

Kate Robinson

Staple Myth: a response to the 15th Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival
(SUPERLUX bursary award, published on LUX website).



Berwick cannon facing the North Sea: image courtesy Kate Robinson

While the film-maker, Tim Alsiofi, sheltered in a basement in an eastern suburb of Damascus - barrel bombs raining down, concrete crumbling around him, filming what could not be expressed in words - he thought of *The Bomb Shelter* by the Vietnamese American poet Teresa Mei Chuc:

When bombs are exploding outside,
it means that there are implosions.

Vibrations travel through air and liquid.

My amniotic fluid is imprinted with airplanes
dropping bombs and screams and fire....¹

I stumbled on Alsiofi's *Douma Underground* en route to other things; I was going to a

lecture at the Maltings, I was in a rush, I was full of Festival. So it was a humbling shock to come into the dimness of a little stone room in Berwick's Main Guard, out of the beckoning sun, and be confronted with such a personal film of the Syrian war.

There was both immediacy and gentleness in Alsiofi's gaze. Amidst the mayhem and the external explosions, he helped me to imagine the internal implosions experienced by those children who survived the bombs even as they cheerfully peered through shattered walls and curiosity drew them to watch the day-time fireworks. *Douma Underground* felt like a film made as an offering, the film's survival, let alone the film-maker's own survival, was not a given.

Much of Christian Ghazi's early work is famously said to have been destroyed except for a sole surviving copy of *A Hundred Faces for a Single Day*. Introduced by curatorial fellow Tendai John Mutambu and artist Marwa Asanios who put this seminal film in context, it examines the effects of struggle and resistance in Lebanon. Political and principled, wry yet deadly serious, partly documentary, partly fiction, with a mind-boggling soundtrack and calmly illuminated by the performance of the filmmaker's partner, Madonna Ghazi, the work defies categorisation.

True to its name as a film about resistance, it constantly resisted my own expectations; stylistically and thematically it is confounding. I find it frustrating to write about, having only seen the film once when it needs repeated viewing. And yet its images have returned to me often from amidst the cornucopia of films and exhibitions I saw at the festival.

Flitting between glamorous images of fighters scrambling down scree in the moonlight and the horrible actuality of war - the bored, sore and bandaged wounded in hospital; between chic people flirting in bars and the drudgery of daily life - hanging out the washing, breaking rocks; between rich and poor, the affluent chattering class and, as described in the film, the 'laborious, miserable and oppressed', the 64-minute work is epic, kaleidoscopic, complex, constantly searching and questioning, never giving easy answers.

Kira Muratova's *The Long Farewell* was likewise epic, though ostensibly played out within the domestic sphere. I found myself longing for Sacha, the young protagonist, to wrench

himself away from his needy, garrulous mother. Go - leave - find your absconded father glimpsed in slides, photographed out on his archaeological dig amidst the rubble of Corinthian pillars.

On a visit to family friends - which looks more like a setting for a play by Chekov or a scene from Tolstoy than (what I would have expected before coming to the Berwick Film Festival of) a Soviet film - we watch - from the perspective of Sacha - as Macha, his young, talented, unattainable-love-interest unravels her hair to the soundtrack of the sea; waves of hair becoming waves of his longing. Later, in his and his mother's apartment, where he projects slides of horses around the walls, Sacha lies back on a sofa reciting absurdist poetry.

Was the film a parable of the relationship between Ukraine and the motherland? The absentee father a metaphor for a Classical past? The son, basking in his own imagination, surrounded by a panorama of mythical horses pounding the plains, a picture of Ukraine? Was this why the film cost Muratova her job as a director, forced to work for 16 years as a janitor and the film banned?

