

MOVIES | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

One of the New York Film Festival's Best Movies Isn't at the Main Event

By MANOHLA DARGIS OCT. 6, 2016

In my dream New York Film Festival, some of the wonderments in Projections — the section dedicated to avant-garde and experimental material — would be programmed alongside the titles in the main slate. It's laudable that the festival continues to show noncommercial fare like you find in Projections (starting Friday), yet segregating these titles from the main event continues to marginalize works that merit a larger audience. And, as it happens, one of the best films in this year's festival is in Projections: Robert Beavers's "From the Notebook of ...," a 48-minute masterpiece.

Elegant, beautiful, complex and austere, "From the Notebook of ..." (Program 10) is a film about creation, about the transformation of life into art and the loveliness of Florentine sunlight flooding through a window. The whole thing functions somewhat like a rebus, in that you need to fit together its pieces — precisely framed, warmly illuminated images of birds, windows, rooftops, water, mattes, a writing desk, some street scenes — to make sense of the larger, layered meanings. This involves a little work, but the film's sheer loveliness and its ideas are so inviting and expansive that the experience is intensely pleasurable. Writing is thinking; so is filmmaking and film watching.

Mr. Beavers finished "From the Notebook of ..." in 1971 in Italy (re-editing it in 1998), having moved from the United States to Europe in the 1960s to be with his

partner, the influential American avant-garde filmmaker Gregory Markopoulos. Inspired by the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci and an essay that the poet Paul Valéry had written about Leonardo, Mr. Beavers uses his own “Notebook” as a means to reflect on his cinematic process. It’s a reflection that he represents thematically with light, shadow, form and the cinematic machinery, with some of the most striking moments taking place at a desk under a large window overlooking tiled rooftops and the bright blue sky.

This modest setting becomes a platform for a series of self-reflexive ideas that starts with a simple window that’s (not so simply) framing the world, touches on Renaissance perspective and eventually arrives at the moving-picture camera. Throughout, Mr. Beavers folds in shots of handwritten texts that suggest poems, aperçus and problem solving: “The shutter in the camera is like the wings of an insect, both create movement,” one reads in part. Movement also creates deep feeling, as in the sublime image of Mr. Beavers — standing in front of a mirror, his face obscured by a camera — suddenly reaching out for the seated Mr. Markopoulos, and turning movement into love.

“From the Notebook of ...” is being presented with Luke Fowler’s “For Christian,” a delicate seven-minute visit with the composer Christian Wolff that in its very fragmentation — and hand-held, grazing shots of curious sheep, green meadows, household clutter and Mr. Wolf’s gesturing hands — seems to acknowledge the limits of portraiture.

Most of the other 10 programs consist of shorts that have been gathered under gnomic and generic headings like “Beyond Landscape,” which draws together titles that deal with, yes, landscape. Several programs are dedicated to features, notably Eduardo Williams’s “The Human Surge” (Program 11), a deceptively simple documentary that follows different people from different countries into the ebb, the flow and the muck of life, a cine-journey that has stirred up excitement on the festival circuit.

In the digital short “Indefinite Pitch” (Program 5), James N. Kienitz Wilkins uses a succession of black-and-white still images of a Northeastern river — framed by a bleakly industrial landscape and littered with refuse — for a sneakily thoughtful, sometimes funny riff on art and work that flows, drifts, dribbles and sometimes rages much like its inert river. The same program features Ismaïl Bahri’s “Foyer,” an ingenious, mesmerizing digital work shot in Tunisia in which a simple piece of paper fluttering in front of the camera becomes a screen onto which assorted passers-by project their thoughts, including those of some police who suspiciously wonder what Mr. Bahri is up to.

One of the highlights of the 2015 festival was the dual retrospective of the films of Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler, who have been partners in life and art since the 1960s. Program 8 includes three of their new and exquisite films. Mr. Dorsky’s elegiac “Autumn” and the equally meditative, somewhat shorter “The Dreamer” play with dualism — figuration and abstraction, nature and culture, the hidden and the revealed — creating an effect on this viewer that might be termed To the Wonder. Mr. Hiler’s misleadingly titled “Bagatelle II,” draws on ravishing moments in time (dancing lights, scudding clouds, a bathing woman) that build into what seems like a self-portrait of the artist.

I’ve seen Deborah Stratman’s “The Illinois Parables” only once (Program 3), but I’m eager to see it again. A dense weave of found and original sights and sounds, this hourlong film is at once an experimental documentary, a work of historical excavation and an insistently moral ideological critique. It’s also a lament, one that uses Illinois to sift through history in 11 sections, including the Trail of Tears and the forced removal of the Cherokee Nation. As she moves across both time and place, locating ghosts and tapping voices as different as those of Emerson and the Black Panther Fred Hampton, Ms. Stratman finds a country that is as haunted and haunting as her film.

The Projections section of the New York Film Festival runs through Sunday; filmlinc.org.

A version of this article appears in print on October 7, 2016, on page C11 of the New York edition with the headline: Avant-Garde Films Worth Seeing.
