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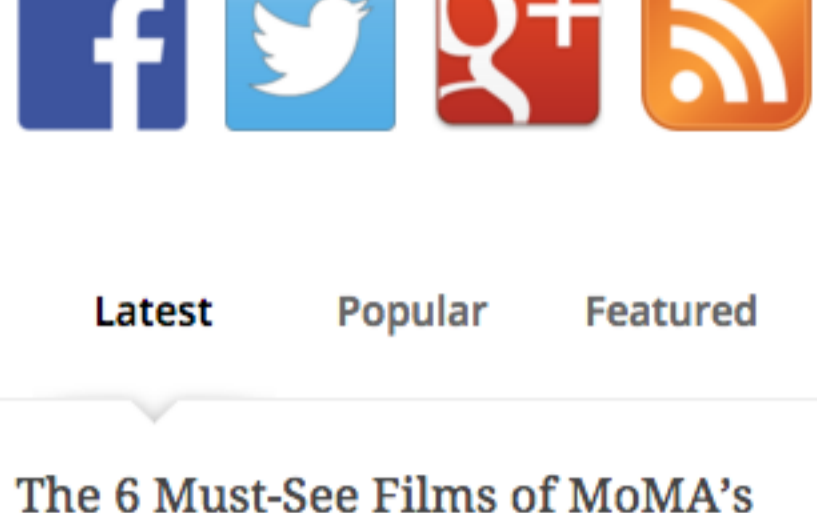
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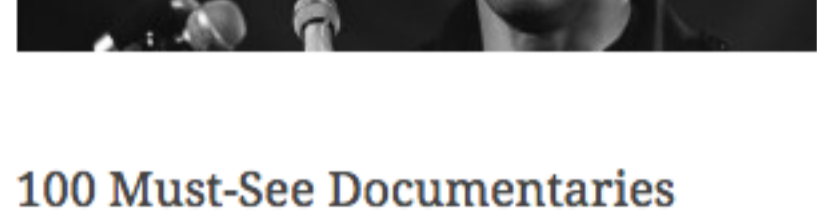


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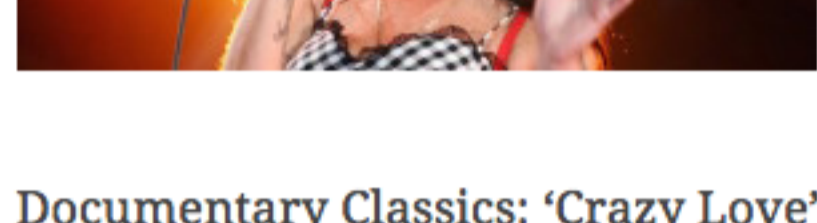
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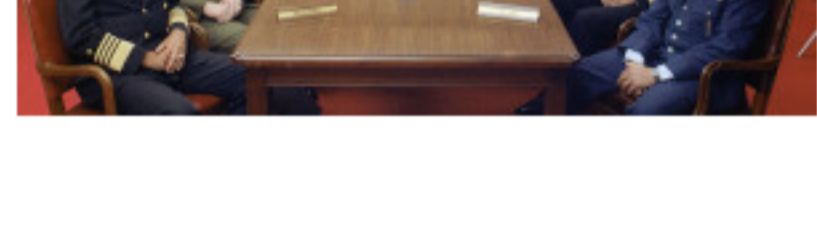
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The 6 Must-See Films of MoMA's Documentary Fortnight 2016

by Daniel Walber on February 18, 2016



red shoes

The Museum of Modern Art's Documentary Fortnight is a showcase for artistic intersection. Given today's nonfiction landscape, that obviously includes films that elide the difference between documentary and narrative cinema. Yet that's only part of it. The festival also includes films that push the border between cinema and fine art, creative experiments with memoir, and urgent political histories. Just last year's edition of the festival featured Laurent Bécue-Renard's critically acclaimed *Of Men and War* and Stanley Nelson's *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*, which lit up the cultural conversation when it aired on PBS on February 16th.

