In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation. (Guy Debord: *The Society of the Spectacle*, §1)

Following Debord’s famous analysis, the conference “Spectacular Now: The Politics of the Contemporary Spectacle” organised by TU Dortmund University’s Institute of English and American Studies took place in November 2016. The title already suggests the controversial character of this conference and its contributions. The media-specific aspects of spectacles were explained with a focus on contemporary societal, cultural, political, economic and technological phenomena. Specifically aimed at young scholars, the conference explored the meaning-making processes that lie underneath media events and mass spectacles. Though spectacles have existed since ancient times (a reflection on Foucaultian thinking would be appropriate here), modern consumer society and the (hyper-)mediatisation of the world have drastically transformed them. Political debates, protest movements and social unrest are mediated and marketed to the same
extent as entertainment shows and reality TV. Can depoliticisation therefore be seen as the
spectacle’s own politics? How does an alienated, atomised and passive spectator fit into new
forms of participatory and (anti-)social media? Furthermore, did something actually happen if
one has not posted about it and earned the new
currencies of our time – clicks and likes? If all
of life presents itself spectacularly, what identity
can exist without a spectacular quality? Scholars
were invited to connect their studies to
contemporary representations, depictions and
stagings of spectacles and their inherent politics,
to investigate our current age and time, and to
explore new ways of presenting their findings,
indeed spectacularly.

First Day

After a welcome address by the organisers and
Prof. Dr. Gerold Sedlmayr, Chair of British
Cultural Studies and Dean of the Faculty of
Culture Studies, outlining the topics of the
conference, the first panel “(De)Constructing the
Spectacular, Blurring Boundaries” took off with
a spectacular presentation as indicated above.

Sarah E. Beyvers and Florian Zitzelsberger
(University of Passau) made a media spectacle
out of their talk “‘A Thing Is a Thing and Not
What You Say of That Thing’ – or Is It?
Alienation Effects and the Conflation of Theatre
and Film as Meta-Spectacle in Quentin
Tarantino’s The Hateful Eight (2015) and
Alejandro G. Iñárritu’s Birdman or The
Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance (2014)”.

They replaced parts of their live talk with recorded
versions of this same presentation projected onto
the screen. The speakers analysed how both
films make use of theatrical means to add
performative and live-event characteristics,
simultaneously enhancing and abandoning their
illusionistic character. The merging of cinematic
and theatrical forms of framing of information,
according to Beyvers and Zitzelsberger,
functions as alienation effects and opens up a
meta-discourse on the films’ own constructed
spectacularity.

UnReal (2015–), which airs on Lifetime
Television, was the topic of Missy Molloy’s
(Santa Fe College) follow-up presentation. The
series gained the channel, formerly associated with low-quality content targeted at a female audience, critical acclaim by satirically depicting the production of a reality TV show similar to *The Bachelor* (2002–). According to Molloy, *UnReal* skilfully shows and deconstructs the complexity of such productions’ running themes such as surveillance, objectification and perverse spectatorship, adding another frame to the already multidimensional nature of reality TV.

The main character, Rachel, is shown using all manner of pressure to get the most spectacular pictures and audio while revealing her own mental problems and conflicts. Molloy pointed out how real social issues like race and gender are used by reality TV and *UnReal* – on a meta level – to create media spectacles.

The second and last panel of the first day was entitled “Politics and Participation” and included Florian Freitag’s (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz) “Banksy’s Dismaland and the Politics of Theming”, and Philip Jacobi (University of Passau) presenting “‘In the End, It Was All About You’: True Crime and Performatist Spectacles”. Freitag, a scholar of theme park studies, examined these year-round spectacles. In their theming – according to Freitag – theme parks traditionally avoid controversial issues while pursuing a ‘politics of inclusion/exclusion’. In 2015, the British street artist Banksy turned this selectivity upside-down with his ‘Bemusement Park’, Dismaland, in Weston-super-Mare (UK). Freitag argued that the spectacular Dismaland reverses common tropes by including topics like the pollution of the ocean, government surveillance and the recent refugee crisis, thus expanding the concept of the theme park. By broaching such issues, the park is as relevant as it is popular with audiences. The excessive use of Disney(land) imagery in Dismaland was identified by Freitag as a critique of a recent development named ‘autotheming’ – a theme park in/of a theme park, or a spectacle about spectacle.

