

Himals in Holland

The Sixth Himalayan Film Festival at the Free University (VU) of Amsterdam on 14-15 February screened 50 films about the Himalaya to 2,200 visitors. The films went on non-stop from 9.30 AM to nearly midnight through the weekend with discussions and even a Himalayan arts and crafts fair.

Glenn Krishna Mitrasing, medical doctor by day and festival organiser by night, says audience numbers continue to rise every year with better advertising and publicity. "The festival has now become an established yearly cultural event known across the Netherlands," he says.

Nepal and Nepali films were particularly well represented this year. From feature presentations such as *Kagbeni* (Dahal) to contemporary politics addressed by *Sari Soldiers* (Bridgham), *Returned* (Koenig) and *Living Goddess* (Whitaker); documentaries and social commentaries such as *Malaamee* (Thapa), *Chhau* (Khadka), *Children of God* (Yi Seung-jun) and *Yuddha Chitra* (BK and Tseten); through to travelogues, mountains and music such as *Return to Nepal* (Lang), *Daughters of Everest* (Sakya and Limbu) and *Musicians Call* (Bajracharya), the range of genres and locations were impressively diverse.

Neasa Ni Chianain's *Fairytale of Kathmandu* is a nuanced and penetrating film about honesty and the abuse of power, raising uncomfortable questions which provoked much discussion. The five-episode series for BBC Four entitled *A Year in Tibet* was

another festival highlight, since writer and producer Peter Firstbrook was present to introduce his films and answer questions. Lectures by Pema Wangchuk Dorjee, editor of Sikkim's leading English-language daily *Now!*, and John Sanday, conservation architect, on their recent research and ongoing work were also well attended and lively.

It's no small achievement that in the few years since 2003, when Mitrasing launched the first Himalayan film festival, the event has done so well. Hundreds of Dutch film goers pay €10 a session to watch films about the Himalaya, and the festival has already been to Tokyo and may travel to other European countries in the future. Taking the festival on tour would be an excellent next move, as it would ensure further exposure for the film makers and their creations. The large communities of Himalayan heritage residents in the UK and Germany make these countries in particular natural settings

for future screenings.

The appetite for Nepal-related events seems to be insatiable in the Netherlands: Nepal Samaj Nederland (NSN), an association established by Nepalis in Holland, organised a one day Nepali film show and public discussion about immigration in Amsterdam a few days after the festival on 21 February. ●

Mark Turin in Amsterdam

www.himalayafilmfestival.nl/eng/
www.nepalsamaj.nl/



Waltzing on a wire

The Academy Awards always has a certain self-congratulatory ring, members and audiences applauding their own supposed good taste: on one hand generally rejecting films that are actually the industry's biggest grossers, while on the other, avoiding the critics' favourite and obscure picks. Much more is said about the appearance of big budget stars than highlighting talent.

Timezones and loadshedding conspired to keep this critic away from catching the event on television, but in the Youtube world we inhabit today, even the speeches are only some minutes wait with a decent internet connection.



CRITICAL CINEMA
A Angelo DiSilva

Yet the real value of the event, apart from memorable speeches, the heartfelt appreciation and the glamour, is the second lease of life for the otherwise unnoticed and under-appreciated films that get nominated, usually in the foreign film and documentary category.

Waltz with Bashir, is an unconventional documentary from Israel by Ari Folman, nominated for Best Foreign Film. The narrative is a kind of investigative journey of autobiographical dimensions, a kind of inquiry into the self that intercepts with a particular historical event. Folman, not much older than a kid at the time, served in the Israeli Army during the Lebanon War of 1982. When a friend approached Folman recounting his recurring nightmare from the time he spent in Lebanon, the filmmaker is confronted with his own glaring gaps in his memory.

The traumatic centre of the mystery is the Sabra massacre—a gruesome, organized retaliation against Palestinian refugees by Christian Phalangists, allies of the Israelis, who were enraged at the assassination of their leader Bashir Gemayel. Folman only recalls fragments of the event, even though he places himself only streets away from the camps. He embarks on a quest to uncover his own past and complicity by interviewing his scattered comrades-in-arms. Its live-action footage is painstakingly rendered into animation, save for the gruesome archival footage at the end, a fitting burst of realism in a film about memory and repression.

Adjoining the interviews, which are often with wry and blunt characters, are graphic re-enactments of war-life. Like Richard Linklater's *Waking Life*, which it automatically draws comparison with, *Waltz* shares a dream-life quality, a certain nagging vagueness. But with its darker subject, it more frequently dips into the bizarre. The format is almost judicious circumspection, building the contexts and explanation about the soldiers' lives and the kind of war they were fighting, that at one point you wonder if Folman will ever reveal the actual event. But at its end and without any excuses, he unpacks the ugly truth and the enigmatic tableaux of his own memory.

Man on Wire, this year's Best Doc winner by James Marsh, retells the stunt pulled off by the French tight-rope walker Philippe Petit and his team between New York City's still-incomplete Twin Towers in 1974. Petit, some decades later, still preserves his boyish looks and all of his charms. His retelling is full of theatrical flair and dramatic demonstrations. Fashioned like an old-fashioned heist story with archival footage and interviews with the many confederates who were charmed and cajoled into abetting Petit, Marsh assembles an entertaining and delightful narrative, culminating with the main event itself, an awe-inspiring and time-stopping work of performance art.††† The events of September 11th, deliberately unmentioned, haunts the retelling—fake IDs, illegal trucks sneaked past barriers and foreign nationals are generally the kinds of details that generate anxiety.

But it's hard not to read this documentary with its irrepressible optimism and sense of adventure as an attempt to rehabilitate the feeling and emotions around those iconic buildings. There is something undoubtedly insane about the venture. It is not quite a pure act of art with its dimensions of ego, but it is inarguably a courageous and inspiring human act that deserves the documentary treatment it receives. ●

Waltz with Bashir
Director: Ari Folman
Documentary 2008. 90 mins.

†
Man on Wire
Director: James Marsh
Documentary 2008. 94 mins.



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