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Rotterdam 2019: Very Personal Cinema

Two documentary highlights: An essay film about Colombia's history of violent imagery and a poetic adaptation of Viennese soul searching.

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While on television and in most mainstream cinemas the talking-head, omnisciently narrated, impersonal and frequently uncritical documentary is the conventional norm, in the festival world one can find a welcome and wonderfully more diverse array of approaches to nonfiction filmmaking. These can range from the modest warmth of diary films to dry systematic analyses, from austere minimalist landscape studies to epic sagas of found footage. Perhaps most common of these more inquisitive types of documentary is the essay film, which frequently uses many approaches to pursue its subject in a more argumentative yet intellectually roving manner. At Rotterdam, Colombian director Federico Atehortúa Arteaga has found a sharply evoked spot in between personal and national nonfiction storytelling with his feature debut, the essay film *Pirotecnia* (*Mute Fire*). Its origins are in a desire to tell the history of Colombian cinema, which Atehortúa Arteaga locates in a 1906 assassination attempt on President Rafael Reyes Prieto, an act re-staged and re-created for a photographic report after the assailants had been executed. This, Atehortúa Arteaga asserts, forever ties violence, war, and the defining of national identity to Colombian cinema, a line of argument that he traces to the practice of the contemporary government taking dead bodies, dressing them up as FARC rebels, and claiming victory deaths. Meanwhile, as he was working on this project, the director's mother was struck mute, a condition that doctors, psychologists and tests fail to explain. Her husband worries she's faking, and Atehortúa Arteaga, who lingers on home movies of a school play his mother staged where he as a child dressed as a FARC rebel, approaches this malady with a mixture of confusion and awe. He eventually finding her silence a bodily response, conscious or not, to the moral and spiritual exhaustion of her country's convulsive war on itself that is still ongoing. While one might have desired a more rigorous and objective approach to connecting Colombia's history of image-creation with national violence, Atehortúa Arteaga's introduction of the personal is ultimately a moving gesture of imbrication, that when bodies are what are photographed and filmed, are what are shot and killed, human bodies are therefore what are affected; dead or struggling to live, they are the ultimate subject. What *Pirotecnia* reaches for is the suggestion that Colombia's identity as a modern nation is one founded on the power of images, especially violent images, and when one lives in this modern world so dominantly made up of imagery, it is impossible for people to remain unaffected, free of the implications that these images reveal or cover up. This kind of personal cinema can be tough to bear: the weight of a nation, a history, or a trauma, that immensity of weight put upon the shoulders of a subject.

This is something Austrian director Peter Schreiner knows something about. His is a cinema too little known in English-speaking film world, despite its existence as capital-A art-cinema, existing in the same world of demanding—but highly rewarding—formalism as director's like Béla Tarr, who works on a more expansive scale, and Pedro Costa, whose intimate productions bare a very superficial similarity. Yet Schreiner is not nearly as hip in the culture; perhaps because his films are rooted in documentary (though, so too are Costa's), perhaps because he is from Austria (where there Can Be Only One: Michael Haneke), and perhaps because of the degree to which Schreiner boldly takes his very real subjects and risks abstracting them as people and their turmoil as humans to a level beyond the surface and the obvious, in attempt to reach something more elevated, more profound.

I realize this sounds pretentious, and indeed a film like *Garden*, Schreiner's latest, is vulnerable and fragile to such concerns: while its three main characters are based on real people of the same name and background, Schreiner fictionalizes their stories, collaborating with them to create a floating world where inner life and external drama blend into utterances and pronouncements of longing and lamentation. On its most basic level, it tells of a love triangle between Awad, a Lebanese migrant in Vienna, and Hermann, a Viennese artist, with Julia, the woman who both claim is the love of their lives. That lost romance is an invention, but all three are real people with backgrounds that feed into the world Schreiner creates—yet that world bares little resemblance to reality: the film takes place in an unidentified garden during the day and night (mostly eerie, moonlit night) and indeterminate interior rooms of a home, and both places have that oneiric vagueness of a dream, nightmare, a state of limbo or a conjuring. Indeed, the garden of the title seems metaphorical, a place of memory, a place of fantasy, a place of purgatory between living and death. In its feeling of inescapability, it is perhaps even a hell, but all in all, this netherspace is one in which Awad and Hermann pine for Julia, recount their lost opportunity of love, and Julia gradually asserts her own story of struggle and self-doubt.

If all this sounds abstruse, especially for a (kind of a) documentary, indeed it is. Schreiner very beautifully shoots in the highest of contrast black and whites, tracking his camera back and forth before his subjects as they utter pronouncements of misery, of doubt, of questioning, and of longing, and we are unmoored in both space and time. These may be real people, but their expressions, and Schreiner's evocation of them, are hardly of fact and figures. Rather, *Garden* is after a revelation of the soul. This is where the film's risk comes from, its danger and its accomplishment. I myself don't recognize my soul within it, or necessarily understand a great deal of what the three say, but I most definitely see and am often awed by recognizing the soul in these people. "You have to wrest a secret from life," says Awad, who part way through *Garden* expresses his wish to make a film, perhaps one about his relationship to Julia and Hermann—perhaps make the film we are watching. (We see a camera lens face us from time to time, and indeed, is what we're seeing Schreiner's film, or one imagined by the people in it?)

The pacing is a morass, tarlike. We are stuck in this so-called garden, this not-now, not-reality with three people who struggle to articulate and define their ardor and their despair. Hermann suggests all three are acting parts, and indeed they are, real people, real backgrounds, soul-riffing in some way or another. Awad despairs as Hermann leaves his film midway through shooting—or is it Hermann the man himself who leaves Schreiner's project, for he indeed disappears from *Garden* for a while? "Who am I when I don't play?" asks Julia. The planes of existence are blurred and it matters not, only the doubt, the wondering and the residue that remains. This may not be what we understand conventionally as "real" in the cinema, but it feels like a direct transmission from these three and from Schreiner to us, something laid exposed and sore before the audience. When describing his film project, Awad says that "unseen images should become visible." He's talking of the metaphysics of cinema, yes, but also very practically too: we see him, Julia and Hermann in the raw, emerging from darkness in a purgatorial place where they question their lives, doubt their motives, lament and long for love and deliverance. They are so vivid and exposed it feels almost painful for these three to be on camera, to try to speak, to give voice to their spirit. And it is by admitting to this difficulty, which indeed can also be difficult to watch, and by showing it ardently, that *Garden* speaks real truths.

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