

## A window into contemporary political-cultural exoticism: The 73<sup>rd</sup> Berlinale

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### Abstract

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Berlin International Film Festival, by taking a frank and critical approach to confronting hostile and aggressive policies of some totalitarian regimes, as well as challenging ineffective management systems, provided a special opportunity to screen some independent films from different countries around the world. Independent films with mainly political-social themes were shown alongside the works of well-known filmmakers in the *Competition*, *Encounters*, *Forum*, and *Panorama* sections of the 73rd Berlinale, creating an exotic experience with a sense of uncanny. This experience attempted to portray societies under inappropriate cultural-political management and at times under the repression of undemocratic and violent governments, by representing a disordered, protesting, and unstable world. At the 73<sup>rd</sup> Berlinale, independent films reflected a kind of political-cultural exoticism that transcended historical and geographical boundaries. In this article, based on the nature of an exotic political-cultural approach, it will examine and discuss the films *On the Adamant*, *Tótem*, *Suzumi*, and *The Survival of Kindness* from the Competition, *The Siren* from the Panorama, *My Worst Enemy* from the Encounters, and *Where God is Not* from the Forum section.

**Keywords:** Berlinale, Exoticism, Independent Cinema, Political, Cultural

### Competition: Combinations of genres

Two hundred and eighty-three films from 67 countries were screened at the 73rd Berlin International Film Festival, which took place from February 16 to 26, 2023. This year's festival featured a kind of political-cultural exoticism that revealed the complexities and nuances of social interaction between countries. The concept of political-cultural exoticism in cinema refers to the presentation and understanding of ethnic, national, and regional cultures and policies in films whose nature and identity are generally alien to a large audience (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p.37).



**On the Adamant, directed by Nicolas Philibert, Berlinale Competition 2023**

Nineteen feature films were chosen for the competition this year, including documentary, fiction, animation, and experimental works. It was one of the most important films in the competition, *On the Adamant*, directed by Nicolas Philibert, won the Golden Bear for the best film of the festival. The documentary shows a different side of the day center Adamant, located in the center of Paris. It is located on the right bank of the Seine, near the Charles de Gaulle Bridge. This unique center houses adult with mental disorders. With the help of treatment workshops and psychological and social rehabilitation support, the center strives to help patients regain their place in daily life.

Adamant's team includes psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, occupational therapists, specialist trainers, psychomotor specialists, care coordinators, hospital staff, artists, and art therapists. Through cinema, music, painting, literature, and handicrafts, the staff of this center tries to treat patients through art. An annual film festival is held at Adamant where the patients choose the films and discuss them. The curious presence of the camera and the effort to introduce the creative thinking of the characters in the Adamant

highlights the use of scenes with the effects and function of art therapy, and the meaningful depiction of the floating location in connection with the central idea, are the special and prominent points of this film.

*On the Adamant* is an independent film that contains political, social, cultural, and philosophical sarcasm in hidden layers. From a political-cultural point of view, all the treatment staff of the Adamant are trying to influence the French government and the rulers of the health sector by their actions to support this sort of respectful and dignified approach that acknowledges the patient as a human being. By diversifying the services and spending time with patients, the staff of the Adamant are trying to remind the collective attention of the need to revise French treatment policies.

The opening scene of the film, in which the patient performs a pop song with a trembling but passionate body and face, refers to projecting worries, concerns, and even mental complexes through art. It shows how art can be more effective in treating patients than medicine. These indirect taunts are directed at the huge pharmaceutical companies and businessmen of the world who sometimes seek mass production at the expense of human ethics, values, and identity. Ontological and philosophical attitudes are reflected in the words of the patients talking to the camera. A patient who enjoys cinema, for example, says to other patients: "You have actors here who don't realize they are actors. It's not medical. They are actors without realizing it."

An exotic, non-traditional space is implied by the film's ironic location, which is both floating and anchored, a space that is both familiar and strange. Meanwhile, the shelter in the center of the city where the film takes place is a sign of the patient's unconscious world; a world at once floating and restless, yet still and static at the same time. In spite of severe mental health issues, people who are dealing with this film are able to express their creativity through art. As a result of such a situation, the characters in this film try to survive by creating art and removing themselves from the world around them, but they also know there is still a strong anchor holding them back from straying too far from it.



**Tótem, directed by Lila Avilés, Berlinale Competition 2023**

*Tótem*, directed by Lila Avilés is considered an important example of magic realism cinema. Sol, a seven-year-old girl, goes to her grandfather's house, where her aunts are preparing a surprise birthday party for her father, which is also considered a farewell ceremony. Toward the end of the story, an exotic, strange, and chaotic atmosphere dominates and breaks apart the family. A labyrinthine space, winding corridors, and many rooms in the

grandfather's house make the place reminiscent of those in magical realism literature, especially that of Gabriel García Márquez. It is important to note that a great deal of the drama in *Tótem*'s narration takes place inside the house alone. The house is masterfully connected between different spaces and places. The characters are aware of private conversations, they recognize each other's tones, and it's as if they have no secrets between them. An impressive collage of human relationships is created in this film. From a single human figure, pieces of each character are mounted on another character.

