



AT THE EDGES OF THIS YEAR'S SUNDANCE FESTIVAL, VR WAS THE BIGGEST BUZZWORD

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One in a Million

The Poetess
Directors Stefanie Brockhaus, Andreas Wolff
Germany, Saudi Arabia

The Poetess follows the lone female contestant on the most popular talent show in the Middle East and the courage she displays through her poetry against gender segregation.

photograph in *The New York Times*.

Restricted Access. Access was always going to be a problem for the directors due to the Saudis' strict laws, but they manage admirably with what they have. Much of *The Poetess* is shot in Riyadh, where aerial shots offer impressive sweeps of its cityscape: sand-hued buildings and unusual, high-tech skyscrapers. Hilal lives there, though we see little of the mother-of-four's daily life other than a covertly filmed clothes shopping trip, and preparations for a wedding in which the camera focuses mainly on the carpet to avoid showing faces.

The film opens with news reports from foreign networks such as ABC about Hilal's talent show appearances and from then on doesn't manage to wholly transcend reliance on this kind of second-hand material. Some reports, however, are very effective in contextualising the shift within Saudi Arabia to heavier religious restrictions on citizen behaviour, particularly archival footage of the Grand Mosque seizure in Mecca by extremists led by Juhayman al-Otaybi in 1979, which prompted the surrender of much of the power over society to Wahhabist clerics in a bid by the monarchy to stave off its overthrow.

"Where The Poetess really succeeds is in revealing a complexity of thought across the Middle East, and even within Saudi Arabia."

Fearlessness. While a casually observational approach is off-limits, candid talking-head interviews with Hilal do provide valuable insight into her ambitions and the family dynamic from within which these are realised. She talks of her nostalgia for the tribal life of the past, tougher but with greater freedom outside the sway of oil-moneyed materialism and hard-line clerics, as black-and-white photographs show her antecedents in the desert. Bedouin relatives introduced her to the Nabati poetry tradition. Her acqui-

GENDER SEGREGATION
BY CARMEN GRAY

Million's Poet is a talent show with high television ratings across the Middle East. It would have stayed largely unknown in the West were it not for Hissa Hilal. In 2010 she made global news as the first female to reach the finals of the Emirati contest, with poems that dared to criticise the fatwas issued by clerics of her ultra-conservative state Saudi Arabia. The story had all the ingredients to hook western media: a suspenseful, relatable spectacle they could dub an Arab version of Pop Idol (albeit with the more sober form of expression of traditional poetry), complete with a plucky heroine challenging Saudi gender restrictions. All this while dressed in a burqa, the body and face-covering garment that has become a symbol of a culture war about identity, expression and oppression across the world. The appeal of the anomalous mix was not lost on German directors Stefanie Brockhaus and Andreas Wolff, who made their latest documentary *The Poetess* about Hilal after seeing her

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A Peculiar Exploration of Nature

Becoming Animal
Directors Peter Mettler and Emma Davie
Switzerland / UK.

A magnificent documentary about the natural origins of what we consider to be man-made and the connection between man and nature.

NATURE AND HUMAN
BY ELLEN LANDE

The opening scene of *Becoming Animal* is a tapestry in motion. A elk sinks to its shoulders in a landscape of splendid autumn colors. The animal slowly turns its head to reveal its majestic antlers. Shortly

afterwards, the elk rises to full stature, showing its impressive figure. As if the sight of one alone might not be wonderful enough, it wanders over to another equally impressive elk. These full-size, satisfyingly harmonious creatures evoke a magically sense of serenity. Another similarly atmospheric scene follows shortly – a memory of warm summer nights in forests full of life and sounds that awaken the senses as much as they subdue the conscious mind.

Perception. We are in the Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming. The sound of the huge animals' mating rituals gradually develop from high pitched overtones sliding through the night, descending into deep grunts. The grainy recordings and dense shadows create a greater sense of presence. The trio behind the film – filmmakers Peter Mettler and Emma Davie, as well as the phi-

losopher and writer David Abram – are out together recording under the full moon. The grunting sounds

"The timely question of human obsession with documenting is being discussed."

David presents his thoughts whilst caressing a beautiful birch trunk. He reflects upon the tactile surface, the chilliness and the smoothness he experiences. The meeting is mutual; the tree senses the chemical imprint from his hand on its bark. The trees move with light and play an active part in the meeting, and, in this way the trees also seem to perceive the humans. One of the directors, Emma, explains that the film not only takes us on a journey of perception, it also has a clear premise: the docu-

mentary sets out **CPH:DOX** to merge David's philosophy and Peter's visionary cinematography.

Iconic scenes. Peter Mettler is known for his intuitive, essayistic documentaries. Emma Davie is mainly known for the gripping movie *I am Breathing*, about a young dying man. Both filmmakers have the unique ability to elevate ideas, objects or concepts others may consider mundane into entities sacred and meaningful far beyond their physical presence. Together they create iconic scenes. The camera angle and composition, movement and meaning symbiotically create something so memorable that later scenes convey callbacks that are easy to link to earlier moments.

Take the shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho* – the very reminder of it causes you to imagine the knife slowly entering the shot, slicing

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What He Shows and What He Ignores

20TH CIRCUIT SUSPECTS
Director Hesam Eslami
Iran

Six years in the life of an adolescent crime gang that breaks into cars in the streets of Tehran.

