

TELLURIDE FILM FESTIVAL

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The Telluride Film Festival is a festival that, from its very beginning forty-nine years ago, has been all about the filmmakers. Not for nothing is one theater named for Herzog—Werner celebrated his eightieth birthday this summer there with cake—and another, outdoors and free, for Abel Gance. It's a place filmmakers can meet, away from pressures, to chat with fans and each other. The Colorado mining town is famously photogenic, with mountains draped behind buildings in every shot and a main street made for photo ops. There is no shortage of celebrities, either, who tend to be strolling down the street or hanging out in restaurants, close enough to touch, rather than whisked away in limos.

And then actors came, too, and all was well, and still is. After a thirtieth-anniversary screening of *Orlando* (which, shhh, actually premiered at Venice originally), I ran into its director, Sally Potter, who had been chatting with Jessie Buckley—the kind of serendipity that Telluride produces. It's a place where everyone can count on being cheered on by both the rabid cinephiles and the indulgent patrons, where even the critics and studio execs relax and clap.

Telluride is also a place where generations of students have been educated at symposia, where Barry Jenkins curated the short films back when he was a youngster and still does, where it's possible for a film lover to drive out from L.A. and sleep in the car and talk their way into movies. It's a faux democracy that's sometimes a real one, too, especially in COVID's third summer, when the mountain air and wide-open spaces, excellent curating, and well-behaved audiences were particularly welcome.

Inevitably, Telluride courts the Oscars, too, successfully battling Toronto and Venice for premieres. Its tradition of secrecy, with no schedules announced until opening day, has given it an edge, allowing the others to boast of premieres

even when they're shown first here in the mountains. Despite the glitzy guests and mountain glamour, Telluride has always been known for a commitment to Eastern European and former Soviet Union cinemas—this year's guest directors, Kantemir Balagov and Kira Kovalenko, fled Russia after the invasion of Ukraine—as well as to the cinema of Latin America, especially Brazil and Cuba. Much of that is the legacy of Tom Luddy, Telluride's cofounder and guiding spirit, who built an archive with holdings from Eastern Europe and Latin America in his time at the Pacific Film Archive. His vision became an integral part of the festival. And despite the prominence of features, Telluride has also and always kept a place for documentary, via Herzog and others.

On August 30, 2022, Mikhail Gorbachev died. Two days later, the Telluride Film Festival opened. With the import of his death (and Putin's refusal to attend his funeral) resonating in my mind, I started my festival with a pair of Russian-themed and Cold War–linked documentaries in order to think about the “old world order.”

Adam Curtis, brilliant motormouth voice of British documentary long known for cramming his soundtracks with leftie narrational wisdom, has made a stark change of style. His *Russia 1985-1999: TraumaZone*, an encyclopedic history of the collapse of the former Soviet Union as traced through its granular effects on the daily life of its citizens, covers fourteen years in 420 minutes. Without speaking at all, Curtis edits a mountain of archival footage with original or natural soundtracks, confining himself to brief on-screen titles marking place and date and occasionally import. The restraint pays off. For anyone who wonders what has happened to Russia, how it seemingly lurched from Gorbachev to Yeltsin to the iron hand of Putin, Curtis's judicious epic tells the tale with chilling precision.¹

A slighter but well-placed companion to *Russia* is Bryan Fogel's gabby *Icarus: The Aftermath*, the follow-up to his original *Icarus* (2017), which traced sports doping scandals through the iconic figures of Lance Armstrong and Grigory Rodchenkov, then head of Russia's antidoping laboratory, who ends up in the United States after revealing the truth.

Film Quarterly, Vol. 76, No. 2, pp. 104–108. ISSN: 0015-1386 electronic ISSN: 1533-8630 © 2022 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2022.76.2.104

When Fogel accepted the Oscar for *Icarus*, he dedicated it to Rodchenkov.

