help of a whistling language that has been used in the valleys of this region. Sibel is different, and she is marginalized in the village because of her impairment. But because Sibel is different, she also has more freedom than other young women in the village. Sibel spends a lot of time in the woods, looking for a mysterious wolf. There she meets Ali, who is hiding in the woods. At first they fight, but later, when Ali looks at Sibel, she transforms from an “it” into a woman. Conflicts in her family and the village follow, but Sibel has changed. She raises her gaze, is self-confident, emancipated, and able to empower other women.

Another portrait of a female adolescent, YARA (Abbas Fahdel, LB/IQ/FR 2018) takes place in the beautiful, almost paradisiacal mountains of northern Lebanon, quite different from the images of the country we see in the news. Yara (Michelle Wehbe) is a young girl who lives with her grandmother somewhere between heaven and earth. She meets Elias, and a carefree, almost shy love sto-

1 Statement of the Ecumenical Jury; for the English text see <https://www.inter-film.org/auszeichnungen/181818/commendation-ecumenical-jury-locarno-2018> [accessed 14 August 2018] and for the German see <https://www.inter-film.org/de/auszeichnungen/181818/lobende-erwaehnung-der-oekumenischen-jury-locarno-2018> [accessed 14 August 2018].

ry begins. But paradise is threatened when Elias tells her that his father wants to take him to Australia to give him a better chance in life. Migration always means that people are left behind. And when somebody is left alone, even the most beautiful landscape is no longer paradise.

A number of the films in the competition accompany young women in their search for identity, for a space opposite men, parents, and groups. *DIANE* (Kent Jones, US 2018), by contrast, is the portrait of an aging woman (Mary Kay Place). The film was awarded a special mention by the Ecumenical Jury. In a plot that spans several years, Diane is shown as she deals with her life. She reviews her relationships, interacts with her son, who is first an alcoholic and then a Christian fundamentalist. She accompanies a cousin in her last phase of her life and is involved in charity work in a soup kitchen. Between her encounters, Diane drives through the winter landscape of Massachusetts, a image of New England different from one we might know. In the winter of her life, Diane discovers new facets of her personality. Glimpses of transcendence appear.

FEMALE BODIES CONTROLLED BY RELIGION

#FEMALE PLEASURE (Barbara Miller, CH 2018) accompanies five women from five major religious traditions. The director shows their struggle for a self-determined sexuality and for the equal and respectful coexistence of men and women. The film portrays the lives of Deborah Feldman, Leyla Hussein, Rokudenashiko, Doris Wagner, and Vithika Yadav and their commitment to enlightenment and liberation in a hypersexualized, secular world.

One of the women, Doris Wagner, lived for a long time in the fundamentalist Catholic community “Das Werk”, where she was abused by a priest. While this story is not representative of the Catholic Church, it shows the fatal consequences of abuse of power and disregard for female identity in a religious community. The documentary by Miller, which was shown in the *Semaine de la critique* and won an award in this section of the festival, claims to portray major religious traditions and their tendency to oppress the female body. It does not succeed equally well for all five women and traditions. Limiting the representation of Islam to genital mutilation in Africa is a strong reduction of a rich tradition. The portrait of the Japanese Rokudenashiko is not really consistent with Buddhism or Shinto. Nevertheless, the basic message of the film is strong. Miller shows that changes in issues such as sexism and abuse are only possible when women and men work together to find new forms of cooperation.

POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

The films in the competition approached the political dimension in quite different ways. While the Singapore-based story of *A LAND IMAGINED* portrays the fragile status of migrant workers from China and Bangladesh and exposes the abyss of a desolate existence, other films are more ideologically specific. In *SIBEL*, the authorities call the outcast Ali a “terrorist”, a designation that appears to have become customary in Turkey. He should be expelled from the territory or locked away, but Sibel enters into a relationship with him and discovers a compelling attraction. This film opens up a larger reflection on the topic of terrorism. But *SIBEL* was not the only film in the festival program to tackle this subject.

Real terrorists are the topic of the German competition entry *WINTERMÄRCHEN* (*A WINTER’S TALE*, Jan Bonny, DE 2018). A trio strongly reminiscent of the right-wing terrorist group National Socialist Underground loses itself in aggression against each other, sex in different constellations, and murdering sprees against migrants. But the film does not even attempt a political analysis of these phenomena and it does not offer anything that would make the characters and their actions understandable beyond a reference to the 25-year-old song “Schrei nach Liebe” by the band Die Ärzte, which is quoted at the end of the film in an acoustic version: “Your violence is just a silent cry for love.” The film was therefore the most ambivalent contribution to the competition.

