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## Breaking the Waves

09.22.16

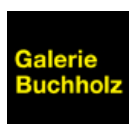
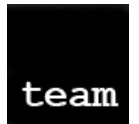


Laida Lertxundi, *025 Sunset Red*, 2016, color, sound, 14 minutes.

**WHILE MOST FILM FESTIVALS** can't be accurately encapsulated in anything close to comprehensive fashion, summing up the Toronto International Film Festival would be next to impossible. Founded a year before the Blue Jays, in 1976, as the Festival of Festivals, TIFF—and the city around it—has metastasized in the years since. Today it's the largest North American festival, lashing together almost every significant title that's been making the rounds in European and American fests... along with *The Magnificent Seven*? I don't think anyone—TIFF employees included—knows just how many movies, exactly, played this year in the fest's many subsections, and for a movie to merely have "played TIFF" means nothing. Certain of those subsections, however, still mean quite a lot, and if you are interested in that vast swath of hard-to-classify cinematic experience that for the sake of brevity we'll call "experimental film," Wavelengths, curated by Andrea Picard, is a very big deal indeed.

Thematically arranged shorts program are one Wavelengths mainstay. This time through I mostly liked what I already suspected I would like of these—Laida Lertxundi, for example, is as close to a sure bet as there is going, and her *025 Sunset Red* is a perfect object, sweet and lyric, integrating mementos of her family's radical past with the filmmaker's established affinity for desert landscape. There is also a transfixing power to the increasingly dense sculptural superimpositions of *As Without So Within* by Manuela De Laborde—like Lertxundi, a CalArts graduate—though elsewhere in these programs a wearisome familiarity set in, which I suspect is attributable to the monopoly of a few grad programs on the avant-garde, operating like Renaissance ateliers and perpetuating readily identifiable templates.

The work of James N. Kienitz Wilkins, represented at Wavelengths by his *Indefinite Pitch*, doesn't follow any such predictable course. I've been keeping up with Wilkins's output since a few years back, when I first encountered his *Public Hearing*—a reenacted transcript of a, yes, public hearing in Alleghany, New York over the expansion of a Walmart to a Super Walmart—and he's rewarded the attention, never doing the same thing twice. His latest is a wordplay-heavy monologue delivered over black-and-white still images of a New England mill town in the depths of winter by the director himself (the frequency of the voiceover is toggled throughout the twenty-three-minute runtime), beginning as a film "pitch" and proceeding through personal anecdote and the digging up of lore around the town of Berlin, New Hampshire. Since *Indefinite Pitch* played TIFF, Kienitz Wilkins has been awarded the Film Society of Lincoln Center's final Kazuko Trust Award, previously given to Lertxundi. I'm excited to see how he blows the dough.



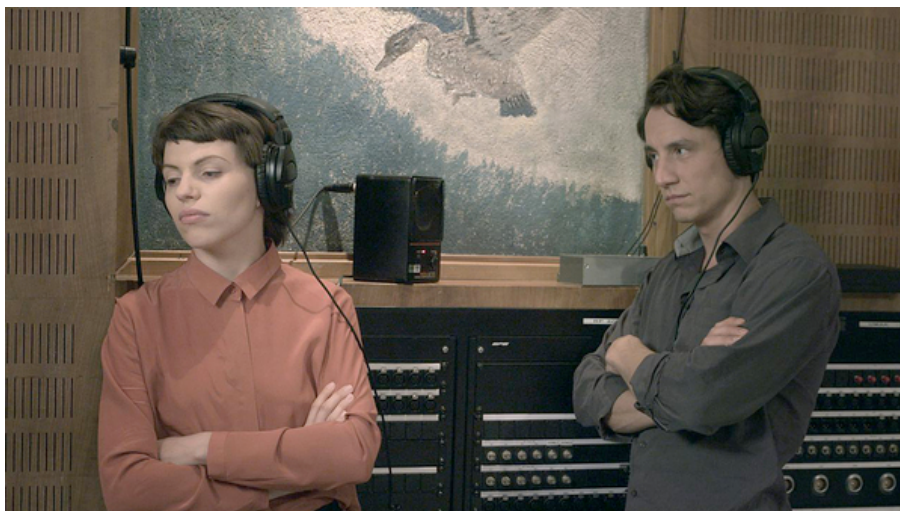


Sergei Loznitsa, *Austerlitz*, 2016, black-and-white, sound, 94 minutes.