Jacobi continued by applying theories of the spectacular to the true crime genre. Focussing on *Serial* (2014–16), a podcast produced by Sarah Koenig for WBEZ Chicago, whose first season
documented and recounted a 1999 murder investigation, Jacobi noted that it had revived not only podcasts but the true crime genre itself. Touching upon what the producer herself called ‘the big things’, topics like love and justice, *Serial* and similar texts derive their addictive power from the desire for sensationalism of the consumer audience. Furthermore, the paper suggested that true crime blurs the boundaries of truth and even adds a participatory aspect, allowing audiences to submit their own investigations and thoughts. The last feature, though, opens up ethical dimensions to consider around this and indeed all kinds of the spectacular.

**Second Day**

Johnny Walker of Northumbria University opened this day with his keynote “The Macabre Video Underground: Historicising the Subcultural Value of Real Death Imagery”, exploring the correlations between underground, explicitly gory, direct-to-video horror movies and their fan cultures in the 1990s. Walker discussed the myth of the snuff movie – feature films including sequences of allegedly real live death – and how sensational media reports of such films helped draw attention to them. Shockumentaries like *Faces of Death* (John Alan Schwartz, 1978) gain their spectacular value from the fascination with arbitrary death scenes, body modifications and atrocities, challenging notions of good taste. These amateurish productions, according to Walker, owe much to the boom in home videos during their time, while their apparent real live death images consciously reject mainstream cinema, and especially mainstream horror, modes of representation. The black market-like transnational distribution and circulation of these extremely violent movies led to their rarity status within this subcultural sphere.

Walker further stated that the *Traces of Death* series (1993–2000) and its producer, Dead Alive Productions, left a significant mark on this niche market and subcultural fan base by not only adapting these techniques, but also extending beyond them into the arena of extreme metal music. So-called ‘shock sites’, websites that
specialise in the remediation of filmed sequences of death, have gradually been influenced by these earlier developments. Walker concluded his presentation by noting how images like those of the Traces of Death films might have lost their original spectacular potential, having achieved iconic cult status.

Panel 3, “Film and Virtuality”, was opened by Svenja Hohenstein (Eberhard Karls University Tübingen) and her paper “‘It’s a Television Show’: Spectacle, The Hunger Games and Political Activism”. According to Hohenstein, Suzanne Collins’s trilogy The Hunger Games was ideal for detecting the characteristics of spectacle, as the novels on which they are based themselves criticise spectacles in their political context. In The Hunger Games, an annual reality TV-inspired deathly spectacle takes place, functioning as state propaganda, distracting people from political and social issues and thus securing the government’s power. Conversely, the rebellious characters use staging and broadcasting to mobilise oppressed people and encourage them to rise up against ‘The Capitol’. Hohenstein further observed that similar techniques can be found transferred to the ‘real’ world. Although the audience of The Hunger Games franchise could be criticised for adopting an inhuman, voyeuristic attitude similar to the audience inside the fiction, similar spectacles are regularly used for political activism and protest, like the Black Lives Matter movement. The adaptation of themes and symbols from this fiction (especially in the context of social media) shows, according to Hohenstein, how spectacular attributes can be used for campaigns for social change.