The title of the film reminds the audience of the keyword totem, which draws the audience into the story from the beginning, wondering who or what the totem is. Is the totem a sacred object, a character, or something else? *Tótem* depicts a life where everything seems normal but there is a magical or unnatural element to it by defining strange cause-effect relationships. An example of this is the scene in which a woman waving a burning stick around and continuously belching attempts to remove bad karma from the house.

Women and femininity have been given special attention in the film's characterization. A birthday party is planned by Sol's two aunts, who decide on all the details. Through close-ups of these characters, the audience gets to know Sol's relatives better. Audiences are emotionally and physiologically connected to the strange characters of the film. As the film's scenes are mostly short, and the editing attempts to break the main narration line, the audience gets closer and closer to the truth hidden in the drama by following the sub-stories. With a focus on a poor family and its sufferings, *Tótem* follows the themes of magical realism stories and shows an anti-imperialist perspective. Sol's extended family has a poor social class as shown by the failure to pay her father's nurse on time, as well as fundraising for treatment at the final party.

There is a long scene in the film where Sol sits in front of the cake and looks at the candles, and we wait to see if her father will come to blow out the candles and make a wish. Having waited so long for her father, the audience understands well that his absence means loss. Here we realize that the totem is Sol itself. Her family gathers around her so that she can be protected from destruction, giving her an appearance of purity and uniqueness.



**Suzume, directed by Makoto Shinkai, Berlinale Competition 2023**

Many critics praised the animated film *Suzume*, directed by Makoto Shinkai, in the Berlinale competition. It is about a girl named Suzumi who meets a mysterious young man named Sota who is looking for a door at the beginning of the film. Among the rubble, Suzumi finds a dilapidated but upright door. It is as if the

door is protected from all disasters. When Suzumi tries to open the door, a terrible force is released and wants to destroy everything nearby.

*Suzume* successfully combines the natural and spiritual worlds, using epic storytelling akin to Japanese anime, especially Hayao Miyazaki's work. One of Shinkai's artistic features is the combination of shadows and light. By balancing images of the real with fantasy worlds, he creates an exotic atmosphere of post-apocalyptic conditions for the audience. It has been very successful from this point of view because the film incorporates its fantasy world more and more into the real world through its photo framing.

In terms of content, *Suzume* utilizes a theme that is meaningfully connected to Japanese history and people's general fear of earthquakes causing total destruction. Because of its organic connection with the collective unconscious of the Japanese people, the film's theme resonates with the global audience because they all feel the same anxiety.

Although *Suzume*'s script follows the pattern of the hero's journey, there are many sub-stories that expand upon it. As the story's protagonist is a girl who can become Japan's savior from a demonic force, the film's feminist approach is evident from its theme. Meanwhile, *Suzume* emphasizes the principle of preserving heritage in the modern world and values the things that have been lost. Empty villages, a closed middle school, and an abandoned amusement park depict the rediscovery of life in environments where people once lived. Rather than dwell on destruction, the film seeks to restore our responsibility to rebuild the lost world and care for our current environment.

A highlight of the film is the transformation of Sota into a chair who has to hunt down a cat with an evil spirit named Daijin. As a result of this unique defamiliarization and giving the chair a human identity, *Suzume* has reached the level of the best Japanese animation work in recent years. Through elements such as integration and replacement, the fantasy characterization of the film can serve as an allegory for changing our nature while preserving our identity and spirit.

Among the other elements that have contributed to the rhythm and dynamics of the film's subsequent scenes, especially the chase scenes, is its music. In this film, the music is successful in creating tension and conflict between the audience and the incident. *Suzume* has a certain cultural exoticism because of its anthropomorphic characters, incredible battles, and hopeful core, making it appealing to a wide range of audiences.



**The Survival of Kindness, directed by Rolf de Heer, Berlinale Competition 2023**

A controversial film made with an experimental approach at Berlinale 2023 was *The Survival of Kindness*, directed by Rolf de Heer. It tells the story of a black woman imprisoned in a cage in the middle of the desert to die. She freed herself from prison with a commendable effort, but along the way, she faces obstacles reminiscent of bigger prisons. Eventually, she returns to her cage and remains silent.

This film metaphorically criticizes world powers and the way they are managed by dealing with racial conflicts, colonialism, and exploitation. There has been a certain process of colonization on every continent, ethnicity, and tribe, but it cannot be denied that heavy colonialism passed over people who weren't white enough, and that is why the black woman in *The Survival of Kindness* represents all those who have endured violence throughout history in different forms. Another theme of the film is the destruction of ancient cultures and ecosystems in the name of progress.

