

## IndieLisboa 2014: *Industrial Revolution*, *Same River Twice*, *The Second Game*, and *Iranien*

BY MICHAEL PATIISON ON MAY 6, 2014 IN FESTIVALS, FILM GO TO COMMENTS (0)



On the festival circuit at least, every calendar year starts with a bang. First Rotterdam, then Berlin—two gargantuan magnets dwarfing all around them. Flabby ships the pair of them, one might say—their programs developing each year by way of a bigger-not-better approach. How nice it is, then, to find oneself, in the weeks prior to Cannes especially, at a festival that appears to have actually *rejected* films in order to arrive at its lineup. Taking place once again toward the back end of April, and running into May, IndieLisboa—Lisbon's international festival of independent cinema—showcases some of the better independent productions unveiled in Rotterdam, Berlin, and elsewhere while pruning out much of the filler.

It's all about timing. And also maybe money. In Miguel Valverde and Nuno Sena, IndieLisboa has two expert co-directors whose curatorial acumen has allowed the festival to negotiate the unpredictable tides of a fiscally fraught Europe. For the 11th edition, Valverde and Sena's tellingly small programming team once again delivered a lineup whose emphasis was on quality control and individuality. In addition to its international competition (won by Sundance-winner *To Kill a Man*), IndieLisboa features several other programming strands as well as a comprehensive, high-quality shorts program. After two years in the financial wilderness, the festival's "Independent Hero" retrospective also returned, dedicated this time around to Claire Simon. It's a shame a festival so dedicated to traditional ideas of cinephilia doesn't in its current situation attract more international press; this critic was one of only four attending from outside of Portugal.

Save for IndieJunior, the program section dedicated to younger audiences, IndieLisboa's daily screenings don't begin until four or five in the evening, which allows attendees to spend their mornings and early afternoons wandering and getting lost in the varied streets of Lisbon itself. On one such meander, I had the grand ambition of walking across the 25th of April Bridge, into the municipality of Almada south of the Tejo River. Ambitions quickly dimmed: While the bridge boasts six car lanes and two railway tracks, walking across it is strictly prohibited. For river-related jaunts, two festival films had to suffice.

The first of these was Tiago Hespanha and Frederico Lobo's *Industrial Revolution*, which world-premiered as part of the festival's Emerging Cinema sidebar. The 72-minute documentary shows how industrialization along Portugal's Ave River conditioned and was conditioned by the surrounding landscape. Unfolding as a boat journey down the Ave itself, the film is a casual, meandering work that begins with a succession of monochrome slides depicting textile workers before moving into a digital foray through present-day locales. An unassuming, cap-wearing boatman steers us onward, whispering, "It's still here...we can only see a little bit from here." Initially, what he's referring to isn't quite clear, but then we see a small factory building through an opening in the trees ahead.

"It was a spinning factory," an elderly interviewee says later. "I was in charge of lubrication." As is gradually revealed, industrial output from the region has all but ceased. And so the film comes to probe two changes at once: the impact that this physically imposing fortress of modern labor had upon local residents, and how its eventual and apparently inevitable decline has left a deep sense of melancholy to linger over the beautiful, surrounding greenery. Such palpable sadness is exemplified late on, when a local man tells of how his brother died when his kayak broke in two along the river. How does one find justice against an invisible, natural killer, he asks? The question has allegorical import. By extension, how does an entire region find justice against an industry that disappeared as quickly as it was formed?

Another river journey depicted at IndieLisboa was that in *Same River Twice*, in which multimedia artists Efi Weiss and Amir Borenstein return from Belgium to their native Israel and journey down the River Jordan in search of a nation to which they feel they no longer belong. The film received an honorable mention from the jury overseeing the festival's World Pulse program. Inspired by a similar journey undertaken in 1869 by Scottish explorer John McGregor, the filmmakers—making their first feature-length documentary—employ a diaristic form that lacks any discernible structure in order to record and probe ever-shifting feelings about their own national identity.