TEHRAN

BY BERNARD DICHEK

A film in which we see real crimes committed without the intervention of the police might in itself be enough of a reason to catch our interest, but *20th Circuit Suspects* has several other attention-grabbers: one of the crime victims is the filmmaker Hesam Eslami himself; the filmmaker becomes personally involved in the lives of the criminals; and the illicit events take place in Iran, a country not known for allowing the outside world to observe the underside of its society.

The main protagonist of the film is Eshan, the leader of a gang of young thieves, whose relationship with Eslami begins after the filmmaker catches him breaking into his car. Eslami follows Eshan and his gang over the course of 6 years,

during which time Eshan has several run-ins with the police, serves jail time and, with fatherly help from a devoted NGO youth worker – and encouragement from Eslami – eventually is rehabilitated, marries and starts a family. Along the way Eslami and Eshan also become close friends.

Each part of this film journey raises thought-provoking issues, both through what the filmmaker shows and what he ignores.

The most controversial question is the extent to which filmmakers can remain neutral bystanders without an obligation to intervene in the events happening around them. In the film, Eslami fails to report to the police the crimes he is witnessing – mainly the gang breaking into cars in order to steal radios and car speakers, and the wanton vandalism of billboards and other property. Did Eslami act in an ethical way?

This is a familiar debating point often raised when journalists and filmmakers return from a battlefield or other violent venue with footage of the wounded and dying. In some cases, professional dedication is valued, as for example when Associated Press photographer Burhan Ozbilici kept on taking pictures while the Russian ambassador to Turkey was assassinated in an Ankara art gallery in 2016. Even



though Ozbilici arguably could have immediately stopped working and either run to assist the victim or summoned the police, he kept on taking pictures. Yet in this case the result was widespread recognition for his perseverance, with one of his photos actually winning him the Photo of the Year prize in the 2017 World Press Photo contest.

Eslami, in a press interview, when asked about his non-intervention in the crimes of the gang, argues that he didn't think that he could have influenced the gang's delinquent behavior at that stage and implies that he was not there to do the job of the police. It is certainly to Eslami's credit that the relationship he builds with the gang has a positive effect, but one wonders what would

have happened if things would have turned out differently and Eshan wasn't able to turn his life around. Not only would Eslami not have been able to create a worthwhile film, but his inaction would have amounted to mere complicity.

Another intriguing aspect of the film, is the inside look it provides of a nation that is largely cut off from much of the rest of the world. That isolation was underscored when filmmaker Eslami, in remarks read to the audience at the international premiere of *20th Circuit Suspects* at the Hot Docs Festival in Toronto in April, pointed out that he was denied a visa to attend the festival. Yet paradoxically, one of the most

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Free market?

Invisible Hands
Director Shraysi Tandon
USA, China, Ghana, Hong Kong

Invisible Hands is committed to the ideology of the free market, but can this myth ever become reality?

CHILD LABOUR

BY TINA POGLAJEN



Invisible Hands is an investigative documentary on the global pervasiveness of child labour, drawing an uncomfortable picture of the global economy's role in the endless cycle of poverty of third-world countries. It is an agitating film as it illustrates the lived realities of exploited individuals subjected to the demands of the global economy.

With its portrayal of responsible companies and their subcontractors, as well as a "call-to-action" in terms of ethical consumerism, *Invisible Hands* is clearly intended as a piece of activist cinema. To get its message across it delivers shocking footage of confronting interviews with PR representatives of responsible companies and public officials – sometimes using a hidden camera. It also features well-placed emotional testimonies of young people that have been or are child workers themselves, accompanied by suitable music that functions as a propaganda piece for populist activism.

The documentary might make sense as a radical activist documentary or as political cinema that diverges in form as well as contents, but the film was never really accessible to a wider audience. As a consequence, it was not really effective in terms of the masses. Nonetheless, the most burning issue with *Invisible Hand* is that it is not radical enough in its search for solutions either.

The film stresses that corporations can make decisions "much more quickly and more effectively" than governments can. It thus argues that the responsibility in terms of terminating child labour should be relying on the corporations. We, as consumers, can influence the process by "voting with our wallets", and in theory hurt the profits of the offending companies. Unfortunately, this view is as naive as it is short-sighted. Aside from the fact that "voting with our wallets" insinuates that the strongest vote is the one with the biggest wallet, hurting the business of individual companies is no more than a virtual victory – a "feel-good cosmetic repair" for something that essentially stays the same. Due to the fact that the problem of exploitation is inherently interwoven into the workings of capitalism itself, the system cannot exist without it.

This is also why modern slav-

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IN THIS ISSUE: Observations and reviews from Sundance, Gothenburg Rotterdam and other docs. See articles on docs from five coming festivals: One World (Prague), Thessaloniki international film festival, CPH:DOX (copenhagen), Visions du Reel (Nyon) and Krakow Film Festival. Also:

- Washington post and the press on the coming community as philosopher Giorgio Agamben thinks it
- "Fake News", as the danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard thought about the press
- an ecological wine maker about Italy and thoughts about life

Reviews about books:

- *Solitude: In Pursuit of a Singular Life in a Crowded World*

- *The art of invisibility*
- *Werner Herzog: Ecstatic Truths and Other Useless Conquests*
- *Narcocapitalism: Life in the Age of Anaesthesia*
- *Hot, Hungry Planet. The Fight to Stop a Global Food Crisis in the Face of Climate Change*
- *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*
- *Mass Starvation. The History and Future of Famine*
- *Weapons of Math Destruction*
- *Talking to My Daughter About the Economy: A Brief History of Capitalism*
- *Futurability. The Age of Im-potence and the Horizon of Possibility*
- *Saviano: Eklär mir Italien*
- *Warlord Democrats in Africa*

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