The 2016 lineup has one of the more illustrious lists of names to grace the festival program in recent years. Opening night features the New York premiere of LA Rebellion filmmaker Billy Woodberry's first feature since 1983's *Bless Their Little Hearts*. Nikolaus Geyrhofer and Sergei Loznitsa both have films making their US premiere in the festival, as well as Oscar-nominee Rithy Panh. Yet, as was the case last year, the real story is the depth of the lineup. Six films in particular, many of them well under the typical length of a feature, overwhelm the eye and challenge the mind. The striking use of setting and landscape, both aesthetically and conceptually, drives an astonishing array of themes throughout the program. Not necessarily obvious at first glance, here are the six must-see films of Documentary Fortnight 2016.

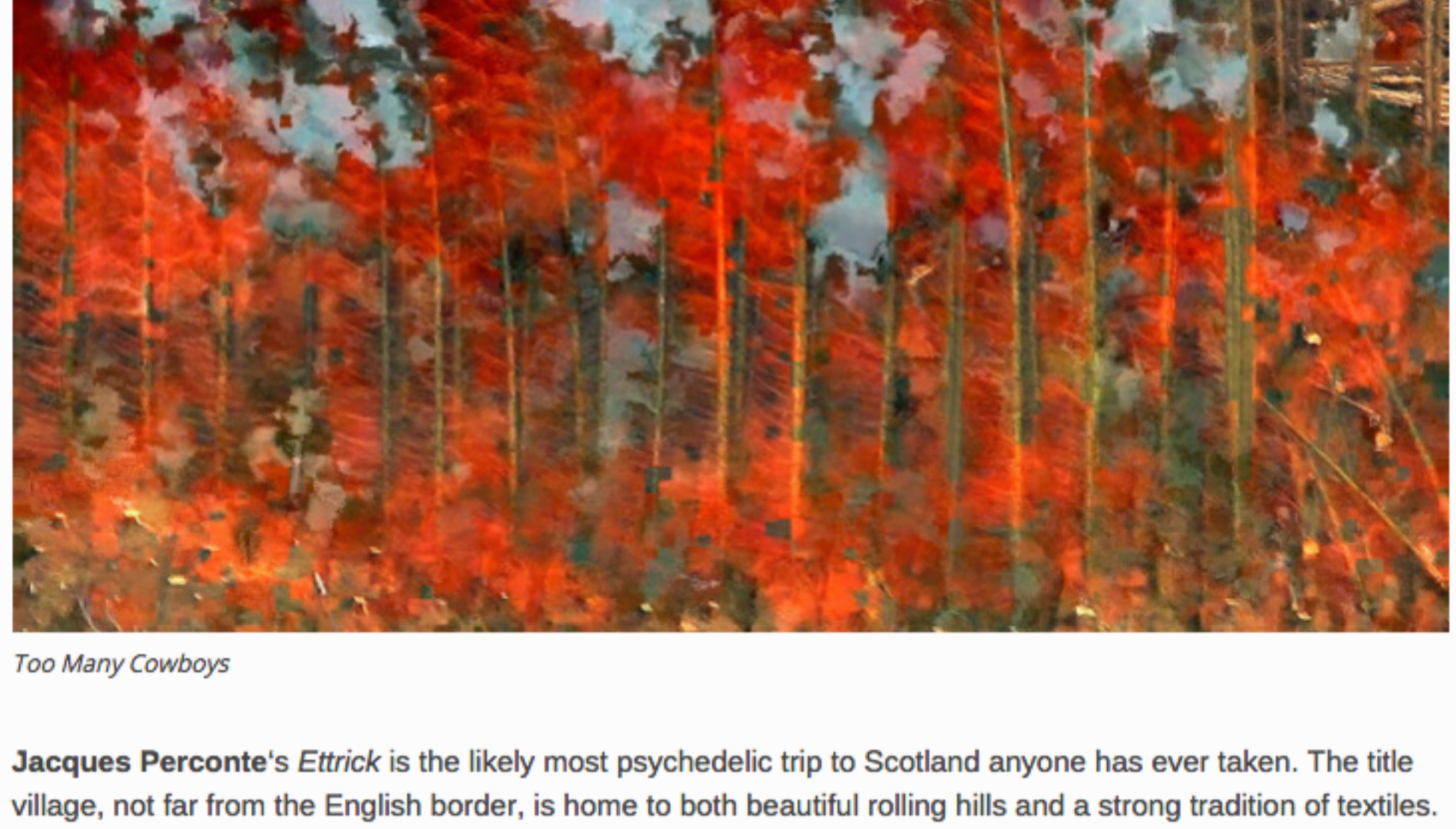
Coma



Sara Fattahi

Sara Fattahi's *Coma* is an extraordinary depiction of war, made almost entirely within the walls of a single apartment. Her mother and her grandmother live together in Damascus, struggling to survive daily life in a nation gripped by civil war. They spend their days watching old movies and drinking coffee, talking about the past and staring out the window; though Fattahi never peers through the curtains with her camera. Instead, she focuses on the impact of the outside on the psychological landscape of the interior. Her grandmother mourns the death of her husband, and occasionally complains about the lack of a man in the house. Her mother, who divorced Fattahi's father, tends not to take this well. Yet despite the surface tension, *Coma* doesn't feel a great deal like *Grey Gardens*. Instead, it falls somewhere between the heartbreaking stasis of Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie* and the striking portraiture of *Autumn Sonata*. Its subject is the war, to be sure, but what Fattahi's mother describes as a war inside. It mirrors the conflict outside, which enters the apartment through the radio and the television and lodges itself in the hearts of three generations of Syrian women.

