



## DocLisboa 2023: The Slow Change

■ Daniel Ribas ○ January 2024 □ Festival Reports □ Issue 108

In the middle of last October, DocLisboa presented again, as a window on the present – its tagline: “In October, the whole world fits in Lisbon”. Important news came at the end: Miguel Ribeiro finished his tenure as festival director, opening the space to Paula Astorga, former director of Mexico’s National Cinematheque from 2010 to 2014. The update was a bit surprising, as Ribeiro (and his former colleagues – Joana de Sousa and Joana Gusmão – who served in the collective artistic direction in some of these five years) opened the door for a new generation of film curators in Portugal.

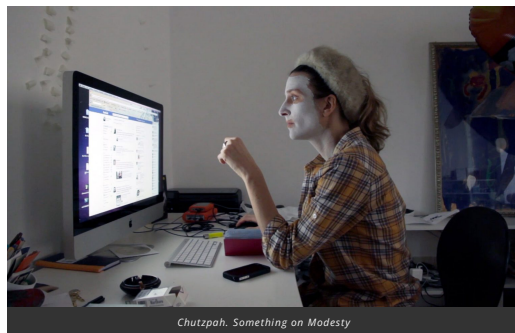
As a sign of the uncertain editorial line of the festival, DocLisboa presented a rather curious International Competition, a section I will discuss in more detail. Two retrospectives, on Anastasia Lapsui & Markku Lehmuskallio (curated by Boris Nelepo) and *Documentary on the March: The Turbulent 30s in New Deal America* (curated by Justin Jaekle with the Cinematheca Portuguesa), are worthy of mention, and the ever-expanding and attractive New Visions section (with two filmmakers in focus, Paula Gatián and Mika Taanila; and a “Shadowboxing” between programmers Cíntia Gil and Jean-Pierre Rehm) was a highlight.

Documentary film has been evolving over the last decade. Immersed in images and sounds that come from everywhere when we scroll, with a future AI world just around the corner, we are on the threshold of perceiving and reading moving images in a transformational way. There is no getaway, even if it can be stated that documentary was always a form that played with the real. The International Competition of DocLisboa 2023 offers a clear sign of a complicated transition and assumes that as the main trend of these nine features and four short films. More than ever, documentaries speak of their modes of cinema making and relation to the “real”. In this diverse program, the festival proposes different ways of registering the passing days and the human struggle to survive.

Take, for example, *This Blessed Plot* (Marc Isaacs), a film that develops as a fictional documentary masked as a comedy. The complicated narrative apparatus in which the film tells the story of Lori, a Chinese filmmaker visiting the old village of Thaxted in the United Kingdom, is portrayed in an amateurish way and in TV sitcom-style that serves to confuse the viewer over the film’s purpose. Maybe it wants to laugh at itself? Or to state the impossibility of capturing the countryside as either a pleasant wandering or weird ghost-like story? The self-presentation as a “fake” documentary overshadows any ambivalence and overstates the affirmation of the impossibility of the documentary. Too much “in your face”.

With this overthinking of the formal aspects of documentaries, many of these films find their ultimate good and bad things. On the bright side, Elisabeth Perceval and Nicolas Klotz’s *Nouveau Monde! (Le monde à nouveau) [New World! (The World Anew)]* delves into the essayistic form to think about our world, at times in a Godard-like excess of images. In that formal aspect, the film mirrors the difficulties of contemporary documentaries by considering the status of images, looking at Jean Epstein’s *Finis terrae* (1929) and where it takes place: the seaside village of Ouessant. It’s fitting to start by speaking of this film, as its opening point is the untrustworthiness of images. The directors know well how historical and cultural images are, and their relationship between a 1929 film and contemporaneity is one of speaking about the “real”. As the film observes the almost oneiric place and its wild nature, the directors talk about the state of images today and their excessiveness, confusing the concept of cinema. How can we make sense of so many images coming from different media?

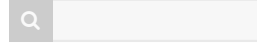
The dark screens that appear during the film – only with music – state well that close end. Is it a pessimistic film? Perceval and Klotz know the importance of cinema, and this almost “small” film – both directors travelled alone, one capturing images, the other the sound – connects to a kind of primordial experience. The voices of children that speak throughout the film show the kind of ingenuity that cinema lacks and that *New World!* systematises with its simple and beautiful images: “The algorithms had penetrated our nervous systems and were destroying us from within”. The directors speak about the “Explosion” at a certain point, and the film guides us to a possible serenity.



Chutzpah. Something on Modesty

Maybe the question on images and formal elements can be found in “personal” films and biographies, an essential part of this year’s selection. One of the most intimate portraits is by Monica Stambirini in her *Chutzpah. Qualcosa sul pudore (Chutzpah. Something on Modesty)*. From the beginning, in which the director turns the camera on herself, the excess of self-images is evident. The film even shoots undercover sequences from Stambirini’s therapy. Is the film, through its excess of egocentric images, trying to overcome its own aesthetic by portraying a woman in 2023 – as comprised of types: a sexual partner, a mother, a worker? The film deals with fundamental issues but cannot escape formal cliché. In a way, it doesn’t resist the inevitable trend of personal cinema in which archive and private footage only increase the excess of images, as criticised by Perceval and Klotz. An Instagramable film?