By combining eye-catching images with a mysterious and wordless story, the audience is drawn into an ecstasy, in which making meaning is postponed, and finally, they become something other than what they are. French filmmaker and anthropologist *Jean Roche* called such a film Cinema-Ecstasy (Andrew, 2010, p.32). In *The Survival of Kindness*, ecstasy is like rolling into a magical labyrinth with no guarantee of return, and in this sense, it is philosophically political and culturally exotic.

*The Survival of Kindness* evokes a feeling of the uncanny. Freudian psychoanalysis defines the uncanny as a feeling that occurs when faced with some objects or situations that are familiar, but at the same time convey a strange sense of alienation to the viewer or subject, and at the same time, this feeling is scary, but it also has a kind of hidden attraction (Schultz, 2016, p.93). There is still kindness left? This question repeats itself throughout the film like a conceptual motif. This is the beginning of an allegorical exploration of spectatorship.

From a narration perspective, *The Survival of Kindness* has a core that emerges in the middle and in the course of expansion. Despite its non-narration nature, the scenes of this film are like an art installation that can be rearranged in any order and still be effective. The audience can actively participate in the experience of suffering by using this special artistic technique instead of judging historical crimes. It emphasizes the idea of discontinuity and the sequence of events in the narration by not using a single language and having some characters speak in unknown languages.

From its executive approach, the film's idea, which is deep and reliant on a critical situation, is combined with static compositions and generally fixed mise-en-scenes to create a unique minimalism. The film's almost surrealistic atmosphere is created by combining macro shots and views of the landscape with the stunning cinematography of Max Corkindala and the charming music of Anna Liebrezeit.

**Panorama: In search of justice**



**The Siren, directed by Sepideh Farsi, Berlinale Panorama 2023**

One of the most important sections of the Berlinale is the Panorama, where works of independent cinema from around the world are shown. Panorama films generally combine innovative artistic skills, social projects, and political commentary. From a formal perspective, the festival programmers select unconventional and progressive works, and from a thematic perspective, works with feminist, gender, and political approaches. As part of the 73rd Berlinale Panorama section, Sepideh Farsi's animated film, *The Siren*, attracted the attention of many audiences.

It tells the story of the visible and hidden violence of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s through the eyes of 14-year-old Omid. Based on the experiences of the director's family, this animation presents a frightening picture of contemporary Iran in the early years after the Islamic Revolution. With a missile attack, the situation of Omid and his family completely changes at the climax of the story. During the first twenty minutes of the film, all the key characters are introduced and Abadan is drawn as the main location. There are ups and downs in the narration style of *The Siren* due to its pacifist protagonist's actions. Due to the use of proper character design, meaningful color combinations, and flat 2D style, the tragedy of War is well executed technically. The use of animation to depict a war situation creates a distance between the audience and observing the situation, which is similar to the world of the teenage hero in the film and makes the war atmosphere more bearable to watch.

A series of consecutive scenes shows Omid discovering parts of the city he was unaware of until now. There are scenes like meeting Armenian Christian priests, an engineer living in a half-finished building with stray cats, and a teenage girl and her mom, Elahe, who was a star singer before the Islamic revolution. Observing such scenes makes Omid devise a plan to save civilians trapped in the city. As a recurring motif, percussion music keeps alive his hope to save the city.

By utilizing an abandoned ark as a means of saving the inhabitants, Noah's ark is metaphorically represented. In this respect, the writer and the director have been able to combine hope and efforts for change in an artistic way. Although *The Siren* talks about a specific moment in time, the issues raised in its side stories are largely related to the current situation in Iran; Issues such as lack of justice, poverty, and ignoring the rights of children and women.

**Encounters: Reflections on contemporary sufferings**



**My Worst Enemy, directed by Mehran Tamdan, Berlinale Encounters 2023**

One of the competitive sections of the Berlin International Film Festival, the Encounters introduces bold works from the perspective of aesthetics and structural elements, while also supporting new and innovative talent. Another characteristic of the selected works in this section is the presence of films based on the filmmaker's unique perspective and a focus on variations in narration and form.

*My Worst Enemy*, directed by Mehran Tamdan, was one of the notable political films in Berlinale 2023's Encounters section. This film explores the concept of torture and its nature within the prisons of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Using a combination of documentary and drama, the film examines the conflict between personal ideologies and political systems. Although *My Worst Enemy* appears to be merely a series of conversations between Tamadan and his subjects, the director's ability to guide and narrate the emotional connections between the characters makes the film so compelling. In addition, the film challenges stereotypes and simplistic assumptions about political beliefs, which are discussed from a pathological perspective. Meanwhile, *My Worst Enemy* shows how petrified and limited beliefs can lead to violence in the course of its powerful interpretation of prevailing ideology and political standards.