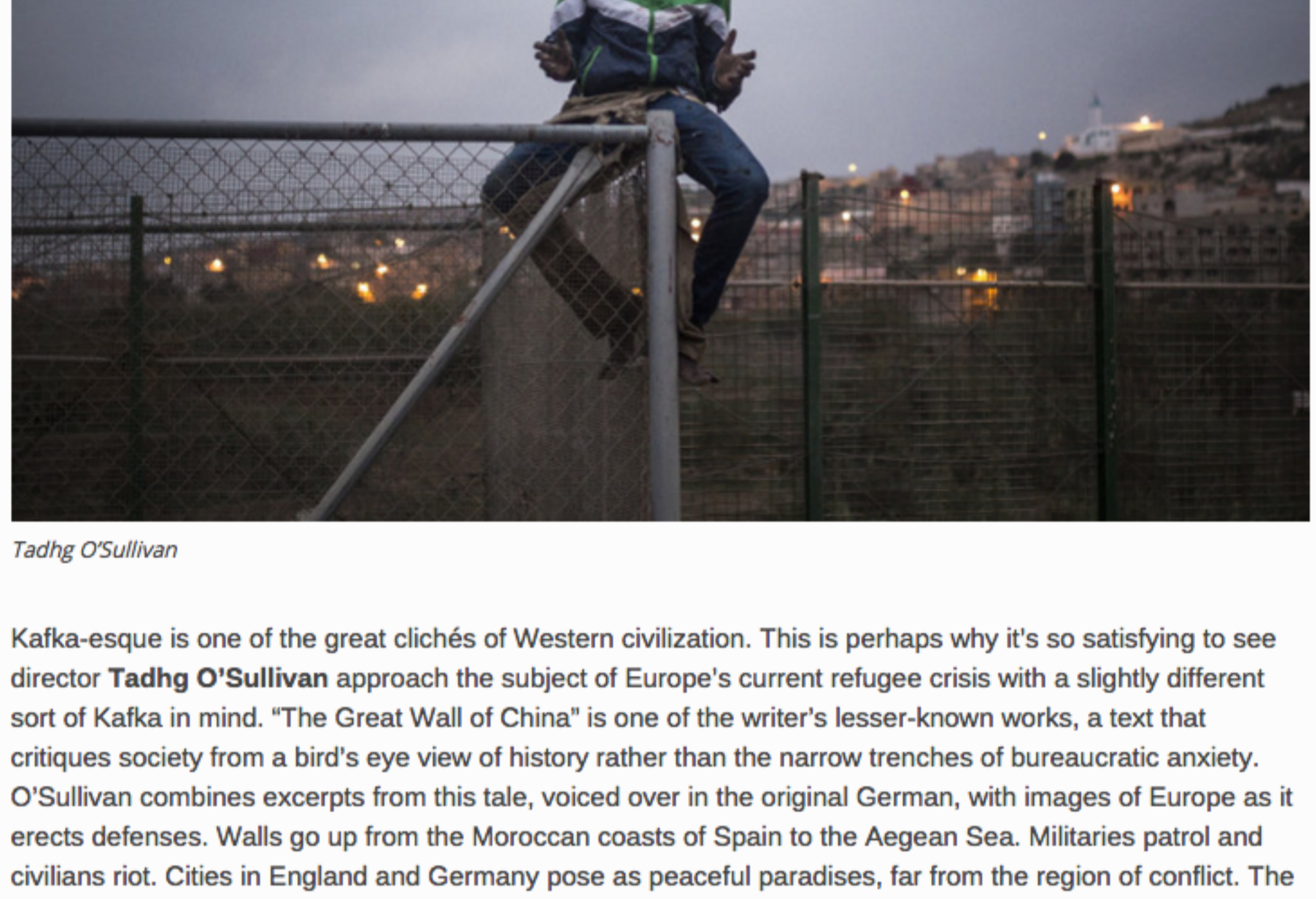
Ettrick



Too Many Cowboys

Jacques Perconte's *Ettrick* is the likely most psychedelic trip to Scotland anyone has ever taken. The title village, not far from the English border, is home to both beautiful rolling hills and a strong tradition of textiles. Perconte takes images of both and digitally alters them with the instincts of a painter. Pixelation becomes pointillism, as wide shots of the hills or more focused images of intricate Scottish fabrics morph into vibrant and sometimes near-shapeless tableaux. As figures, notably sheep, move through the frame, they bring along sticky digital distortions of their own. The open fields are given the texture of the textiles made indoors. The fabrics are given the free shifting colors of the grass and sky. Perconte's images vacillate between frenzied digital chaos and near-classical compositions. Every last image is fascinating.