The third panel also comprised Susanne Schmid’s (Freie Universität Berlin) engagement with “The Return of the Grand Hotel”. Countering the the worldwide trend for glass and steel tower hotels, a fascination with the turn of the century 1900s Grand Hotel has emerged, noticeable in both film (e.g. Skyfall [Sam Mendes, 2012] or The Grand Budapest Hotel [Wes Anderson, 2014]) and literature. Schmid applied Debord’s theory of the spectacle as materialised worldview to the cosmos of
(Grand) hotels and contemplated the notion of nostalgia frequently evoked by such settings.

The second keynote, by Neyir Zerey (SPoD Social Policies Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Studies Association), revealed astonishing empirical data about LGBTI+ rights in Turkey, stressing the interdisciplinary nature of this conference by combining sociological methodology and cultural studies theories of the spectacular. LGBTI+ rights in Turkey being a very contradictory and controversial matter, Zerey focused on Istanbul Pride Marches and how these epitomes of visibility and performativity have the potential to transform the city into a spectacular space. This nowadays highly carnivalesque event was met with bans and brutality in 2014 and 2015, forcing the organisers to rethink their concepts. This led to 2016’s Pride being a specifically different one, focussing on performance arts protests and creative initiatives rather than on ‘excessive’ parades. A rainbow drawn onto a busy street was turned into a spectacle by police forces cordoning off this simple and peaceful scene.

According to Zerey, the protesters thereby turned around positions of power by using the authorities themselves. The speaker concluded by pointing out how this form of spectacular protest was key to this year’s events and has a higher potential for influencing acceptance of LGBTI+ in Turkish society than the common carnivalesque parades showcasing what is perceived as ‘perverse’ behaviour.

Taking on a similar topic, the fourth panel was dedicated to dimensions of gender. Melanie Stengele (University of Konstanz) began with a paper titled “‘J. F. K. Wanted to Send a Man to the Moon. Obama Wants to Send a Man to the Women’s Rest Room’: Transgender Rights and the Spectacle of the Public Rest Room”. Stengele critically examined what spectacle resulted after North Carolina passed House Bill 2 in spring 2016, prohibiting cities from passing anti-discrimination ordinances intended to protect LGBTI+ people and thereby forcing transgender people to use the public restroom corresponding with the gender indicated on their birth certificate. The media’s role in framing this political spectacle is essential, as major
companies threatened to withdraw from North Carolina following the international attention that it triggered. It also imposed a discourse on gender roles and state authority onto American society, while there have been reports on increased violence against the transgender community. Almost ironically, this spectacular discourse takes place around one of the most private of public spaces. Analysing the spectacular qualities of this incident, Stengele in her conclusion problematised the actual implementations of House Bill 2.

A 2015 BBC documentary by British filmmaker Leslee Udwin and the discourses surrounding it were central to the last talk, Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt’s (TU Dortmund University) “Creating Spectacle out of Pain: India’s Daughter (2015)”. This film recounts the deadly gang rape of a 23-year-old Indian woman in 2012 that led to a media spectacle inside India itself which made the government’s policy towards violence against women once again a subject of debate. The documentary, though, caused even more attention. It was banned in India, while parts of it (for example, an interview with one of the convicted rapists) went viral on social media, especially YouTube. Thus the influence on spectacle-making of social media was essential to this paper. Even though the film helped to raise awareness of the issue around violence against women, Laemmerhirt argued that India’s Daughter can rightfully be criticised for re-establishing a racially connoted colonial discourse, depicting a British perspective displaying hegemonic tendencies even in its very title.

The variety of topics, issues and themes touched upon by this conference testifies to the significant extent to which the spectacle reaches into our daily (mediated and thus real?) lives. It also reminds us of how diverse the scholarly enterprise on this topic has to be in order to grasp all of its dimensions.
Fantasia Turns Twenty: The Return of the Retro Aesthetic

