

FILM

# STRANGEST THINGS

October 03, 2018 • Tony Pipolo on Projections at the 56th New York Film Festival



Daniel Schmidt, *Diamantino*, 2018, 35 mm color, sound, 92 minutes.

**A LOONY FAIRY TALE** opens this year's "Projections" sidebar of the Fifty-Sixth New York Film Festival. Gabriel Abrantes and Daniel Schmidt's *Diamantino* alludes to the immigration crisis, cybernetics, gender-bending, political corruption, internet crime, and global sports mania, yet it remains fanciful to the end, replete with a bevy of villains and a too-good-to-be-true hero, who gives the film its title. *Diamantino* Matamouros (Carlo Cotta), like Wagner's Siegfried, is, as English comedian Anna Russell's hilarious spoof described Siegfried, "very brave, very

handsome, and very stupid.” Soccer champ and certified hunk Diamantino, though as naive and vacuous as any prince charming, is also Portugal’s last great hope to win the World Cup. When he blows it, his beloved father, with a little help from his mercenary daughters, drops dead after a stroke, leaving Diamantino at the mercy of his demonic sisters, Sonia and Natasha. Determined to maintain their lifestyle, they connive to have Diamantino cloned by genetics genius Dr. Lamborghini to secure Portugal’s glorious future. To say any more would ruin the dizzy charm of this film’s endlessly antic, weirdly relevant plot.

In general, the features in this year’s “Projections” are especially strong and exhibit an amazing range. Although both Jodie Mack’s aptly titled *The Grand Bizarre* and Albert Serra’s *Roi Soleil* have been written about recently in these pages in connection with other festivals, I would be remiss not to stress them as two highlights. Mack’s feature debut is a dazzling, bountiful spree. Yards beyond what she has done before, the colorful fabrics and textiles of her shorter works are here inventively superimposed on various domestic and public settings to uncanny effect—as if the world itself has undergone refurbishing. Its accumulative impact aside, the film has a formal structure that is beautifully punctuated by the audio-visual pulse of its final “movement,” wherein repeated snips of heavy scissors on the soundtrack accompany the reams of fabric and textiles that reel by.

While some have dismissed *Roi Soleil* as a redundant installation version of Serra’s *The Death of Louis XIV* (shown at last year’s NYFF), I found it unexpectedly riveting. Save for the occasional walk-on of unidentified figures and spectators, the film consists of the sustained image of the dying king sprawled in agony on the floor of a contemporary industrial-looking space, his faithful, ministering court nowhere in sight. Denuded of a naturalistic mise-en-scène—except for seemingly chance appearances of a mirror, a tray of candy, pillows, and a pitcher of water—the isolation of the moribund monarch in a space and time alien to his own is both intensified and surreal. It would not surprise me if Serra was inspired by the final sequence of Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which an aging astronaut, similarly misplaced in a seventeenth-century hotel room, also awaits his solitary demise.



Jodie Mack, *The Grand Bizarre*, 2018, DCP, color, sound, 60 minutes.

There's a great deal of talk in Ted Fendt's *Classical Period* and Dora Garcia's *Second Time Around*, but idle it is not. This is especially true of the former, a modest exercise in 16 mm that opens with a lecture on Dante and follows a group of young intellectuals (friends of the filmmaker) whose engagement in the nuances of language, philosophy, and theology is as earnest as it is unusual—universes away from what you might imagine preoccupies the youth of today.

Jeremy Shaw's quasi sci-fi *Quantification Trilogy* is not feature-length but comprises three different movies: *Quickenings* (2014), *Liminals* (2017), and *I Can See Forever* (2018). The first, drolly narrated and set five hundred years in the future, speculates on the lost past of the human race, and efforts by revivalist types—seen in unidentified found footage—tap into the species' lost connection with faith and transcendence. In *Liminals*, young people in an exercise class occupy a “para space,” somewhere between the physical and virtual worlds, in an

incubation period that might lead to eternal life. The final episode, allegedly about seeking gifted mortals as models for cyborgs, focuses on a young black man whose passion for dance leads him to out-of-body experiences. The trilogy's contrived efforts at irony are blown away as we watch this youth dancing in a gym, fusing the physical and the transcendent as he defies gravity and carves seamless, visually stunning arcs in space. It's the elegance of his movements in a real—not virtual—space that will likely leave one breathless.