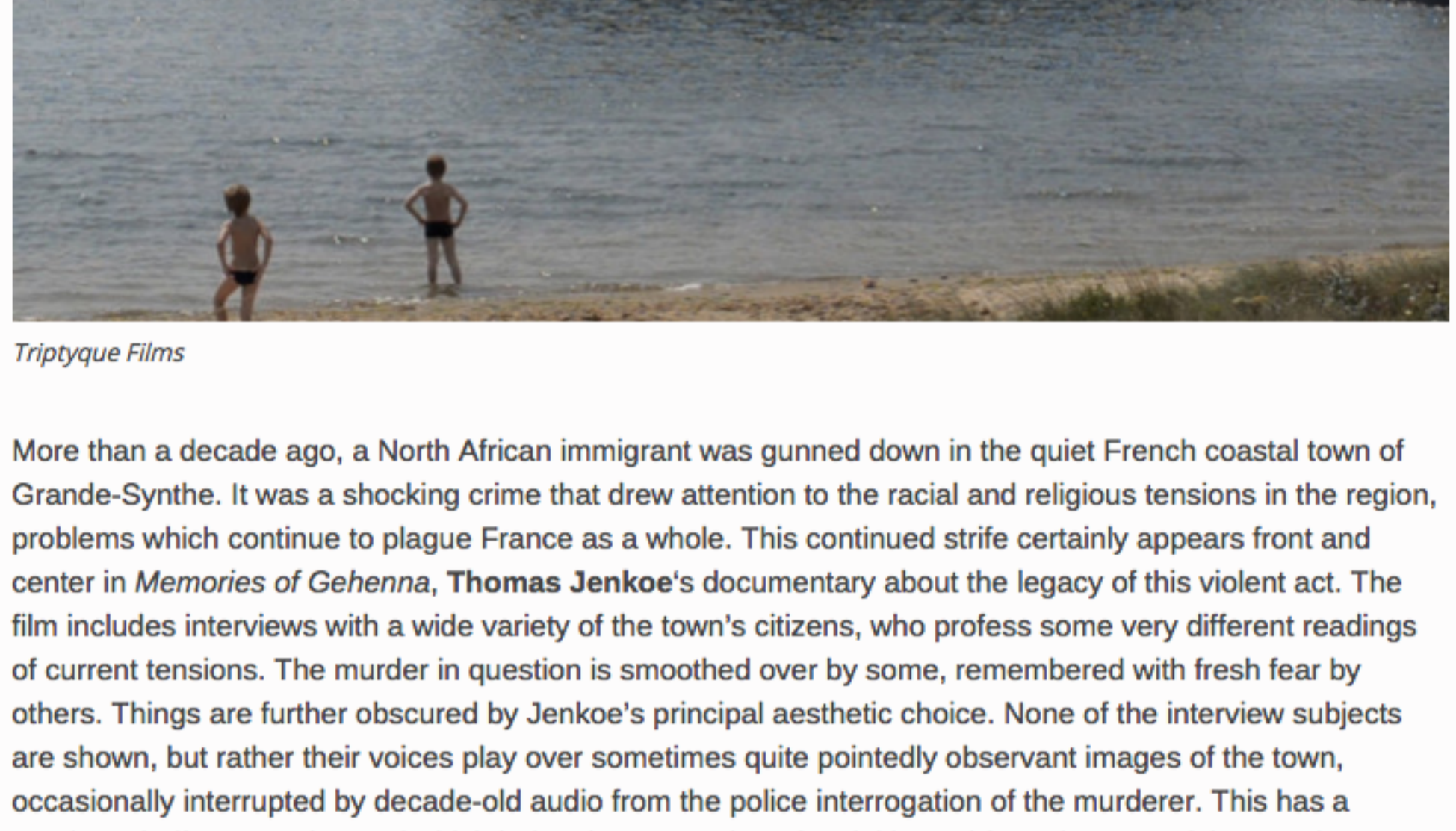
The Great Wall



Tadhg O'Sullivan

Kafka-esque is one of the great clichés of Western civilization. This is perhaps why it's so satisfying to see director Tadhg O'Sullivan approach the subject of Europe's current refugee crisis with a slightly different sort of Kafka in mind. "The Great Wall of China" is one of the writer's lesser-known works, a text that criticizes society from a bird's eye view of history rather than the narrow trenches of bureaucratic anxiety. O'Sullivan combines excerpts from this tale, voiced over in the original German, with images of Europe as it erects defenses. Walls go up from the Moroccan coasts of Spain to the Aegean Sea. Militaries patrol and civilians riot. Cities in England and Germany may be peaceful paradises, far from the region of conflict. The music, which alternates between classical touchstones and the music of composer Akira Rabelais, underlines these troubling ideas with a unique atmosphere of mourning and dread. O'Sullivan is not interested in an exact analogue between Kafka and contemporary reality, but rather uses him to evoke questions, many of them quite troubling.

