

festival review

FNC 2018 - Festival Gender Politics after #metoo

Ylenia Olibet

The 47th Festival of Nouveau Cinema, as every year, marks a grand occasion for the cinephiles of Montreal showcasing films that have accumulated significant cultural capital by their prior circulation in the international festival circuit (such as *Shoplifters*, Kore-eda Hirokazu, 2018, 121 min), varying premieres, and avant-premières (*A Land Imagined*, Yeo Siew Hua, 2018, 95 min). FNC is also known to feature independent, experimental, and local productions that are often excluded from wider distribution avenues (*M/M*, Drew Lint, 2018, 82 min). In this sense, FNC conceives of its programming as an exceptional space, which has the ability to project Montreal as a city embodying the trends of global cinema. This year, the festival highlighted its engagement with and contribution to global film politics by including films and events that directly responded to the pervasiveness of the #TimesUp and #metoo movements. Slowly, but endemically, these movements have been reshaping power relations in the film industry at large, while also reorganizing mechanisms of visibility for women's work within film festivals.

Reviewing FNC relative to the visibility of today's feminist digital activism brings to the fore two major perspectives through which global film politics, in the context of film festival institutions at large, can be approached by means of a gender-specific lens. On the one hand, the festival's concern with spotlighting films directed and/or

scripted by women¹ as well as films with a “feminist representation of the world,”² opens up a space in which one can reflect on the extent to which the dominant project of global feminism has become intertwined with the idea of global cinema, as engendered by the festival's apparatus. Through featuring and promoting the contributions of women filmmakers from various parts of the world (*Fugue*, Agnieszka Smoczyńska, 2018, 103 min) and narratives that foreground contemporary feminine subjectivities (*The Heiressess*, Marcelo Martinesi, 2018, 95 min), the festival claims to endorse a feminist vision on film politics. On the other hand, this kind of feminist vision seems based on a narrow understanding of feminism, one that settles amid neoliberal and Western-centric parameters of self-entrepreneurship, according to which women, with supposedly equal opportunities as their men colleagues, can now succeed, even within this already established (capitalist) system (Rottenberg 2013). However, such a monolithic understanding of feminism,—proliferated by festival discourse—curbs the opportunity to engage further with the nuances of feminist resistance to established channels of production and distribution. This is necessary for the possibility to break into and revise the existing dynamics in the global film industry. The festival's construction of cinematic feminism reinforces a discourse of global cinema where the “global” is defined according to “progressive”

Western standards in gender politics. By emphasizing the inclusion of films by and on women from “all over the world,” the festival promotes itself as seemingly liberal and modern, while actually engaging with only a narrow idea of feminism. In turn, the festival’s gender politics are then instituted as the model to follow in order to be considered “global.” Despite the festival’s reductive construction of feminism, many films in its latest edition demonstrate an alignment to multiple feminist projects. In this review, I will focus on select films screened at the Festival that underscore women and non-conforming modes of femininity. In the second part of the review, I will deal more specifically with the way that the #metoo, intended as a socio-political movement, has contributed to the reworking of labour conditions within the film industry, as well as to the reshaping of certain rape and sexual assault narratives in women’s cinema.

Rafiki, programmed in the Panorama International section of FNC 47th, clearly depicts a dynamic linking feminism with the idea of global cinema, as constructed by the FNC. Directed by Wanuri Kahiu, *Rafiki* is both a lesbian love story and a coming-of-age narrative between two young women, set within Kenyan society, one intolerant and forbidding of homosexuality. By delving into the representation of queerness in a specific geopolitical context and by intersecting issues of locality, class, and ethnicity—the film challenges canonical sexual identities promoted by globalization and condemns the violence inflicted on LGBTQIA+ communities in Kenya. However, FNC’s discourse around the film, as described in the program as well as mentioned at the film’s Q&A, has focused primarily on the fact that the film was censored in Kenya, where homosexuality is constitutionally forbidden. The festival, thus, positions itself as an emancipatory platform for the circulation and the exhibition of *Rafiki*. The screening and fruition of the film at FNC, an internationally-acclaimed festival based in North America, stages FNC as a progressive space where Western gender politics and attitudes on ‘liberated’ sexualities can be openly presented and conceived of as the standard and most championed model to follow suit.