Review by Donato Totaro

The 2016 edition of Fantasia marked its twentieth anniversary as a leading light in the world of genre cinema. Since its inception in 1996 Fantasia has made its mark not only with discoveries (J-Horror, Takashi Miike, Sion Sono, internet horror, to name a few) but timely retrospectives, audience pleasers, formally complex films that challenge genre and genre fans, and, since 2012, the Frontières International Co-Production Market, a film market aimed at genre cinema. Lasting around three weeks, Fantasia is an endurance test even for the film-festival junkie, but the vibrancy of the host city, Montreal, makes it a challenge with ample filmic and social rewards. Perhaps what sets Fantasia apart from other well-heeled festivals is the rippling enthusiasm that extends from the programmers to the audience members. At times the buzz in the 700-seat Hall Building theatre prior to the lights going down feels like a rock concert. Everyone from the volunteers to the staff and programmers make each guest feel respected and cared for – and in some cases, loved. There is also a precious egalitarianism in the rank and file of Fantasia, with every film, from the unfancied short to the first-time feature to the feted grand-gala feature, promoted for maximum exposure. The short film and the documentary are two genres that are awarded particularly tender care. Short films are often shown before appropriate features and given their due in countless short-film programmes, including the flagship “Small Gauge Trauma” programme, Mitch Davis’s baby, which is always one of the festival’s most anticipated film blocks. This year, long-time programmer Davis added – after much consternation and Facebook consultation – a short block aimed at
promoting female directors: “Born of Woman”. There were countless other short-film blocks, including “Fragments of Asia”, which included a surprise screening of a Miike short, “Celluloid Experiments”, “My First Fantasia” (free animation blocks for kids), “International Science Fiction Short Film Showcase”, Marc Lamothe’s specially curated “DJ XL5’s Zappin’ Party” (one of the many Fantasia elements unique to Quebec), and many programmes devoted to local filmmakers. Let’s just say that short films are not overlooked at Fantasia.

To celebrate their twentieth edition, the organisers had a few special events – such as an exhibit of the unmistakable art that has graced T-shirts and posters for twenty years – but kept the focus on the films and the guests. Two of the marquee guest names reflect the festival’s past and present: Takashi Miike (the past) and Guillermo Del Toro (the present). Both were honoured with prizes, Del Toro the Cheval Noir Award and Miike the Lifetime Achievement Award. Miike and Fantasia go back a long way, as he had his North American premiere at Fantasia in 1997 with *Fudoh: The Next Generation* (*Gokudō sengokushi: Fudō*, 1996) and has since appeared with over 30 films (shorts, features, TV programmes included). An illustrated history of Miike at Fantasia has been copiously archived by colleagues Randolph Jordan and Peter Rist for the online film journal *Offscreen.*¹ Del Toro visited Fantasia on a career high, with multiple projects brewing. Along with such excellent recent films as the über Kaiju love-in *Pacific Rim* (2013) (which has spawned a video game, naturally) and the precious neo-Gothic *Crimson Peak* (2015), he has several

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¹ Del Toro visited Fantasia on a career high, with multiple projects brewing. Along with such excellent recent films as the über Kaiju love-in *Pacific Rim* (2013) (which has spawned a video game, naturally) and the precious neo-Gothic *Crimson Peak* (2015), he has several
features in pre-production or announced, an ongoing horror/science fiction TV show, *The Strain* (2014–), and a travelling exhibit, which opened on 21 July 2016 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, “Guillermo Del Toro: At Home with Monsters”. At Fantasia proper, Del Toro introduced a documentary on a subject dear to his heart, *Creature Designers: The Frankenstein Complex* (Le complexe de Frankenstein, Gilles Penso/Alexandre Poncet, 2015), which he followed with a Master Class.

