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# “Slow Cinema” and Its Pleasures at IDFA 2010

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Created 2010-11-24 09:41

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A couple of the more provocative films—one by a first-timer and one by a veteran—that I watched at the International Documentary Festival at Amsterdam (IDFA) this year employed the “slow food” approach to cinema in ways that provoked not boredom but critical reflection.



Soy Libre

German film student Andrea Roggon’s *Soy Libre* <sup>[2]</sup>, which got a lot of attention from filmgoers, is a rigorous and thoughtful exploration of daily life in Havana today. She juxtaposes meditative monologues of anonymous Cubans—intelligent, reflective, disaffected, hungry for freedom but without experience of choice—with extended observations of daily life in Cuba, filmed with an eye for composition.

The visuals require our patience as the realities do the Cubans’; for instance, we watch a bus loading from the first person to the very last, giving us an idea of how crowded transport really is. We watch a young boy skip down cobblestones, then watch reflections of crumbling colonial buildings in a puddle he has just jumped over. When someone talks about the rafters fleeing Cuba, the camera focuses contemplatively on water, coming ever closer to the surface. The only identified voice is that of blogger Yoani Sanchez, who argues here as elsewhere that Cubans need to see themselves as social and political actors in their own society. She argues that they need to start with recognizing the moral torpor into which many (including other monologists) have sunk: “Freedom means being able to say, ‘There is no freedom here.’...My soul is like a corpse.” She thinks it is possible to revive the Cuban spirit; others just want to marry a foreigner and leave.

A “slow cinema” veteran and beloved IDFA figure is the much-lauded Finnish director Pirjo Honkasalo. She showcased a recent work, *Ito, Diary of an Urban Priest* <sup>[3]</sup> (homage to Robert Bresson’s *Diary of a Country Priest* intentional). It is a closely observed visit to the daily work of a young Japanese Buddhist priest, whose own crises and conflicts are only slowly revealed. Like her other work, it gets right down to the basic question of what kind of meaning we ascribe to our



Ito

lives and those of others. In discussion, she likened the young priest to Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov or Goethe's Young Werther. In Honkasalo chose ten of her favorite films of all time <sup>[4]</sup> to show in retrospective at the festival. They included, eclectically, Jean Rouch's *Maitres Fous* and Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up*, both arguably also candidates for the slow-cinema label, both demanding of and rewarding viewers for time invested in understanding. She also included a neorealist classic, *La Terra Trema*, evoking her reverence for Italian neo-realism. As she said in a master class, "Truth is not about bad exposure and shaky camera movements, it is a much deeper issue. Sometimes, as neo-realism did, you can reveal the truth much better through a strong aesthetic than by showing everything just the way it appears in front of your eyes."

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