



FIDMarseille – Passing Impressions

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For more than thirty years, the FIDMarseille festival came as an impulse, and then a confirmation of the extraordinary programming and curatorship that is taking place around the few cinemas in this wonderful Mediterranean city (Videodrome 2, La Baleine, Le Polygone étoilé, with the last one not included from the festival's circuit). In the last years, the festival has shown all sorts of radical works, willing to set the tone for some of the most exciting and daring things that one can see nowadays on the big screen so that the idea of participating in the event – after a long period of pandemic blankness – imposed itself as the ideal chance to reset the cinephile clock at the precise hour. My conclusions, after several full days spent in Marseille, are mixed: there is a certain desire for cinema, however (nuance!) there is a

lesser *need* to which it adequately responds, which lead me, more than once, to this feeling of inflation regarding contemporary young film productions.

Many eccentric films arrive to us nowadays from all corners of the world, and it wouldn't be a problem that most are incapable of overcoming their status as confidential works, meant solely for their festival screenings and then, the cupboard – in the end, distribution is that which fixes the flux of things that we see (and do not see) onscreen. It's clear that nowadays, all of this is realized following the interests of the higher-ups (“exploiting” screens in the full sense of the term) and to the detriment of the spectator, all the poorer in terms of options and deprived of experiences. In other words, what is radical in one era might well not be so in another, more open-hearted one, and the history of art is beginning to be written – as it maybe should – from the perspective of the ignored, the unknown, the ones who are secretive. This is the spirit of FIDMarseille: an act of rebellion that, for a couple of days, has the atmosphere of normality, with full screenings of films that pierce through conventions: all sorts of oddities, that are finally bestowed with town privileges. It's however a shame that this year the verve of the productions (many and fizzy) was not always accompanied by a verve of ideas set into circulation, instead, pedaling out of inertia, in an unquestioned enthusiasm for quantity. It might not hurt if – to respect the ideal of this new, horizontal leadership of the festivals – all of us who participate in this fragile industry, from programmers to spectators, would ask ourselves a simple question: actually, why are we persevering in doing this?

This brief article cannot offer any answers. It's content with simply observing a general tendency, which was confirmed at this year's FID, that these increasingly brawny selections (more and more films, retrospectives that are increasingly appetizing) are obligated to fight for the same, increasingly small mass of spectators. It's becoming clear that the economic model upon which the festival ecosystem was built – in and of itself a trend, even if only a minority one – is now in a crisis, assaulted both by the aplomb of Video-on-Demand, but also by the lassitude of those who no longer accepted the invitation, after the pandemic waves swept by. But, in the long term, this model couldn't have worked anyway: it only came to mask the desperation of the industry's workers in the face of empty cinemas. That's why a film by João Pedro Rodrigues could run in Marseille with a full house, but not even a filmmaker of the Portuguese director's level – far from being some unknown author – is not shielded by this normalization of cinema taste, this leveling coming in from the bottom up, which pretends to speak in the name of “common spectators”.

The paradox is that a niche festival has an increasingly difficult mission nowadays – and that, lacking truly relevant proposals, that would rightfully move the center of attention away from the hegemony of blockbuster films –, it ends up doing more harm than good. In 2022, I discovered a FID that was in the midst of transforming. Starting with its very poster, with “D”

for “documentaire” pierced and slowly, but surely transformed into a “C” for “cinema”, hinting at an important mutation towards hybrid works (“docufiction”, as an unpleasant label calls it), or even downright fiction (the latest film by the incorruptible Lav Diaz, selected in the international competition). It means that documentary is no longer an obligatory passageway for the festival, and given that it still was omnipresent in most sections, that might be, of course, because this genre manages to concentrate some of the most fertile energies nowadays, the kinds that dispense themselves from the weighty economic systems that lie in the proximity of contemporaneous aims. FID featured historical documentaries (the admirable, but actually dusty *Signal GPS perdu*, by Pierre Volland), playful documentaries (the tepid *On a eu la journée bonsoir*, winner of the French Competition, by Narimane Mari), topical documentaries (the awful *Dispatch from Przemysl*, on the Ukrainian crisis, by Marine Hugonnier) and so on.



FIDMarseille In this context, the decision by the international competition’s jury to award (twice, both as best film and as the winner of post-production services) a classical gesture, surprising exactly because it’s outdated, through its impulse of straying away from all the passing –isms of the day, must be duly congratulated. Daniel Eisenberg (the author of some

remarkable historical meditations based on audiovisual archives, such as *Persistence*, an excellent 1997 documentary on the ages of Berlin) came to FID with a 200-minute-long film which he shot in a German prosthetics factory, in a French mittens workshop and a jeans factory in Turkey. *The Unstable Object II* is the follow-up to a similar film that Eisenberg presented at FID in 2011 and that, just like its predecessor, comes from an apparently outmoded documentary tradition with pedagogical aims: it's not a *How It's Made* episode in which the voice-over quickly passes us through a manufacturing process that is compressed in a few minutes, which mystifies everything in the name of a fascination towards engineering, but rather, a patient gaze that reveals the working conditions of the present, with the individual caught in their midst. Human-object, creativity-work on the conveyor belt, handicraft-fabricated, women-men plus some other coupled notions gain a remarkable sensorial intensity in Eisenberg's simple method, which talks about the biggest hidden topic of our days: work.

With its eloquent title, *The Unstable Object II* is constructed on two levels: a worrisome report on the materiality of the object and an ode sung to the person who, with their bare hands, still forges objects. The factory is our society's blind spot, the place where we allow ourselves to function and the place from which we turn our gaze, because we know that this way of functioning is fundamentally wrong. Eisenberg installs a camera there: a non-militant camera, impressive to the degree to which it knows how to avoid needless rabble, but how to observe, modestly so. The filmmaker needed entire years to achieve the stability of his device, which allows him to blend Discovery Channel, Karl Marx, old-school humanism, and fake genre conventionality into a sort of nodal point, a documentary *Aleph* that allows us to see the entire world looking at a work front in an isolated provincial factory. Far from glittery gimmicks that would steal our eyes, *The Unstable Object II* is like a mineral bursting with substance: a solid gesture that has more than enough to say about the value of modern handicraft (even in a cinematic sense). Precisely because it loses and constantly replaces itself with vain pretensions, Eisenberg's film gains a sort of urgency that is both touching and inspiring.