Memories of Gehenna



Triptyque Films

More than a decade ago, a North African immigrant was gunned down in the quiet French coastal town of Grande-Synthe. It was a shocking crime that drew attention to the racial and religious tensions in the region, problems which continue to plague France as a whole. This continued strife certainly appears front and center in *Memories of Gehenna*, Thomas Jenkoe's documentary about the legacy of this violent act. The film includes interviews with a wide variety of the town's citizens, who profess some very different readings of current tensions. The murder in question is smoothed over by some, remembered with fresh fear by others. Things are further obscured by Jenkoe's principal aesthetic choice. None of the interview subjects are shown, but rather their voices play over sometimes quite intertidally observant images of the town, occasionally interrupted by decade-old audio from the police interrogation of the murderer. This has a number of effects, not least of which being the separation of racial hatred from the race of the speaker. It also seems to accuse the physical landscape of the town itself for the violence, on top of the individual criminal. It's chilling but also eye-opening, an approach that could and perhaps should be used to great impact in communities across the world struck by violence.

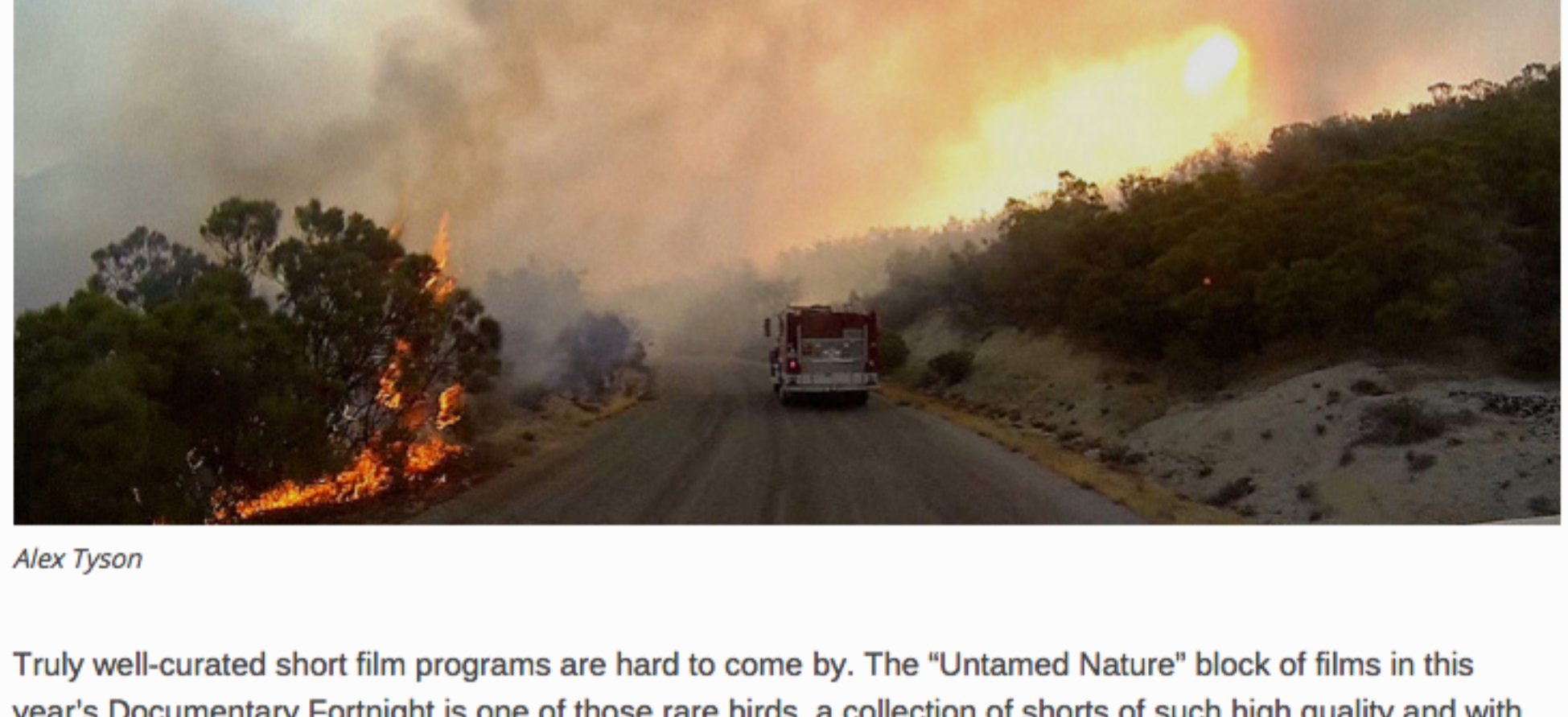
Time Passes



Ane Hjord Guttu

Is it art? This is the sort of question that undergraduate art majors are forced to ask each other the world over, usually (one imagines) to less-than-revolutionary results. Yet in *Time Passes*, a remarkably contemplative documentary by Norwegian filmmaker Ane Hjord Guttu, it is a discussion both essential and rewarding. Damla is a student at the Bergen Academy of Art and Design. For a year-long project, she decides to sit on a street corner with the Roma women who spend their days there, quietly asking change from passers-by. It begins as a fairly brash gesture, one which her fellow students find troubling. Is this exploitation? The initiative was headstrong Damla, who never concedes that this is remotely unethical, gradually becomes quite good friends with Bianca, the woman next to whom she sits. As Guttu presents the developing year with tremendous visual clarity (this could easily pass as a narrative film), the questions change. The political implications fade as the work becomes more and more personal. Is Damla doing this as an artist or as a human? If it's not art, why not? Guttu follows Damla's journey beat by beat, while also including the perspectives of her fellow students, her teacher and, most importantly, Bianca. The result is a beautifully crisp meditation on the practice of living.

Untamed Nature: Shorts



Alex Tyson