M – CHILD ABUSE IN THE STRICTLY ORTHODOX MILIEU OF JUDAISM

Director Yolande Zauberman has found a fascinating character in Menachem Lang. In her documentary *M*, she accompanies the young man on his way to reconciliation with his parents and his Jewish community, a small group of Yiddish-speaking Haredim in Israel. Menachem has had a very difficult life. As a child, he was raped several times, and when he made these events public, he was expelled from the Haredi community in Bnei Berak near Tel Aviv. Since then he has been desperately searching for his identity and his parents’ home.

The film manages to penetrate this forbidden world. Thanks to Menachem’s willingness to enter into dialogue, strictly Orthodox men open up for conversations in long night scenes. The further the film progresses, the deeper the abyss becomes. Several Orthodox Jews report that they were raped and are now themselves abusing children. The spiral of violence in a closed society becomes visible. The film examines the mechanisms of abuse and violence and generates new perspectives. Menachem meets his parents and in front of the camera speaks with them for the first time in years. The careful and empathetic work of the director allows this to become a sign of reconciliation.

INQUISITION IN THE STYLE OF THE RENAISSANCE

Opposition to religious authorities is also a strong element in the Italian film *MENOCCHIO* (Alberto Fasulo, IT/RO 2018). The miller Menocchio lives in a village in Friuli, Italy, at the end of the 16th century. He is a charismatic person with significant influence on the inhabitants of his village – greater than that of the priest. His beliefs and convictions are not consistent with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. He calls for poverty and respect for nature. Menocchio testifies with conviction before a court that he does not accept authority and feels himself to be the equal of the Pope. He is close to be burned at the stake when, at the end of the film, he recants. Although he is no longer to die, he is imprisoned for life for his heresies.

Director Alberto Fasulo stages the story of the heretic in an expressive chiaroscuro style, with the strong contrasting of light and dark known from Renaissance paintings of the 16th century. Many scenes take place in the prison or at night. Only in court are the images bright, but light does not lead to the truth. The film is based on historical records and reports about the trial, but it also develops a unique view of the protagonist whereby Menocchio becomes a modern, agnostic figure. He thinks for himself and risks his life and the lives of his companions and family to stand up for his own convictions.

TRANSCENDENTAL STYLE IN A PASSION STORY

In *FIRST REFORMED* (Paul Schrader, US 2017), the American actor Ethan Hawke plays a pastor who experiences a profound existential and spiritual crisis. As an alcoholic, he is harming his health, but he rejects any help. His encounter with a young couple of environmentalists confronts him with this existential abyss, but he also discovers new meaning in his work. He wants to resolve the existential and environmental problems of the world through radical action taken on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of his church, the historically significant First Reformed community in New York State.

With his transcendental style, Paul Schrader provides a strong film in *FIRST REFORMED*. At the presentation of the film in Locarno, Ethan Hawke stated: “A film should be like a big bell that strikes you and follows you when you leave the cinema.” Stylistically, director Paul Schrader draws on Bergman and Bresson. *NATTVARDSGÄSTERNA* (*WINTER LIGHT*, Ingmar Bergman, SE 1962) is an important point of reference, with its pastor and the depiction of his existential crisis. Robert Bresson’s *JOURNAL D’UN CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE* (*DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST*, FR 1951) was also an inspiration for this film. With *FIRST REFORMED*, Paul Schrader, a leading American filmmaker, is at his zenith. Ever since his theoretical reflections on the “transcendental style” in the 1970s, Schrader, who is informed by

the Protestant Reformed tradition, has aspired to make such a film. He has provided a surprising and captivating drama which strikes like a thunderbolt and lingers for a long time. This Passion story of a pastor is surprising at an international festival – and staggeringly powerful.

PLEDGING GENDER PARITY

President Marco Solari and Vice-President Carla Speziali of the Locarno Film Festival signed a pledge to ensure gender parity in programming. The Swiss Women's Audiovisual Network (SWAN) with its director Ursula Meier initiated the pledge. "We are thrilled about this first step towards equality and diversity in festivals. Just as with budget and funding, women are entitled to an equal share of the spotlight and the screens. Visibility of our films is essential", said Gabriel Baur, Laura Kaehr, and Stéphane Mitchell, SWAN's co-presidents, in a statement.² Locarno was the first major film festival to follow the initiative taken by the Cannes Film Festival. Alina Birzache and Anna Piazza, members of the Ecumenical Jury of *Signis* and *Interfilm*, were present at the signing event to support this initiative.

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² Quoted in Keslassy/Hopewell 2018.