

The 75th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 5

Short films and their view of history: *How Are You?*, *Lloyd Wong*, *Unfinished* and *Ceasefire*

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9 March 2025

This is the fifth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival. Part 1 was posted February 20, Part 2 February 27, Part 3 March 2 and Part 4 March 6.

History has returned in recent weeks and months in ways that frighten or disturb many people. This activates memories, intrudes into nightmares, changes familiar thought patterns and influences creative work, including that of filmmakers.

This year's Berlinale Shorts, the section of the Berlin film festival featuring first productions by younger directors, provides a sense of how this process is influencing filmmakers. Many of the 20 short works from 18 countries deal with history and historical issues in one way or another.

The section featured a short that connects a racist attack on passersby at Munich's Olympia shopping centre in 2016 with the construction of the centre in 1972 by so-called "guest workers," i.e., migrant workers (*Rückblickend Betrachtet / In Retrospect*); two films about the former Yugoslavia (*Koki, Ciao* and *Prekid Vatre / Ceasefire*); and a biographical film about an artist suffering from AIDS in Toronto, Canada in the early 1990s (*Lloyd Wong, Unfinished*).

In addition, interesting productions dealt with the exploitative conditions produced by the globalised economy (*Their Eyes*), with social issues in the Netherlands (*Mother's Child*) and increasing state repression (*Dar band / Citizen-Inmate* from Iran). We will deal with these shorts in two articles.

How is history made visible?

In some films, however, the damage caused by postmodernist conceptions is also apparent. According to contemporary subjectivism, history is limited to personal narratives, opinions and memories, and people's actions are primarily driven by immediate emotions. Objective historical changes and their impact on personal relationships are barely visible.

Comment ça va? (How Are You?) by Caroline Poggi and Jonathan Vinel was selected as a candidate for the European Film Award. This is where harmful ideological influences are most noticeable. Employing cartoon animals who inhabit a rough coastal strip, the film strives to create a parable of the current world situation, with its violent conflicts, climate destruction, the persecution of refugees, etc.,

and links this all through existentialist, postmodern dialogues and commentaries. At its core, the film serves an anti-scientific agenda. Instead of theoretical clarity, according to the short, emotion and action are needed to change (or survive) the world.

Inspired by the philosopher Martin Heidegger, who asserted that human existence was "thrown into the world," a new animal, a penguin, is washed ashore by the waves, questioned by an elephant surrounded by a library for a radio show, fought and beheaded by a lion figure and then declared a friend again. His name is "I-don't-know."

In a dialogue with the lion, the elephant says: "Ignorance is simpler than knowledge." To which the lion replies: "Theory is more comfortable than its implementation." Later, the lion criticises the elephant: "You're just a library elephant. Right, don't read, but act." In the end, the elephant acts by catapulting the other animals out to sea with a kind of cannon, leaving him behind on the beach with his books.

Lloyd Wong, Unfinished

The winner of the Golden Bear for short films, *Lloyd Wong, Unfinished*, by Lesley Loksi Chan, is based on video recordings made by the late Chinese-Canadian artist and AIDS victim Wong in Toronto in 1990-1991. The Canadian director emphasises that she does not intend to complete his work. She is more interested in "listening to the details of everyday life," the major difficulties faced by queer communities at the time and how these resonate in the present day. For her, filmmaking is a "form of caring," a space for a "dialogue about collective memory and self-representation."

The limitations of this approach are evident in Wong's own statements. He was one of millions who succumbed to AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, which was a massive human tragedy. The disease arose as a product of nature, but its deadly character and persistence are an indictment of the capitalist system under which healthcare is subordinate to corporate profits.

The artist was not able, unfortunately, to see the difficulties faced by homosexuals or Asian artists in the 1990s in a broad context. There was a general reactionary turn in political and social life at the time of the dissolution of the USSR and beyond. Like many others, Wong resorts to identity politics. At one point, he says, for example, that the cultural origin of the Chinese or Vietnamese individual, respectively, must be emphasised and racism fought on that basis.

Yugoslavia—a warning against nationalism

Prekid vatre (Ceasefire)

Two of the short films in Berlin concern themselves with Yugoslavia, which was devastated by wars in the 1990s and has since been broken up into a number of small, impotent states.

Koki, Ciao by Quenton Miller, which won the new CUPRA Filmmaker Award, takes an ironic and grotesque look at a talking white cockatoo named Koki, who once belonged to the Yugoslav head of government, Marshall Josip Broz Tito (in power from 1945 to 1980). During visits by diplomatic representatives of the so-called Non-Aligned countries to Tito's estate on the Brijuni Islands (in the northern Adriatic Sea), Koki was presented as part of the entertainment. The cockatoo show, complete with its piercing cries of "Tito, Tito," is still performed as a tourist attraction today.