However, the renewed attention to feminist politics, brought about by the global visibility of the #metoo movement, among others—restores, the concept of ‘women’s cinema’ as a political filmmaking practice that represents women as

righteous social subjects and engages with issues at stake within feminist communities amid international flows of film circulation. FNC 2018 delineated a space to showcase how the politics of ‘fourth-wave feminism’³ can enter into themes, narratives, and characters of films directed by women, contributing to a redefinition of “women’s cinema” as more so of an operational concept that directly reinscribes feminist theories over the political into the film form itself. Thus, while FNC itself is a concrete example of how contemporary women’s cinema is involved within the dynamics of global cinema, the very formal and thematic tactics in the included films disrupt hegemonic modes of femininity, helping rethink gendered relations within globalization. These films now stand within a genealogy of women’s cinema that specifically engages with and employs the woman’s experience itself as a site of political insurgence, addressing issues that feminist politics, activism, and theory are currently concerned with. The wide range of genres, formats, and themes explored by the women filmmakers in this year’s edition of FNC display unconventional explorations of feminine subjectivities as influenced by recent feminist understandings of girlhood/womanhood, gender performativity, sexuality, and queerness. For example, from the section “Focus Quebec/Cinema,” *Mouthpiece*, by well-known filmmaker Patricia Rhozhema, follows a woman wandering through the urban landscape of Toronto as she tries to find the power in her to write a eulogy for her mother’s funeral. The protagonist’s inner conflict is rendered by two actresses playing the same role, with each representing a different aspect of the complex character. Both, in turn, are torn between the past and present, childhood and adulthood, while simultaneously negotiating mourning, aphasia, and creativity. Using flashbacks, fantasy sequences, and musical performances, which mediate the process of mourning, the film explores a mother-daughter relationship that is anchored in generational conflict. While the film depicts different expectations of womanhood, it confers centrality to the role of the mother as crucial to a woman’s formation. From the section “Temps 0,” *Touch me Not* by Adina Pintilie, winner of the Golden Bear at Berlin, explores sexuality and intimacy through a body-positive approach—foregrounding disabled, older, and transsexual bodies. What Pintilie thus renders is an attempt to redefine the boundaries

of what is considered to be normative, reshaping assumed ideas over human desires and relations. Understanding these films in line with contemporary reconfigurations of feminist activism and theory reactivates a political project capable of ultimately readjusting a postfeminist⁴ climate that has long dominated festival politics and, in that way, reducing women's cinema to an industry-fabricated 'films for women' (White 2015). Refusing to relegate feminist endorsement to the past, the formal and thematic strategies of these films re-establish a feminist engagement with embodiment, women's experiences, and the understanding of the 'personal' as the political. In this sense, the resurgence of feminist activism through digital technologies, of which the #metoo movement seems to belong to, helps re-define feminine-centered narratives and subjectivities in the larger scope of contemporary women's cinema.

The extensive reach and potential of the #metoo movement cannot be underestimated in its ability to reignite a feminist political project within film politics. This intervention is evident both on the organizational level of the film industry as well as on the level of filmic form, theme, narrative, and constructions of femininity. The force and the political effectiveness of the #metoo movement is reworking gender politics in the grand scheme of the global film industry by initiating a conversation about women's working conditions. The #metoo movement has not only denounced sexual abuses, but has also exposed the inherent sexism in all spheres of the film industry more broadly. From the marginalization of women filmmakers at the stage of production and distribution, to the gendered power relations on set and within the broader network of the film industry, to the instituted biases regarding the types of films women can make—international festivals are gradually and more explicitly addressing these issues. The panel "Breaking the Glass ceiling: Women in Cinema," within the FNC Forum—a series inviting members of the industry to reflect on specific topics—was a formal occasion at FNC 47 that focused on recognizing and discussing how the #metoo movement has broadened the discussion over a woman's presence, role, and place within the film industry. The filmmakers and producers on the panel, moderated by Fanni Pelletier, entered the discussion by means of their embodied experiences, in order to pinpoint the way gender discrimination in the

industry cannot be tackled solely through policies that attempt to establish gender equality (like the NFB's commitment to ensuring that by 2019, at least half of its productions will be directed by women and half of all production spending will be allocated to films directed by women)⁵, but also through addressing the more structural problems (like the resulting gender gap amid technical positions, in part due to the ways certain professions are socialized), that contribute to a toxic working environment on set for the female filmmakers and technicians. In order to eradicate such deeply embedded sexism, a panelist proposed for women filmmakers to rely exclusively on networks meant to support their professional and creative development. For example, the organizations Femmes du Cinéma, de la Télévision, and des Médias, based in Montreal, offer social events that provide women with training, assistance, and the possibility to network among other women film professionals. Although the panel was undergirded by a neoliberal discourse and framing of confidence, creativity, individualism, and self-empowerment—the recognition of the importance in creating a network of support amongst women produces a renewed potential for the politics of feminist solidarity in cinema.