Miike was represented by two films that, while not from the director’s top-drawer, have enough visual panache and outré content to appease the faithful: *Terraformars* (2016) and *As the Gods Will* (Kamisama no iu tōri, 2014). *Terraformars* is a space opera about a twenty-sixth-century Mars ruled by genetically modified seven-foot tall anthropomorphic cockroach monsters, with a tendency to decapitate humans. That description alone was enough to have Fantasians lining up around the block! The better of the two films is *As the Gods Will*, a gory, special-effects-heavy allegory (?) that pits teenage students against sadistic god-like toys that force them into bizarre death traps. If you will, *Battle Royale* (Batoru rowaiaru, Kinji Fukasaku, 2000) meets *Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard, 2012) meets *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012) meets *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) with a hint of Sion Sono’s *Tag* (Riaru onigokko, 2015). All of the monsters are based on old traditional toys: a Daruma doll, a huge wooden cat, a set of Russian dolls and so on. It is tempting to read this in the vein of modernity-vs.-tradition satire, with Japanese tech-driven youths pitted against traditional-style monster toys.

Fantasia is always at the forefront of genre trends and cycles, including the recent love-in with genre films that feature a retro aesthetic. Two major figures in this postmodern reinvention of genre had their first major exposure at Fantasia: the Belgian *auteurs* Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani, and American all-rounder Anna Biller. The Belgians are unique in their ability to transplant their ultra-formalistic, experimental tendencies onto their geekish, cinephiliac love of 1970s Italian giallo. Though
Cattet and Forzani made their mark on the world scene with *Amer* (2009) and *The Strange Colour of Your Body’s Tears* (*L’étrange couleur des larmes de ton corps*, 2013), they cut their teeth and honed their excessive style across an impressive body of five short films between 2001 and 2006, all of which played at Fantasia, often in their presence. Anna Biller has served in multiple creative roles in all of her films, shorts and features. Her first feature, *Viva* (2007), played at Fantasia in 2007. Set in 1972, it recreates the world of the sexploitation film with wit, style and panache. Biller topped *Viva* with her next feature, which also played Fantasia this year: *The Love Witch* (2016), starring Samantha Robinson as Elaine, a young, artistically inclined woman obsessed with an idealised notion of devotional love. Elaine is looking for a strong man to return her unconditional love, but, lacking the time or patience for conventional courtship, she concocts her own love potions, with tragic results. With her straight, jet-black hair and sultry dark eyes, Robinson is channelling Euro-horror greats such as Florinda Bolkan, Edwige Fenech and Barbara Bouchet.

Although a character that also came to mind for her look and her role as a powerful sorceress was Ruth from Mario Bava’s *Kill, Baby, Kill* (*Operazione paura*, 1966), played by Fabienne Dali. *The Love Witch* was filmed on 35 mm the better to replicate the glorious Technicolor stock of the 1960s and 1970s. The sets, art design, costumes, colour palette and use of filters to soften the image combine to create a state of fever-induced dream. The performances are delivered on the cusp of camp, reeled in by the attention to aesthetic detail and the seriousness of the subtexts (female creativity, patriarchal ideals of femininity, narcissism). Biller’s greatest achievement – apart from her many technical skills, involving scoring the music, editing, producing and undertaking production design, art direction, costume design – lies in making a film that challenges viewers to decide whether Elaine’s actions and behaviour throw the feminist movement back to the dark age, or forward into a post-post-feminist age. You decide.
Another retro title that shifts across time-frames in the 1960s and 1970s with a mannered style is *The Arbalest* (Adam Pinney, 2016). Pinney’s approach is unique in that the retro aesthetic is structured as a fictional account of a real character, the inventor of the Kalt Cube, a play on Ernő Rubik, the inventor of the eponymous cube. The work is playful at every level: it is a film about an ‘invented’ inventor of puzzles embedded within a puzzle-like film. Foster Kalt (Mike Brune) is a Charles Foster Kane-like narcissist who steals a man’s idea for a toy and becomes rich, but remains unhappy because the woman he loves, Sylvia Frank (Tallie Medel), does not reciprocate his love. One of the things that makes the film so interesting is that, after a certain point, there is a strong possibility that the narrative actions are Kalt’s fantasy projections.