Truly well-curated short film programs are hard to come by. The "Untamed Nature" block of films in this year's Documentary Fortnight is one of those rare birds, a collection of shorts of such high quality and with such an interesting dialog that they should be given a more substantive theatrical release. It starts with two wordless shorts from American filmmakers David Redmon and Ashley Sabin (*Girl Model, Downeast*). *Neige* is an industrial ballet of snow plows, going up and down the streets of Montreal after a particularly impressive snowfall. *Herd*, on the other hand has a cast of non-mechanical beasts. It's a brilliant 12-minute observation of donkeys. At first a simple pastoral scene, the film shifts when the animals start making direct eye contact with the audience. It's bluntly hilarious, exceedingly creepy and soon becomes a clever articulation of one of nonfiction cinema's essential facts. You can't tell a group of donkeys to act natural and ignore the camera.

For these two micro-focused shorts, the program includes a particularly rich natural scene. *Mountain Fire Personnel* is a montage of images from a 2013 fire in Southern California, which blazed through the San Jacinto Mountains with a vengeance. Director Alex Tyson combines satellite images, amateur footage taken by shaken locals, and a central cinematic journey up the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway to the heart of the blaze, 8,000 feet above sea level. The smoke is as impressive as the scale of the firefighting operation, an assembly of professionals and emergency-ready convicted felons whose orange outfits are oddly appropriate for the crisis.

Finally, the uncanny experience of documentariness and the otherworldly images of wild beasts lead into an investigation of some of the world's oddest communities of feral animals. *Wild Aerials*, by Belgian directing team Grégoire Motte and Éléonore Saintagnan, is a documentary triptych. Its first segment is about the wild parakeets of Brussels, its second about the large population of hippos smuggling foxes on the border between Belgium and France, and its third featuring the now-escaped pig Pablo Escobar. It's also a compendium of documentary styles. The bizarre history of parakeets is told with the help of archival footage, while the foxes are featured in a very funny reenactment. The hippos get the benefit of the most unexpected stylistic gesture. Both Escobar and the alpha hippo get to speak in the first person, despite both being deceased. More than a reenactment, this last sequence charges the border of nonfiction. It's also a very fitting, theatrical end to a shorts program that began with the wintry silence of vérité.

Documentary Fortnight runs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City from February 19th through February 29th.