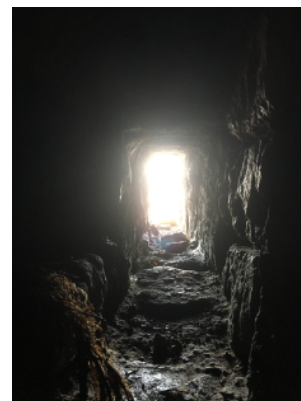
May Adadol Ingawanij has written about 'makers of offerings'.² In her curation of 'Animistic Apparatus: Stories of Encounters', she proposes a way of looking at films 'reimagined as if they were rituals addressed to nonhuman beings'. The films discussed so far, thought about in such a way, are addressed to the spirit of the land from which they were born: Syria, Lebanon, Ukraine. And yet they also speak to the psychic essence of places that bridge geographies of the heart, of shared experience, wobbly borders, imagined communities, historical myth.

As a part of 'Animistic Apparatus' Ingawanij commissioned Tanatchai Bandasak to make *Central Region* inspired by the presence of prehistoric standing stones in the highlands of Laos. The film was shown in Coxon's Tower, a small domed room, entered from the ramparts above by mossy steps, with a tiny window, just big enough for an archer to position an arrow, looking out towards the sea.



Central Region,
Tanatchai Bandasak,
image courtesy Kate Robinson

Earlier, I had listened to Bandasak as he explained how he would await the dawn, alone, in the midst of the dense vegetation in the highlands so that he could film the standing stones as the sun rose. He said he felt scared, waiting there, in that spirit-full, ancestrally populous, ecologically-freighted landscape in the midst of Southeast Asia. He travelled around the Central Region filming each of the stones in the very centre of the frame. In the resulting work the stones remain in the same position as the landscape around them changes from place to place.



Coxon's Tower
image courtesy Kate Robinson

When I watched, as the light of the film changed so did the light in Coxon's Tower, complemented by a slice of sunlight coming through the arrow-slit and cast on the stone wall opposite. Moving, I found it, for these stones from Southeast Asia to re-contextualise the tower turning it from a bored soldier's keep into a waiting dolmen.

Closer to Edinburgh than Newcastle, Berwick was at the centre of border wars for over 400 years - one of the most highly fortified towns of the first Elizabethan era - and has a fluid sense of identity. With sections of the ramparts and the town court and jail animated by films its history as well as its potential futures felt alive.

When I first arrived from Glasgow, I wasn't sure if I was in England or Scotland. It mattered. And so, thinking about borders, I had stumbled across my first film, *O Pierrot* by Tanoa Sasraku in The Straw Yard. It was spookily appropriate to see the Harlequin Union Jack reconstituted as a 'crazed black man'³ with a painted white face wildly struggling to be a character in a minstrel show.

The openness of the programming, with collections of films by different curators, and director Peter Taylor's stated aim of not having one single theme but allowing attendees to make their own way and choices – in a sense curating their own programme – helped me make personal connections and experience works with a depth that I might not have otherwise.

The opening film, Carlos Casas' *Cemetery* about an elephant, as well as Ben Rivers' *Now, at Last!* about a sloth set me thinking of the world of animals. Both of these films

empathically envision the world from the animal's perspective, the former through the soundtrack and much of the Point Of View - labouring through the forest at canopy level - and in the latter through the stillness and patience of the gaze. *Camera Trap* by Chris Chong Chan Ful compares human ways of looking at animals contrasting images by Muybridge, made a hundred years ago, to camera traps used in the rainforests of Malaysian Borneo at the present time. The image I most remember is of the eyes of an owl lit up staring directly into the screen. Turning the tables on the idea of being measured or 'caught on camera', it was the owl's own agency of which I was most aware.

In contrast, the opening sequence of Angela Shanelec's *I Was Home, But* presents a hunt and the subsequent bloody devouring of a rabbit in the presence of an impassive donkey not from the animals' perspective but as a metaphor of human relationships. Matt Stokes' aural work, *Beyond the Field*, re-creates the sounds of a pre-industrial meadow from the 18th century. Within a brown, windowless gallery at the Berwick Museum sitting on a beanbag, eyes closed, I could meditate on the buzzing, humming, murmurs and other susurrations of a time when human and animal relations were radically different from the present.