*She’s Allergic to Cats* (Michael Reich, 2016) is an analogue wet-dream fantasy. Reich chose to shoot his film, for the most part, to capture the look of low-resolution video art. This is partly to feed into the status of the lead character Michael Pinkney’s (played by Pinkney) as a failed video artist living in East Hollywood. However, as he explained in the Q&A, director Reich shot the film in high resolution and degraded it in post-production. While shooting in digital and then to recreate a video aesthetic in post often feels disingenuous, Reich had a valid aesthetic reason for doing this. In certain shots, at times only for
a few seconds, the film slips into high definition – like Pinkney’s first sighting of his dream girl, Cora, played by daughter of Nastassja Kinski and granddaughter of Klaus Kinski, Sonja. Pinkney works as a dog groomer by day but fantasises about producing an all-cat remake of Carrie (Brian De Palma, 1976), a plot point which made me think of Hal Roach’s early sound all-animal comedy shorts, like The Dogway Melody (Zion Myers/Jules White, 1930). This latter point may not be so off the wall if you factor in that director Reich himself worked as a dog groomer. The film is a fascinating, surreal satire on the struggles of an artist in Hollywood, a polar opposite to Nicolas Winding Refn’s glittering The Neon Demon (2016).

The retro aesthetic gets a shakedown in Pat Tremblay’s Atmo HorroX (2016), a film which will burrow itself into your head and have you asking: ‘what the hell did I just see?!’ Atmo HorroX is not your usual retro film because it is retrofitted through Tremblay’s esoteric and wide-ranging cultural touchstones and deep appreciation for kitchen-sink technology (for a sense of Tremblay as a tastemaker, read his list of the top ten weird movies²). At times the film looks and sounds messy and dirty, the colours bleeding everywhere, and lights flaring, as if the
images and sounds were being sent down from another planet through a faulty satellite.

Tremblay is a Montreal-resident DIY filmmaker who has managed, with very few means and resources, to make three feature films over the past ten years, his first feature showing at the Festival of New Cinema, and his last two at Fantasia. *Atmo HorroX* is nothing if not ambitious, a science-fiction, anti-pharmaceutical conspiracy film with no discernible dialogue, that runs 101 minutes and is structured to induce frustration, annoyance or restlessness through scenes of calculated longueur and repetition.

Aliens, helped by a binocular-obsessed ‘scout’, are scouring the city in search of human victims. However, the humans seem to have their own issues, driven by a sinister pharmaceutical company to a condition of mania, somnolence or absurdist repetition. Pat Tremblay is DIY to the core. His arsenal of props and art direction is dependent on what can be found in the home. The main alien is dressed in nylons adorned with prickly nut shrubs and with hot-dog balloons protruding from the crotch area. God bless Pat Tremblay. If he didn’t exist, the aliens would have to send one down.

To briefly note, other films with a retro aesthetic that played at Fantasia 2016 include the French found footage *À la recherche de l'Ultra-Sex* (Bruno Lavaine/Nicolas Charlet, 2015), which does for the 1970s and 1980s sex film what Craig Baldwin’s *Tribulations 99: Alien Anomalies Under America* (1992) did for the Cold War-era science-fiction and conspiracy film, and *Bad Blood: The Movie* (Tim Reis, 2016), a throwback to the 1980s body horror film. There were two films referencing the spaghetti western: retro-horror advocate Ti West’s (*The House of the Devil* [2009], *The Innkeepers* [2011], *The Sacrament* [2013]) *In a Valley of Violence* (2016), and JT Mollner’s *Outlaws and Angels* (2016), the latter starring Clint Eastwood’s daughter Francesca Eastwood; also in retro mode was *Parasites* (Chad Ferrin, 2016), directed in the spirit of the 1980s urban action film. And finally, *Red Christmas* (2016), an impressive debut feature from Australian funny man Craig Anderson, which blends the
grind-house aesthetics of the 1970s holiday-horror film with that same era’s streak of social consciousness. In *Red Christmas* Anderson uses a powerhouse performance by Dee Wallace (who was in audience, along with Anderson and other crew and cast members) as a matriarch whose reasoned decision to abort a deformed foetus comes back to haunt her many years later when the thought-to-be aborted child returns as a lumbering ‘monster’ to claim justice on Christmas Day. Anderson manages to elicit genuine emotion and tackles the theme of abortion with surprising nuance and sensitivity, while never renouncing the gory accoutrements you would expect.