The two instances of film-work by the late Ana Mendieta that showed in one *Wavelengths* program didn't really impress as part of a shorts block, though it was rewarding to tarry with them when reencountered in a gallery setting, one of a handful of off-site installations attached to *Wavelengths*. Probably the most talked-about of these was Albert Serra's *Singularity*, which first appeared at the Catalan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015. The installation consists of projected images visible on the obverse and, inverted, rear sides of five hung screens in a darkened gallery space. Presented on them are a variety of vignettes taken in boudoirs and brothels, which dialogue identifies as linked in relation to the mining industry, the setting located somewhere between *Don Quixote*, Ireland in the 1930s, and our current Age of the Drone. I was unable to discern any meaningful interplay among the counterpoised screens, though this is very possibly the whole idea, as the title of the work refers to the prophesied moment when man is surpassed by machine, and *Singularity* is deliberately incomplete, inexhaustible. If nothing else, I walked away secure in the knowledge that Serra had been looking at late R.W. Fassbinder, just as his deathtrip theatrical feature *The Death of Louis XIV* suggests that he's taken notes on Roberto Rossellini's great historical films—it's a mashup of *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* (1966) and the sickbed passages of *Blaise Pascal* (1972), in which we watch the slow decline of the senescent monarch (played by Jean-Pierre Léaud) as his breath slows and his gangrenous leg turns obsidian.

Where Serra's immersive *Singularity* suggests an early cinema experiment like the 360-degree Cinéorama that bowed at the 1900 Paris Exposition, the unutterably complex simplicity of Sergei Loznitsa's *Austerlitz* is at times close to the Lumières—call it *Vacationers Entering the Death Factory*. The movie consists of a procession of fixed-camera framings provide us with black-and-white views of the crowds milling through guided tours of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Oranienberg, Germany. One's first impulse may be abhorrence or mockery, for these are tourists in summer wear, a great many wearing T-shirts emblazoned with product logos or inane English-language phrases, a semiological mish-mash, and the visitors to this solemn scene whip out selfie sticks and smile for the camera before the "ARBEIT MACHT FREI" sign. But among the hundreds who seem oblivious, there are a few who seem to engage—is the film about the masses, or these few? What Loznitsa is doing is leading us into a double-bind of incomprehension—for in scrutinizing these visitors trying to understand the incomprehensible, we are doing much the same thing.

The historical upheaval in Wang Bing's *Ta'ang*, another documentary standout, is very much present tense. The title refers to a minority ethnic group whose population is distributed along the border between Burma and China's Yunnan Province, and the film bears witness to the mass displacement that occurred during Burma's most recent internecine struggle, which brought thousands of Ta'ang streaming over the Chinese border. As in his recent asylum expose, *'Til Madness Do Us Part*, Wang puts a premium on scenes of commiseration amid the unendurable, and sandwiched between the movie's rugged, crudely framed scenes of flight and dogged endurance is a remarkable centerpiece, a collection of conversations by fire- and candlelight between refugees too exhausted to move, too rattled to sleep, caught in Georges de La Tour lighting.



Ruth Beckermann, *Die Geträumten* (*The Dreamed Ones*), 2016, color, sound, 89 minutes.

After nodding off through a few lukewarm pools of "painterly" art cinema, Ruth Beckermann's minimalist *The Dreamed Ones* was a welcome splash of cold water. Beckermann's movie documents a staged

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recording of the almost two-decade correspondence between poets Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan—an Austrian and a displaced Romanian Jew—that began in 1948 and ended a few years before their premature deaths. The approach succeeds largely on the chemistry and charisma of “leads” Anja Plaschg and Laurence Rupp, seen wavering in and out of character between smoke breaks and sessions at the microphone, returned to each time with amplified emotional effect, and in the final measure heartbreaking. It’s an altogether gutsier approach to “translating” a literary text to the screen than Raoul Peck’s *I Am Not Your Negro*, a thuddingly literal-minded interpretation of a text full of revolutionary fervor, James Baldwin’s unfinished 1979 *Remember This House*, which played the TIFF Docs section and was quickly snatched up by distributor Magnolia.

Among other things, *The Dreamed Ones* recalls the space for yearning, and the concentration of feeling made possible by an epistolary culture that has been all but erased in the age of the “U up?” text. The most urgently contemporary works at Wavelengths, those that seemed to address this, our reality, included Kienitz Wilkins’s film, obviously dependent as it is on internet archaeology; *Austerlitz*, focused on comprehending history in an era of mediated experience; and, perhaps above all else, Argentine-born Eduardo Williams’s *The Human Surge*.

I was rarely aware of who I was watching during *The Human Surge*, or of the narrative significance of their actions, but who cares?—for I also had an acute sense of seeing things that I’d actually never seen before in a movie, including bravura passages like a seamless jump to “inside” a webcam screen on the Chaturbate platform or a headlong dive into an anthill. A roundelay of ambiguously connected sketches involving young people, mostly male, hanging out and making a subsistence living through crap jobs and internet voyeurism, it’s a masterclass in good-bad cinematography, the signature image a traveling frame that lags slightly-too-far-for-clarity behind its subject, and occasionally seeming to forget what exactly it’s supposed to be looking at. (Along with *Perfect Pitch*, *The Human Surge* was also one of a few films to exhibit a sense of humor, which was a bit thin on the ground here.) While too much experimental work is content to retreat into lo-fi analog revanchism, multiformat *The Human Surge* reconciles film texture and digital delirium, pointing to a way ahead—a destination as of yet unknown.

— [Nick Pinkerton](#)

*The Toronto International Film Festival ran September 8 through 18.*

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