*Same River Twice* has a built-in problem. While on the one hand, Weiss and Borenstein are able to document a number of encounters with people they personally meet, there's something immovably irritating about the degree to which they place themselves at the film's center. As a result, the film is self-absorbed from its outset; its stronger passages are undoubtedly those in which the filmmakers give screen time to others. These include conversations with Tach, a happy-go-lucky oarsman, and a brief but heated exchange with a group of local lads who claim the filmmakers stopped being Israeli the moment they emigrated. The weakest moments, in contrast, are when Weiss and Borenstein place themselves in front of the camera, in scenes that are the semi-contrived, moving-image equivalent of a selfie.

Corneliu Porumboiu's *The Second Game* is at once similar to and different from *Same River Twice*. In it, the Romanian filmmaker sits down to watch a video recording of a 1988 soccer match between Steaua and Dinamo, Bucharest's two most famous teams, with his father Adrian, who refereed the game in question. Like Weiss and Borenstein, Porumboiu features heavily in his own film, though he remains off screen. Essentially, this is a 97-minute retroactive audio commentary, as Porumboiu Jr. exchanges reminiscences with his father about the changing rules of the game as well as refereeing strategies. It's also part of the director's ongoing fascination with film form as well as the ongoing ramifications of the Ceausescu regime.

In the first instance, we have an absolute minimalism here, whereby it's easy to overlook the fact that we're watching images recorded with a contemporary digital camera, so transparent is the gaze of Porumboiu's own tripod-fixed camera as it watches the television set on which the soccer game unfolds. In the second instance, Porumboiu uses this otherwise innocuous match—which, after all, ends in a nil-nil draw—as a primary historical artifact, returning again and again to the institutional corruption of the period, which the incessant snowfall of a late-'80s winter literally and symbolically covers.

While *The Second Game* stresses the virtues of looking, the best feature-length film I saw in Lisbon emphasizes the need to listen. Mehran Tamadon's *Iranien*, which premiered in Berlin, is its director's second feature-length documentary following 2009's *Bassidji* and follows the two days he spends with four supporters of the Islamic Republic of Iran, trying to convince them of the merits of a secular, pluralist society. Iranian-born Tamadon moved to Paris in 1984 at the age of 12, before returning to his birth nation in 2000 as an architect, and only made his first short film in 2004. *Iranien* places a refreshing emphasis on the power of the dialectic, and the result is frequently absorbing.

Unfolding like a gentler, less derisive (because more participatory) version of Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion*, this unexpectedly amusing film pits Tamadon against four apparently unified men on a number of seemingly irreconcilable points: self-control versus human nature; the individual versus the social; secularism versus dictatorship. Deferring to their de facto leader (a handsome, commanding, formidable figure), Tamadon's guests appear intransigent, and the logical fallacies they cunningly and even charmingly put forth in their own

defense speak of the insidious ways in which institutional religion can enable a number of prejudices, the most recurrent of which here is misogyny, as well as its implied logical extreme: rape culture.

A large number of their arguments boil down to apparent self-doubt: Since men are sexually aroused so easily (a speak-for-yourself claim if ever there was one), laws must be made and upheld to "protect" women from the natural conditions of masculinity. Tamadon's own eagerness to persuade his guests away from their beliefs often results in he himself being stumped. You can't reason somebody out of a position they arrived at through a failure in reason in the first place—or so the argument goes.

But perhaps you can. Toward the end of the film, exhausted by debate and dinner, and with the end of their experiment in sight, the four mullahs begin to indulge Tamadon's Western sensibilities, and work with him in drawing up a new constitution that's tolerant of all (or most) human rights. Tamadon and other pluralists' hopes may lie in arguing their case with four people at a time, then, and so good luck to them. They'll certainly need it, for the social roots of religious doctrine run much deeper and thicker than a jovial 48-hour experiment in one's own well-to-do country home.

IndieLisboa ran from April 24—May 4.