As the film begins, several scenes of interrogation are recreated. The film director is interrogated by several people who have been tortured in Iran's prisons before. One of the highlights of the film is the presence of Iranian actor Zar Amir Ebrahimi. In the movie, she appears in three different roles: as an interrogator, as an actor, and as herself, who has been interrogated. A combination of roles in one person creates the exotic atmosphere of the film. In the narration, the three characters are combined in a way that is difficult to distinguish. As a result, the film turns from a journalistic television production into a cinematic production. In terms of content, the dualities of the torturer-victim relationship, conscience and cruelty, reality and imagination, recreation, and documentary play a significant role in the film. By using repetition, *My Worst Enemy* gives an aesthetic function to the nature of torture and the understanding of what it is through repeated actions, sentences, and sounds.

By creating portraits of torture survivors and abuse victims in the prisons of the Islamic Republic of Iran, *My Worst Enemy* raises important questions about the nature of the relationship between the interrogator and the accused, which can occupy the mind of any concerned spectator for hours.

Forum: Leading experiences



**Where God Is Not, directed by Mehran Tamadon, Berlinale Forum 2023**

As part of the Berlinale, there is a Forum section, which was established to introduce new perspectives on cinema's form and content and to understand what cinema is. There is a wide range of new audio-visual experiences represented in this section regardless of the conventional categories of fiction, documentary, and animation.

In the Forum section of the festival this year, Mehran Tamdan's film *Where God Is Not* was one of the most influential innovative, political, and protest films. Over the course of cinema's history, protest films have played an important role in shaping social awareness by challenging dominant power structures (Biltereyst, Meers & Winkel, 2014, p.43). Protest cinema based on themes such as widespread and systemic government corruption, non-respect of women's and sexual minorities' rights, religious and cultural taboos, stagnation, poverty, torture, repression, harassment, and the execution of protesters as a result of autocratic regime policies has increased significantly in recent decades.

The film *Where God Is Not* is a work of protest cinema based on the experiences of three former Iranian prisoners, depicting their interrogations and torture in the prisons of the Islamic Republic of Iran through recreation. Tamadon interviewed three prisoners in an abandoned warehouse in Paris, which evokes the atmosphere of a prison, and three ex-prisoners described their memories in the cells and interrogation rooms. Maziar Ebrahimi owned a video equipment company and was one of these former prisoners. As his rivals with strong government ties to Iran accuse him of espionage, he says he has been accused of espionage himself. With the director's help, he recreates scenes of his torture. Homa Kalhari describes how she and other female prisoners were tortured by a torturer. Another ex-prisoner, Taghi Rahmani, explained how he keeps his sanity despite the difficulties and exhaustion of a small solitary cell. An abandoned warehouse serves as the main location of the film and is a recreation of Iran's Evin prison. Human rights organizations as well as prisoners, witnesses, and staff report that Evin prison is the most notorious prison in Iran for harassment and intimidation of prisoners. Filmmakers, writers, journalists, and other opposition figures have been imprisoned at this prison.

Through the dense compositions, smooth camera work, and gradual relationship between the director and the prisoners, the audience is brought into the horrific experiences of the prisoners. As a result of the mise-en-scene and the camera position, the torturers are targeted and criticized. *Where God Is Not* has adopted

a clear and bold language in order to question the inhuman acts of people who have cooperated with the Iranian regime for any reason and have participated in suppressing and torturing protesters.

By showing the details of the act of torture, which is extremely painful for the prisoners, the director tries to expose the audience to the current situation of political prisoners in Iran. Mahsa (Jina) Amini's death sparked a nationwide demonstration against the mandatory hijab and the policies of Iran's dictatorial regime, which continues to this day. Many artists, cultural activists, athletes, journalists, etc., were arrested after this uprising and are currently detained in Iranian jails. With such a situation in mind, the film *Where God Is Not* comes as a shock to those who fight for freedom.

### Conclusion

At the 73rd Berlin International Film Festival, including Competition, Panorama, Encounters, and Forum, numerous films demonstrate how cinema has the power to introduce and discover political-cultural exoticism as both an aesthetic and content phenomenon. A variety of independent and low-budget films relying on cultural and political elements raised the audience's awareness of social and libertarian movements in other countries at the 73rd Berlinale.

*On the Adamant*, directed by Nicolas Philibert, *Tótem*, directed by Lila Avilés, *Suzume*, directed by Makoto Shinkai, *The Survival of Kindness*, directed by Rolf de Heer, *The Siren*, directed by Sepideh Farsi, *My Worst Enemy*, directed by Mehran Tamdan, and *Where God Is Not*, directed by Mehran Tamadon, used universal ideas and new techniques to highlight political-cultural exoticism. With significant cultural, political, and social themes and an innovative and progressive style, these films offered a new form of exotic cinema.

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