Alex Tyson	Ane Hjord Guttu	Ashley Sabin	Coma	David Redmon	Documentary Fortnight
Éléonore Saintagnan	Ettrick	Grégoire Motte	Herd	Jacques Perconte	Mountain Fire Personnel
Sara Fattahi	Tadhg O'Sullivan	The Great Wall	Time Passes	Wild Beasts	Neige

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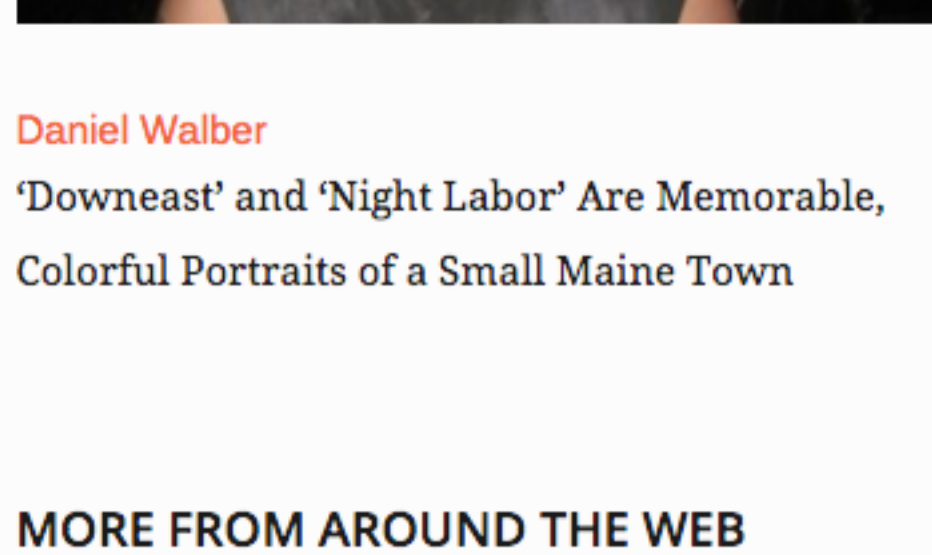
Now On DVD: 'The Black Panthers' is a Solid Primer on a Subject That Deserves Something Bigger

AUTHOR

Daniel Walber
 Daniel Walber is a freelance writer based in Brooklyn. He has written for Nonfics, Film School Rejects, Movies.com, Film.com, and The Brooklyn Rail. He holds a BA in History from McGill University and an MA in Cinema Studies from New York University. His favorite documentaries include Paris Is Burning, Portrait of Jason, F for Fake and everything directed by Werner Herzog.

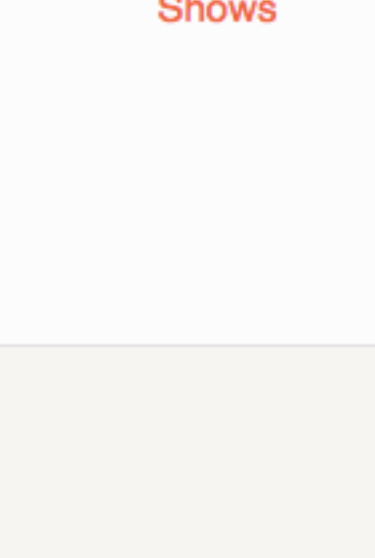
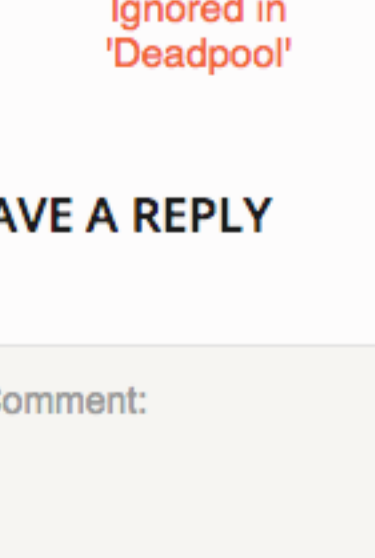
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