Aftermath picks up where the first one left off: Rodchenkov is still in protective custody, in hiding, moving every few months to escape the Russian agents that everyone assumes are out to kill him. Fogel embedded a cameraman there, off and on, over the intervening five years. Rodchenkov is a compelling character, and a mesmerizing narrator of his own history and fate. This follow-up portrait is a remarkable view of the consequences of speaking truth. If at times it slips from a scary spy movie into a tender Grigory–Bryan bromance, the camaraderie between scientist and filmmaker is well earned—and the details, chilling.

Two other documentaries trace figures whose lives reflect, in small and large ways, the consequences of the Cold War and the dissolution of Soviet hegemony.

In the summer of 2022, they assumed a particular historical resonance.

Eva Weber's *Merkel* is a biopic that stitches together ample footage, mostly off television, to examine the life of Angela Merkel before, during, and after her years (2005–21) as Germany's renowned chancellor. Her candor and guardedness are present in equal measure as the documentary retraces her steps: from a girlhood in then-Communist GDR, to young adulthood as a physicist within the same

Soviet system, to her maturity as a fledgling politician, and then on into her fifties when she assumed the role of chancellor. Sure of herself even as a beginning politician, she was always humble, smart, and serious. Weber includes an interview with a surprisingly relaxed Hillary Rodham Clinton talking about her friend. Finally, Merkel's choice to have the German military band play her out of office (a tradition, evidently) with an adapted version of an East German rock song from her youth brings her trajectory full circle.

Given the absence of any original interview with its subject, *Merkel* is left to rely on a well-edited international archive as a rigorous primer of just what shaped the worldview of one of the most influential leaders of Western Europe in the post-Soviet era. Weber traces the arc from the day of *deutsche Einheit* ("German unity") in 1990 to the refugee crisis of 2015, when Merkel made the controversial decision to allow one million refugees to enter Germany legally. Framing that decision with earlier footage of the Berlin Wall coming down is helpful, but not Trump chanting, "Build that wall." I didn't want to see him in Merkel's story!

Spanish-Cuban filmmaker Pavel Giroud's feature *El caso Padilla* (*The Padilla Affair*) may well be the most original documentary of the year precisely because of what it does not do: tinker with the archive. Similarly focused on



Herberto Juan Padilla in *El caso Padilla* (*The Padilla Affair*).

tracing history, it avoids accumulation or pastiche in favor of a dedication to one singular relic: a box of Betamax reels whose provenance— out of history and out of Cuba— Giroud declines to reveal.

The “Padilla affair” was a notorious case of ideological warfare that riveted Cuba and the world in 1971. Cuba’s internationally renowned poet Heberto Juan Padilla was jailed and, once released, publicly renounced his own writing as a betrayal of the Cuban Revolution. Giroud’s box had recordings of that signal speech in its entirety; transferred, edited down, and restored to luminous black-and-white, they yield a riveting record of political consequences.

Giroud’s distillation captures Padilla’s act of self-demolition, performed in front of comrades who sit transfixed in a crowded room, waiting for his punitive gaze to rest on each of them in turn as he delivers his and their own condemnation—including, shockingly, of his own wife. In this cross between a Stalinist show trial and a homegrown *Soy Cuba* (Mikhail Kalatozov, 1964), Giroud has sculpted the found footage into an explosive time capsule, maintaining the purity of the record to remind viewers of what’s at stake for intellectual freedom. *El caso Padilla* is beautiful and chilling, and as historical as it is contemporary.

My other favorite documentary was Liliane Mutti and Daniel Zarvos’s *Miúcha, the Voice of Bossa Nova*—which is the opposite of *Merkel*, for this archive originates with Miúcha herself, the voice on the soundtrack is hers, the animated watercolors are hers, everything is intimate and chatty, the voice of a woman whose public and private selves seem identical.