There was so much I saw and so much I wanted to see but didn't manage to get to, one of which was the overnight screening on the Quayside of Lav Diaz's *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery*, inspired by outdoor screenings in Southeast Asia often in cemeteries as offerings to the ancestors. Reading the notes, I see the film is about a search party looking for the body of a Filipino revolutionary leader, meeting mythical creatures who guide them on their way.

In discussing George Clark's *Double Ghosts*, Fang-Tze Hsu, quoting Ghassan Hage, talks about an 'alter-politics' that 'grows not from opposition... but from attention to another way of being, one that involves other kinds of living and nonliving beings.'⁴ I found the focus in the festival on alternative ways of presenting and of re-positioning the value of film to be liberating.

Since coming back, I have been to recent LUX Scotland screenings of independent films by women filmmakers and artists from Eastern Europe made since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Many of these films present alternative ways of paying attention to the past and to

ways of being which can be buried 'under mud'.⁵ Mainstream politics has a vast machine to produce its myths to promote agendas. An alter-politics that values art as offering (attending to 'other kinds of living and nonliving beings') suggest ways of being in the world in which myth itself is staple.

Herb Shellenberger's curation of 'Fantastika' brought together a group of international films that explore fairy tale, folktale and fable with contributions stretching from Nigeria and Mali to South America to Europe and beyond. *The Story of the Hare Who Lost His Spectacles*, a joyful pagan romp made to accompany a tour by rock group Jethro Tull, presents animals with a manifestly human twist led in a forest dance by the nature god Pan dressed in spectacles and a suit. The sharp style and deadpan wit of the *Celestial Wives of the Meadow Mari* by the Russian Alexsey Fedorchenko is given added depth by the shots at the end of each of the 'wives' not acting a part, just being themselves. *When the Cat Comes* by Vojtech Jasny from what is now the Czech Republic, about a magical cat, juggles with ideas about hypocrisy and truth.

Camp cannons pop up all over Nikki de Saint Phalle's *Un rêve plus long que la nuit* filmed in France in 1976. Saint Phalle's phallic shooters are made from chicken wire and paper, sometimes strapped to groins bounced with insouciant joie de vivre, sometimes larger sculptural contraptions with coloured streamers bursting forth causing those at which they are aimed to fall writhing into the dust. Camelia, a young girl, meets a wise woman and chooses to become an adult. In the process, as she wanders through a sculptural maze created by Saint Phalle's partner, Jean Tinguely, she chooses not to marry the King, not to fly off with the Soul Bird, meets the man with the miracleoscope and survives a small-scale Armageddon before walking off into the sunset with a man in black: an alchemical symbol of the *conjunctio* (culmination), the sacred marriage of spirit and body, *albedo* (whiteness, purity) and *nigredo* (chaos, shadow) joining in union, otherwise known as a happy ending. Pleasant it was, in these times when political borders and old acts of union are contested, to be reminded of those spiritual places - inner and outer - where it's still possible to be whole.

One last thing, my own personal-festival happy ending. Before getting the train home, I went for a walk beside the Tweed. I heard a mighty splosh and saw the snout of a large sea creature rushing through the water. My heart leapt. Amidst the energetic splashing in the middle of the river I'm convinced I saw a dolphin's fin.

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/145694/the-bomb-shelter>

²15th Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival Catalogue, 2019. May Adadol Ingawanij, *Animistic Apparatus: Stories of Encounters*, 35.

³Ibid. Tanoa Sasraku, *O' Pierrot*, 50.

⁴ Ibid. Fang-Tze Hsu, *Giving Time: George Clark's 'Double Ghosts' and the Alter – Politics of Film*, 46.

⁵ *Under Mud* Sunday 29th September Glasgow Film Theatre, curated by Alexandra Tryanova and Susannah Stark.