This year's retrospectives include James Benning's *11 x 14* (1977) and two films by Ericka Beckman. The former was Benning's first 16-mm feature-length venture into the prolonged meditations on landscapes and the things that move within them that have preoccupied him for decades. I saw Beckman's *You the Better* for the first time at the 1983 New York Film Festival. Seeing it again thirty-five years later, I am astonished that its visual/audial clout and masterful editing seem fresher than ever, and all the more impressive for achieving in 16 mm what many digital artists take for granted. Her *Cinderella* (1986) does not simply recast the fairy tale in feminist terms but with vintage computer animation and musical charm that give it a vibrant wit.



Janie Geiser, *Valeria Street*, 2018, montage, mixed media, color, sound, 11 minutes.

James Edmonds's *Return* is a bracing demonstration of the continued power of montage and of 16 mm, bringing widely disparate spaces together in a manner so personal and visually arresting that it recalls the work of Stan Brakhage—all in six minutes. With characteristic subtlety, Janie Geiser's *Valeria Street* mixes personal and political, alternating photos of charts and building plans with those of male decision-makers, all of it leading to an eerie, photographically negative tracking shot along a barbed-wire fence bordering a power plant that remains unidentified. Equally singular, Sylvia Schedelbauer's *Wishing Well* evokes the awesome power of the natural world while seeming, through her lyrical superimpositions, to hold it in the palm of her hand. Through a series of graceful pans across an apartment in a German city, Helena Wittmann evokes the everyday lives of its occupants in *Ada Kaleh*. In Laura Huertas Millán's *The Labyrinth*, a wanderer's walk through a Colombian jungle is crosscut with shots and dialogue from the American TV series *Dynasty*. He arrives at the desolate ruins of an extravagant mansion, modeled after the one in the series, built decades earlier by Evaristo Porras, who ran the Amazon drug cartel across South America and entertained other drug lords, the military, and the police.

Few filmmakers so effectively evince social and political import with a deceptive paucity of means as Katherin McInnis. In *Eye of a Needle*, a black orb in the center of the frame pulses with strobic insistency against fleeting black-and-white images of the poor, the homeless, children, struggling farmers, fruit pickers, and chain gangs. The Depression-era footage, courtesy of the Farm Security Administration of the US federal government, is reminiscent of those in James Agee and Walker Evans's 1941 book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In the spirit of that work, the rhythmic assault of McInnis's black hole is as unignorable and relentless as the pointing finger of a tormented conscience.



Tsai Ming-liang, *Your Face*, 2018, color, sound, 76 minutes.

I couldn't imagine a better pairing of feature and short than Tsai Ming-liang's *Your Face*, preceded by Mariana Caló and Francisco Queimadela's haunting and sobering *Luminous Shadow*. As its final acknowledgments attest, the latter owes as much to ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch as it does to visionary Jose Luis Borges. Without commentary or context, photos of prehistoric objects, sculptures, and masks are followed by surviving specimens (all found in the Jose de Guimaraes International Arts Center in Portugal). Before it is confirmed by a lecture later on, one of the film's points is made when a visitor stares into a mask or replica of a prehistoric countenance behind glass, his reflection aligned with its ghostly contours. While suggesting kinship with ancient ancestors, it also prefigures the mirrored image of an equally distant future. A professorial voice-over assures us that only humans have this capacity to reflect back and see configurations of the human everywhere—in the very ground and stones of the ancient world. An indication of the film's power to tap into our most unsettling dreams of where we came from and where we are going is the Adam and Eve story recounted at the end, which is oddly sweet and reassuring.

Of a genre central to the history of painting, Charles Baudelaire once said, “A portrait! What could be more simple and more complex, and more profound.” It applies no less to Tsai Ming-liang’s *Your Face*, perhaps the loveliest, most self-effacing work of this year’s programs. With patience and an unassuming presence as unflinching as the camera itself, Ming-liang offers a series of portraits of mostly elderly individuals with the uncommon aim of not anticipating or eliciting any response from his subjects. Neither confrontational nor in a Warholian vein, the filmmaker gazes, as do we, on face after face, each finding its niche within the whole. If one figure says and does nothing, the next cannot tell us enough. It’s a mark of the film’s assured aesthetic that it leaves us wondering which has conveyed the most. While recalling her business career, a woman is overcome with remorse for having let her parents down. One old man, eyes closed, plays the harmonica. Another remains stoically mute, with a look that implies there is nothing he deems worth saying. Perhaps that sentiment is what lies behind the six-minute take at the end: a huge, empty entrance hall in a building, as daylight fades to darkness, unintelligible sounds heard in the distance. In the wake of what has preceded, the absence of the human could not be more palpable.

— Tony Pipolo

*The Projections series opens October 4 as part of the 56th New York Film Festival and runs through October 7.*

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