Zarvos talked at length with Miúcha (Heloísa Maria Buarque de Holanda, also his cousin), who was intimately involved in planning the film before her death. “Miúcha” is justly famous in Brazilian music for both her contributions and her connections: the sister of Chico Buarque, wife of João Gilberto, sometime collaborator with Herb Alpert, and fully partnered with Tom Jobin, she lived at the center of the very invention of bossa nova. She breathed music from childhood on, with family friend Vinícius de Moraes, who wrote “The Girl from Ipanema,” teaching the kids to write songs. These are magical home movies of a cultural family in the throes of invention—laughing, singing, enjoying each other’s company. Its joy accompanied me out of the theater and up the mountain as I turned my attention to the fiction feature films that dominate the festival.

Okay, let’s get it out of the way: Luca Guadagnino’s *Bones and All* (which went on to win him Best Director at Venice) is a film about cannibal love— based on a novel written by a vegan writer, Camille DeAngelis. Put another

way, it’s a young-love road movie about two people—Taylor Russell and, yes, Timothée Chalamet—with unusual appetites. Mark Rylance is weird and scary as hell in his role as Russell’s mentor/predator. I had chatted with him in the audience prior to the screening, thanks to publicist extraordinaire Jeff Hill, and somehow that simple encounter made his stalker screen persona even creepier. Just another Telluride experience. As for the film, it’s well done, masterfully paced, cleverly cast, even sweet—but ultimately, hard to digest.

Oliver Hermanus reinvents Akira Kurosawa’s classic *Ikiru* as a British tale, *Living*, starring the luminous Bill Nighy and set in London in the 1930s. A sort of everyday fable of dying and coming to terms with life, this could have easily been a cliché in the mold of Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946). But Hermanus and screenwriter Kazuo Ishiguro deliver something altogether more delicate and moving. Nighy deserves major recognition for his performance.

Living convincingly places Nighy within the suffocating British class system as a straitlaced minor official, dutifully laboring in a city hall rife with obstacles seemingly devised to prevent anything from ever getting accomplished. Kafkaesque in its complexity, the office is a universe unto itself, suffocating in its structures, life



The many faces of Miúcha.

destroying, and seemingly static as a block of marble—until Nighy’s character’s diagnosis combines with a young man’s arrival in the workforce and a young woman typist’s departure, shifting this universe on its axis. *Living* has an unforced charm that works its own magic. A bit reminiscent of Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* (1987) in its gossamer charms, it is just as (un)believable. If it were a song, I’d still be humming it.

Telluride wouldn’t be Telluride without its annual tributes, this year to Sarah Polley and Cate Blanchett for directing and acting, respectively, and to the Scotsman Mark Cousins (the one I missed) for his prolific documentary career.

Polley’s *Women Talking* was reportedly the object of a bidding war between fall festivals over where it would debut, and she has surely earned her festival tribute for her directing career. Actors who become directors tend to remain actor-focused, and Polley is no exception. Casting her fictional Mennonite colony with some of the best in the business—Jessie Buckley, Claire Foy, Rooney Mara, Judith Ivey, Sheila McCarthy, Michelle McLeod, Frances McDormand (who optioned the book for Polley and is a coproducer), and others—Polley is restrained in her directing, quietly prodding and waiting and watching.

She has Luc Montpellier’s camera hold still and quiet as the group of women struggle to decide what to do next. There’s been violence: women and girls raped, drugged, and beaten in a community-wide savagery seen only in flashbacks and denied by the men, gaslighting writ large. The film’s conceit is that the women, pushed to the brink, delegate a group to decide on a plan. While the men are away, posting bail for a perpetrator, the women decide whether to flee or to stay and fight, one for all and all for one. The conversation is the film; the decision, its ending. What ensues (with a script that Polley adapted from the novel of the same name by Miriam Toews, based in part on a true story) is a sort of 1970s consciousness-raising group, transplanted to this very different time and place. Theirs is a slow dance of respect and restraint, anger and rebellion, revelation and action.