Pictures and videos from the archives reveal guests such as Nikita Khrushchev, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Indira Gandhi, Nicolae Ceausescu, Suharto, etc. Other visitors included the actress Sophia Loren and film director Orson Welles.

The Australian-British director Miller has said he did not want to show a "human-centred story," but rather the "alienated perspective of Koki, who is locked in a cage." He said he used the word "alienated" in reference to the work of German playwright Bertolt Brecht and science fiction. "Koki's position is [located] not only between bird species, but also between nations," he continued.

The cockatoo has ended up "in a zoo of world animals as part of the international diplomacy of the Non-Aligned Movement, on an island with changing borders that was Roman, Austria-Hungary, France, Italy at different times and then a diplomatic centre for a country that no longer exists."

The metaphor indirectly alludes to the national conflicts of the Balkans in the present day. However, Miller's film remains on the surface of events and leaves open the question of the director's position on the tragic history of Yugoslavia. The truth is that the dissolution of Yugoslavia helped set off geopolitical reverberations that today increasingly threaten global war. In any case, this episode is not suitable for a grotesque or "quirky" comedy.

A more serious look at Yugoslav history is provided by the documentary *Prekid vatre (Ceasefire)* by Jakob Krese.

"Look where they've brought us," Hazira says in the summer of 2022, when the film crew visits her. She has been living in a refugee camp for almost 30 years, since the end of the Yugoslav war (1992 to 1996).

"*Fucking Mladi?*," she says into the camera while pulling up clumps of weeds in a field. And "*Fucking Karadji?*, fucking weeds." Mladi? and Karadji? were the Bosnian Serb militia leaders responsible for the Srebrenica massacre.

These are virtually the only political comments in the film. When asked about the massacre 30 years ago, which Hazira survived, she remains tight-lipped, only emphasising that women and small children were not attacked and that they hid from the shooting "from all sides."

Krese's documentary shows the hard life of Hazira and her family in the Ježevac refugee camp near Tuzla in eastern Serbia. She was never able to return to her home village in the mountains above Srebrenica. Today it is part of the Republika Srpska, the breakaway Serbian portion of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Her life is characterised by cramped living conditions in the camp and hard work in the fields, harvesting fruit. She collects firewood,

cleans the miserable accommodation almost obsessively every day, smokes incessantly and tries to cope with the trauma of the war with black humour and resilience. However, her family and the other inhabitants of the camp are not only traumatised people, but also proud farm workers who do not want to emigrate and do not want to accept an offer from European Union (EU) representatives for apartments in new blocks of flats in the city.

The starting point for the documentary was research by director Krese and his aunt Meta Krese on the Balkan route, which thousands of Syrian refugees have been taking since 2015 to escape the war in their own country. In a reception centre near Belgrade, they discovered barracks housing survivors of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Further research revealed that there are a number of such camps scattered throughout Bosnia.

As the director, grandson of a family of Yugoslav partisans who fought against the Nazis, emphasises, his film is intended as a warning against the nationalism that is spreading throughout Europe today.

"We refused to believe that 20 years after the war in Yugoslavia, people were still living in refugee camps," he said in his director's statement at the Berlinale premiere. "And that we, who come from the same former country, knew nothing about it." It turned out that there were many more such cases. "With this film, I also want to express my outrage that in the middle of Europe, 26 years after the war, people are still living in a refugee camp."

The Bosnian war alone, not including the subsequent conflict in Kosovo, "forced more than 2.2 million people to flee, the largest displacement of people in Europe since the end of the Second World War," as the film's intertitle explains.

Krese's documentary does not examine the political issues in the Yugoslav civil war of the 1990s, or the background to the Serb massacre near Sarajevo, which is still exploited for propaganda purposes today, but was accompanied by similar massacres by Croatian militias. He also does not address the significant role of the German government, which pushed for the secession of Croatia and Slovenia in 1991, thereby triggering the subsequent civil war.

But the director wants his film to serve as a warning: "The history of Yugoslavia is an integral part of European history, and the violent nationalism that once seemed to come out of nowhere is now also resurgent in other parts of Europe."

Two small moments in the film are significant. On the television news program that Hazira and her neighbours watch together, we hear: "The fighting in Donetsk is intensifying, 15,000 people in Lysychansk have been ordered to leave the city," and in a later broadcast: "In the Jalazone refugee camp near Ramallah, several Palestinians have been arrested, including children. Since October, more than 10,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli attacks..."

The title, *Ceasefire*, makes clear that any "truce" in the Yugoslav civil wars and in the current wars in Ukraine and Gaza would only be temporary.

To be continued



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