

ALIVE

Entertainment

Unorthodox moves online with films that speak to an uncertain year

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The Wexner Center's annual documentary film fest begins virtually today and runs through Friday, Oct. 30

For the fourth straight year, the Wexner Center is convening Unorthodox, a festival of documentary filmmaking. For the first time, the festival will happen virtually, with all films and director appearances happening online. With the exception of the opening talk at 7 p.m. tonight (Friday, Oct. 23), all of the titles will be available to stream for 48 hours or more. In an effort to make the festival as accessible as possible, all screenings are available on a pay-what-you-can model.

This year's festival, which runs through Friday, Oct. 30, features six films, half of which are international. Works are set in Romania, Algeria, Palestine and Puerto Rico, but all share a common interest in politics and social engagement. "Unapologetic," for example, follows Black activism in the U.S.; "Mayor" addresses one politician's work to end the occupation of Palestine; "Landfall" covers Puerto Rico's rebuilding efforts following Hurricane Maria.

Chris Stults, associate curator of film/video at the Wex, hopes that viewers will make connections across the titles. He singled out "Nardjes A" and "Unapologetic" as films that would be best viewed one after the other. Both works cover public protests in different settings, Algeria and Chicago, respectively, offering a comparative double-bill on civic participation.

Stults has programmed Unorthodox since it started in 2017. As the festival moved online, he recognized that attracting viewers in this format could be challenging. "There is such a glut of things that are available streaming right now, or just online in general, beyond film," Stults said.

Working in the digital realm, he was especially selective with programming. He characterized the selection process for this year's festival as "trying to pare it down to what felt vital this year. There are a lot of films that feel very present tense and have resonated with ... the way 2020 has gone."

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The home-viewed format of the festival reminds us of the difficult moment we are in, arguably made worse by patchy government management of the pandemic. Filmmakers are also aware that their work's relationship to audiences has been changed by COVID-19. The festival's first film, "Collective" (available Saturday and Sunday, Oct. 24 and 25) tells a story that began with a tragic 2015 nightclub fire in Romania. Deaths and injuries from the tragedy could have been curtailed with more competent medical care and better government leadership.

"The hospital corruption and subsequent government cover up in 'Collective' took place in Romania, yet this is not just a local story. There is a universality which is even more relevant post-COVID," director Alexander Nanau said.

"Government corruption is sadly all too familiar across the world, and the need to safeguard social justice and press freedom feels more urgent than ever."

This was reflective of the deliberate approach Stults adopted this year in selecting documentaries that speak to the present moment. "These are films that help to make sense of a year that is pretty tough to make sense of," he said.

Nina Menkes opens Unorthodox tonight (Friday, Oct. 23) at 7 p.m.

In the only live event of Unorthodox this year, filmmaker and professor Nina Menkes will present "[Sex and Power: The Visual Language of Oppression: A Cinematic Talk.](#)"

Menkes' lecture will analyze films such as "Do the Right Thing" and "Raging Bull," uncovering how the "politics of shot design are embedded into films that are many people's beloved films," she said.

Focusing on gender, Menkes looks at how camera movement, framing and point of view communicate in subtle, yet powerful ways. Sometimes the camerawork can be at odds with the story on screen. Taking the example of "Bombshell," the

recent film about sexual harassment at the Fox News network, which Menkes said “may indeed be a feminist story, but the way that it is shot undercuts that intention by objectifying women in a very standard way.”

Menkes’ presentation explores five prominent ways that shot design is gendered, now known as “the Menkes List,” as coined in a review by Caz Armstrong. The Menkes List can be understood as complementary to the Bechdel test. Both are critical rubrics for analyzing gender in film. However, where the Bechdel test focuses on character design and scriptwriting, Menkes analyzes elements of style such as framing, sound, camera movement and lighting.

Menkes clarified that she does not consider many of the films that she analyzes as categorically “bad.” She even loves some of them. Yet, we would do better to view films more critically, she said, disentangling the aspects of these films that still deserve our admiration with those elements we ought to question.