*Magnificent Sky* by Alexandru Badea also deals with some of these same problems. However, here we have a filmed portrait of Iancu Dumitrescu and the late Ana-Maria Avram, avant-garde Romanian composers and partners in life. Supported additionally by a formal decision to film in Hi8 cameras, adding to archival material, the project takes life by its contradictions about what is contemporary. Observing Dumitrescu and Avram’s music today marks a return to a time when disruption in music was a matter of life and death. They were at the forefront of a displacement, a radical change in how music could be composed and heard, even by today’s standards. While the Hi8 colours bring that to life, this music is now a vague remembrance of a past revolution, losing its enchantment and charm. At a certain point in



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the narrative, young people comment on Dumitrescu's figure and music, calling him "elitist". The clash of temporalities is a paradox at the film's core.

Time is also at stake in *La gruta continua* (*Ongoing Cave*, Julián D'Angiolillo). The most clearly observational documentary of the selection, the film follows a group of explorers in deep caves. The caveers are a unique class of workers who defy the known world, and the film makes the case for this speciality. It's as funny as it is dangerous and talks about the inner turmoils of humankind. Breathing is the film's keyword. It is also the one for late capitalism. By its side, *La Suite canadienne* (*Suite Canadienne*, Olivier Godin) follows a group of dancers that are rehearsing a famous Canadian ballet – *Suite Canadienne*, by Ludmilla Chiriaeff, broadcast nationally on Quebec television in 1958. The group is slowly learning the importance of Chiriaeff's gesture from the late 1950s and how it was important to question specific identities. But the film's main achievement is in how, through sound and light, the rehearsals become something more: pieces of cinematic dances. In this instance, the formal choices of the director allow us to enter an *experience of the dance* instead of an observation of a dance company's reality.



This sensory approach permeates *la tierra los altares* (*earth altars*, Sofía Peypoch), the film that won the City of Lisbon Award for Best International Competition Film. Peypoch delivers one of the most personal films of the festival, researching the surroundings in which she was captive. Using different documentary methods – interviews, forensic analysis, but mainly opting for a poetics of trauma – the filmmaker builds an intimate portrait that gives space to the many layers of the traumatic events and an understanding of it through a memory reconstructed by cinematic means. It's a humble and powerful testimony to the capacity of images and sounds in liberating oneself from a disturbing memory. Peypoch delivers voice-over and onscreen text, entering a poetic procedural on the past. Soil and natural objects (bones, pieces of trees, etc.) are the evidence of the passing time with which the film tries to deal.

Trauma and the need to expose it are also present in *Tzipora ve Rachel lo metot* (*Tzipara and Rachel Are Not Dead*, Hadar Morag). But in a different manner to *earth altars*, this film takes its time – shot over 16 years – to show the changing faces of two sisters. Mainly shot by its women, *Tzipara and Rachel Are Not Dead* is a testimony to being alive, even if that means enduring traumatic events and their aftermath. Mostly filmed inside homes, rooms, or other small spaces, largely in hospital facilities, the film has the difficult task of filming psychic illness. It's a dangerous subject, which the director approaches in its entirety by not putting the camera aside when discussions or even violent events occur. The fight for the identity of each of the sisters in this messy life is a powerful statement. Inside a body there is always someone, alive with fears, demons, and joys.

*Hormigas perplejas* (*Perplexed Ants*, Mercedes Moncada Rodríguez) was the most explicitly political film of the selection. The film was closer to a section that DocLisboa previously had – Cinema of Urgency – which featured films connected to a more intense political fight or humanitarian causes. Little by little, Rodríguez mounts the case for Spanish shipping and aerospace industries and chronicles the slow death of the unions that supported the workers' struggle. It's the demise of a particular time and place where labour was at the heart of social issues. As the title suggests, this is a *perplexed* world left alone.

The short films also encapsulate this trend in the documentary film of rethinking the way formal elements are also affective elements of a political cinema. Take, for example, the dryness of *Terril* (Jorn Plucieniczak), which builds the awkwardness of the community it portrays through an observational mode that substitutes long shots for close-ups, mostly shot at dawn or night. With its impressionistic vignettes, the film also creates a strangeness that reverberates through the characters' feelings. With the same awkwardness, *Tudo que vi era o Sol* (*All I Could See Was the Sun*, Ralph Antunes, Leonardo Amaral, Pedro Maia de Brito) builds a portrait of a wider community. Life happens around a bar, different homes, and religious spaces in the village. It's a quiet film, but through its hyper-realist approach, a vivid portrait of humans and their minor and profound loves emerge. Exquisite but bright, the film has an enormous affection for our existence. In an almost opposite way, *Like the Glitch of a Ghost* by Paula Albuquerque, explores the archive – footage from religious/medical propaganda from the 1950s, shot in Suriname, found in Eye Filmmuseum – but scratches the human elements, managing to erase its skin and cultural identity – glitching history to achieve a story of ghosts.

DocLisboa 2023 was a festival of trial and error, navigating the state of contemporary documentary film. Sometimes formal elements succeed in politicising films in a way that contemporary cinema demands. The less exciting films lay, precisely, on the borderline between chosen formal capacities and the feelings films can generate. The inner truth of these documentaries lies precisely in their capacity to portray the changing landscape of reality. The one that is always escaping us.

DocLisboa

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Daniel Ribas is a film writer, curator, and professor. He is an Assistant Professor at the School of Arts, Universidade Católica Portuguesa. Currently, a curator for Curtas Vila do Conde IFF and Batalha Film Center, he is also a regular contributor to the Portuguese daily Público.

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