For many of the original programming team of Fantasia (like Mitch Davis and former programmer Karim Hussain) the Polish director Andrzej Żuławski embodied the passionate and crazed approach to cinema that they would cultivate over the twenty years of Fantasia’s life. They were thrilled when they were able to bestow a Lifetime Achievement Award on Żuławski in 2013 (interviewed here³) and saddened to hear of his passing three years later. As a tribute to this director dear to their hearts, Fantasia programmed a delicious mini-spotlight on Polish genre cinema, culminating in a screening of Żuławski’s troubled metaphysical science-fiction brain twister, *On the Silver Globe* (Na srebrnym globie, 1988). With this film Żuławski is true to the nature of science-fiction literature, which has always privileged idea over spectacle, contrary to cinema science fiction. *On the Silver Globe* is hard to properly judge, given its fractured production history: it was started in the mid-1970s, but its production was halted by the communist government in 1978. Żuławski returned to it a decade later adding subjective POV tracking shots of a flâneur-like figure moving through the streets of contemporary Poland with a voice-over explaining the missing footage. What we do have is some of the most flamboyant, extravagant and disorienting imagery of any fantastic film. *On the Silver Globe* renounces linear narrative for religious and political parable, drawing from the Bible, the western, science fiction and horror. The conceptual scope of the film is so broad – time
travel, space travel, messianic figures, alien species, found footage – that it evokes Andrei Rublev (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1966), Solaris (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972), Zardoz (John Boorman, 1974) and 2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), while remaining wholly original. In terms of the legacy going forward, there is little doubt that On the Silver Globe influenced Aleksei German’s final and equally cryptic film, Hard to Be a God (Trudno byt' bogom, 2013).

The three other films in the Polish spotlight were Demon (Marcin Wrona, 2015), a creepy, genre-bending supernatural tale about a young groom, Peter (Itay Tiran), who on his wedding day becomes possessed by the Dybbuk of a dead bride, a young Jewish woman named Hana. Director Wrona (who tragically committed suicide less than a week after the film was completed) sets his tale on an island-village community, which underscores the growing sense of claustrophobia that hovers over the wedding party once Peter’s behaviour turns erratic. Because the film places the family in a closed-off, unsettling environment, the Dybbuk’s haunting presence invokes Poland’s troubled Holocaust history very effectively. It is hard to deny the assertion that The Lure (Córki dancingu, Agnieszka Smoczyńska, 2015) was the most wildly entertaining film of the fest: a genre-defying Polish updating of Cat People (Jacques Tourneur, 1942), re-imagined as an East European satirical musical-horror fantasy. Two Mermaid sirens, Silver and Golden, come ashore to a coastal town, recalling Jean Rollin’s coastal pirate-horror film The Demoniacs (Les démoniaques, 1974), and find work at a strip bar, singing, dancing and luring men to drink and spend money. The Lure has an infectious energy, with fantastic 1980s-style club/dance/pop music and dance choreography that remains simple but inventive. One of the sisters, Golden, played by the Jennifer Connelly look-alike Michalina Olszańska, becomes jealous when her more delicate sister, Silver (Marta Mazurek), finds a human boyfriend. Like Irena in Cat People, this elicits Golden’s dark, brutal, ‘wild female side’. The film also has interesting parallels with recent films that use
female ‘otherness’ to comment on what it means to be human: cyborg, android or alien in Steven Soderbergh’s Solaris (2002), Ex Machina (Alex Garland, 2014), Under the Skin (Jonathan Glazer, 2013) and Lucy (Luc Besson, 2014).