Their slow process of starts and stops (what the seventies called “internalized oppression”) is slow to advance, but eventually a breeze of hope fills their divided psyches. The film has a central flaw, though, at least for me. August (Ben Whishaw) is the colony’s schoolteacher, a former member who has returned, and the narrator in the original novel. The women, who by design cannot read or write, conscript him to take the minutes of the meeting (though it’s never clear why). As visualized by Polley, he is the women’s scribe, sitting up front, sometimes interjecting, a

sympathetic presence who occupies too much screen time for a saga of women’s empowerment. The film’s conclusion does much to mitigate this flaw, though, and produces a ripple effect of hope.

Cate Blanchett, recipient of the festival’s tribute for her acting career, came bearing the festival’s most outrageous and thrilling film, *Tár*, the first film in sixteen years from writer/director Todd Field. Its opening scene has Blanchett onstage, fully in persona as renowned symphony conductor Lydia Tár, being interviewed by Adam Gopnik (yes, playing himself) in a *New Yorker* series. It is a tone-perfect rendition: Tár is pretentious, obsequious, full of banter and puffed-up grandiloquence. She had studied with Leonard Bernstein and is happy to go on and on about “Lenny” while preening her feathers in anticipation of conducting a Mahler symphony in her new season. This performance sets the audience up perfectly for the character: in command, stunning, grandiloquent, and, yes, hateful and irresistible and unsettling.

Tár is a fall-from-grace movie, a moral tale of an immoral protagonist, a character study of one woman’s unraveling, with a last act of excruciating retribution. What nerve this film has! Field makes every other scriptwriter seem timid and prim by comparison.

Blanchett’s Tár, the first female principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, lives with her partner, Sharon, the orchestra’s concertmaster and first violin, in a dazzlingly gorgeous and luxurious modern apartment, where they are also raising a child together. She drives a futuristic sports car, has her tuxedos custom tailored, and preserves her scores in perfect order in archival boxes on the shelf of her study. On the side, though—ah, on the side. She’s mean and bitchy to students, dismissive of contemporary ethics, and laser-focused on drawing fresh young women into her orbit.

Trouble is there from the first text message that pops on-screen. The cracks in the surface are beginning to show. Her assistant, Francesca (Noémie Merlant), herself an aspiring conductor, is disenchanted, while someone named Krista is desperately trying to reach them both. Meanwhile, Olga has arrived: a gorgeous Russian cellist with her own ambitions and a scent of *All about Eve*. But Tár doesn’t notice, nor does she pay attention to social shifts or social media, where rumors are circulating. Dark clouds fill the sky as she blithely goes about her business, cruelly targeting a gender-fluid BIPOC student in a class she visits. All is not well, but she is the last to notice.

And Blanchett? Oh my, does she ever go for it. Watching her conduct in the early scenes of the film is every bit as dazzling as it is horrifying to watch her vomit in its



Cate Blanchett as renowned conductor Lydia Tár.

final moments—a performance arc of almost unimaginable scale, soaring to the most bombastic heights, falling into the most hideous abjection. Weeks later, it’s still one of the most exciting films I’ve seen in ages.

Yet there’s a problem. Blanchett’s genius makes Lydia Tár a villain for the ages—but she is a #MeToo figurehead, a woman whom Field has positioned where hundreds of thousands of men ought to be standing instead. Even if the finale makes the gender switch painfully obvious, it’s that magician’s trick that has turbocharged the film. I am not sure I can forgive them for framing Eve as the one who eats the apple yet another time, even as I count the days until I can pay to see it again.

All in all, hitting their stride in the extended-COVID era, Julie Huntsinger, Mara Fortes, and their team scored another victory summer on their way to next year’s fiftieth anniversary.

Notes

- 1 For the details behind this epic and his change of style, see Adam Curtis, “‘They are stealing Russia’: Adam Curtis on how hyper-capitalism wrecked a nation – and why Liz Truss must take heed,” *The Guardian*, October 12, 2022, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/oct/12/russia-adam-curtis-extreme-capitalism-liz-truss-traumazone