On the surface, Fantasia is all about entertainment and pushing boundaries, but sometimes it takes viewers into a dark and sobering place, offering a complex view of human nature, which is the case with the fourth film in the Polish spotlight, I, Olga Hepnarova (Já, Olga Hepnarová, Petr Kazda/Tomáš Weinreb, 2016) and its companion piece, the Austrian-German Agonie (David Clay Diaz, 2016). Both films present fictional accounts of real-life murders committed by troubled contemporary East European youths. I, Olga Hepnarova stars the dark-haired mermaid from The Lure, Michalina Olszańska, in an about-turn performance as a 22-year-old lesbian, Olga Hepnarová, who committed mass murder on 10 July 1973 as a calculated response to a life of emotional and physical abuse suffered at the hands of her parents, authority figures and peers in communist-era Czechoslovakia. Backed up against the wall, Hepnarová feels trapped in an either/or scenario, and writes the following letter before driving a truck along a crowded Prague pavement, killing eight and injuring many more:

“I am a loner. A destroyed woman. A woman destroyed by people … I have a choice – to kill myself or to kill others. I choose to avenge my haters. It would be too easy to leave this world as an unknown suicide victim. Society is too indifferent, rightly so. My verdict is: I, Olga Hepnarová, the victim of your bestiality, sentence you to death.” The film approaches its subject with an austere and minimalist aesthetic – static shots, long takes, monochrome black and white, diegetic music – which culminates in a non-judgmental portrait of a tragic, splintered soul whose legacy includes being the last woman to be executed in Czechoslovakia.

Diaz’s Agonie opens with the grisly facts of a murder: a young man murders his girlfriend with a kitchen knife, dismembers the corpse and deposits the body parts in different skips around the city. With these facts duly noted, Diaz
proceeds to intercut between two young men, ostensibly suspects, a conservative-looking Christian (Samuel Schneider), studying to be a judge, and a punkish-looking Alex (Alexander Srtschin), fresh out of military training and looking for direction and release from a regimented life. Like *I, Olga Hepnarova*, *Agonie* owes much of its impact to a controlled exercise in style. *Agonie* is a taut, well-directed psychological drama with the violent murder serving as a pretext for a dual character study in youth anomie. Although the film is based on the true story of a 24-year-old man who, without motive or provocation, killed and dismembered his girlfriend, Diaz directs it so as to make it a more generalised, metaphorical depiction of life circumstances weighing down contemporary young people: indifferent or distracted parents, worries about jobs and economic prospects, sexual identity, peer pressure, and possible mental-health issues. The film is shot in a reserved, realistic manner, with long takes, static framing or subtle camera movements, and judicious use of music. The film isn’t interested in suspense – it tells us right at the start about the murder – but in the minutiae of detail across the lives of the two lead protagonists, 24-year-old Christian and 20-something Alex. The film’s only concession to suspense lies in the audience having to figure out which of the two characters
will be the eventual murderer. But most viewers will have little trouble working that out. What is fascinating is the way that Diaz structures the film so that it alternates between the two characters, using a deceptively simple, parallel-cutting style, moving equally from one life to the other in an almost mundane rhythmic fashion.

The two characters, from different classes, are unalike in most respects. Their worlds never meet, and yet Diaz’s style ‘equalises’ them and the effect of this is to ‘trap’ the two dissimilar men in the same stifling world. With Agonie, Diaz has woven a powerful cautionary tale about contemporary youth who feel disconnected from the usual safety nets society offers (education, entertainment, family, authority figures). The film is disquieting because Diaz does not offer any precise causes of the youthful dissatisfaction or explain why the young adults are perennially courting violence. Given that the demographics of Fantasia are younger than that of any other film festival in Montreal, this is a vision which should resonate with its audiences. In fact, it should resonate with everyone, regardless of age.

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