It is precisely through this idea of reconstructing solidarity that digital feminist activism is reorganizing the struggle over sexism, misogyny, and rape culture. The renewal of a feminist consciousness is reconfiguring the understanding of sexual harassment and consent, consequently reshaping the representation of rape and opening up a new political understanding of a woman's agency in the context of sexual violence. In this sense, women's cinema is tackling these issues by dealing with new representations of sexual violence. At the 47th FNC, two films in particular, that address the structural problem of rape culture through a character's individual trajectory, caught my attention. Although using different narrative and formal strategies, *All Good* (Eva Trobisch, 2018, 93 min) and *Holiday* (Isabella Eklöf, 2018, 93 min) both grapple with a representation of sexual violence that challenges the standard understanding of rape, shifting discourse to new understandings of what constitutes consent and how it is determined. In *All Good*, the protagonist Janne must deal with the trauma of being raped at her country house by a man she meets at her high-school reunion. With

a cinematography composed mostly of close-ups, imparting the audience with intimate feel of the protagonist's state, the film focuses on the feelings of insecurity and loneliness that arise after such an experience. In the sequence depicting the woman's rape—the bare *mise-en-scène*, the assailant's arrogance in forcing himself onto the protagonist despite her verbal lack of consent, along with her ultimate surrender—together compose an alternative representation of sexual violence in its non-sensationalized treatment. Although not overtly aggressive nor brutal, the insidious violence of rape in this sequence emerges. While this traumatic experience will leave Janne with anger, despair, and solitude—her trajectory is also marked by the realization that her relationship with her life partner is characterized by manipulation, abuse, and egoism. In this sense, the experience of this rape is not only the object of analysis, but the prism through which hegemonic discourse, which tends to analyze sexual and gender violence as exceptional or fixed occurrences, are deconstructed. In other words, the representation of a more inconspicuous rape enacted by an acquaintance, as opposed to the more common, violent representation as one committed by a stranger, challenges pervasive perceptions of sexual assault that are usually limited to more recognizable scenarios.

Through a different set of formal and narrative strategies, *Holiday* speaks directly to the contemporary feminist deconstruction of sexual violence in its reductive style. The austere camera work, in contrast to the film's embellished set design, illustrates a context that forces the power relations within the protagonist's personal sphere to become visible. A luxurious *mise-en-scène* made of brilliant colors, kitsch objects, and maritime landscapes is anchored in a cinematography of frontal shots with medium to long frames. The flashy film form situates the protagonist, Sascha, on vacation in Turkey with her gangster boyfriend and his family—living in a world of surfaces, where physical and sexual violence are enmeshed with consumerism, economical wellness, and recklessness. Her body becomes akin to a human-sized doll, fondled by her partner in a disturbing initial sequence. While drunk and helpless on the bed, Sascha's bodily autonomy is disrespected as her boyfriend treats her body as a conceit for objectification: playing with it as he wants, touching and manipulating. This reprehensible scene is positioned,

unbeknownst to the viewer, before graphic rape scene later into the film. A long frontal shot makes a distancing, observational perspective that obliges the spectator to witness the scene, without being enticed, putting them in a position that replicates the structural complacency of society on the issue of sexual assault. Although the sequence, mostly provocative and highly disturbing, is certainly disempowering for Sacha, the film dares to show sexual violence as embedded within a capitalist and consumerist structure of imbalanced gender relations, thus connecting to and participating in the revolution of #metoo.

Both films focus on a woman's subjective trajectory in conjunction with a structural, social, economic, and political treatment of sexual violence. Within the context of Festival du Nouveau Cinema, these films open up a dialogue with broader feminist attempts at reconfiguring the public sphere, especially through cultural film politics. Such a moment is intertextually linked to the existing digital media-based instances of feminist activism that, in line with a long-standing tradition of feminist solidarity, can mobilize audiences against sexism and rape culture. Finally, although the festival operates under a global cinema logic that conflates with certain homogenizing discourses of feminism, the specific films themselves, of and about women, have the power to excavate a space within FNC, for the discussion and visibility of the most relevant and radical aspects of contemporary feminisms today.

References

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Endnotes

- 1 "Women's Voices at FNC 47" <https://nouveaucinema.ca/en/news/news/womens-voice-at-fnc47>, last access February 1, 2019. Please note that this Festival's article, as well as all the other festival discourse, only refers to women and does not specify other "self-identified women."
- 2 "Something like Feminism – FNC 47" <https://nouveaucinema.ca/en/news/news/something-like-feminism-fnc47>, last access February 1, 2019.
- 3 Fourth-wave feminism usually refers to a renewed visibility of feminist politics as an intervention into structural, gendered power relations through the use of online grassroots strategies (Munro 2013; Chamberlain 2016).
- 4 By postfeminism, I mainly refer to the disavowal of feminism based on the idea that feminist activist politics are no longer required. For some literature on postfeminism, see McRobbie 2004; Tasker and Negra 2007; Gill and Scharff 2011.
- 5 National Film Board of Canada – Departmental Plan 2018-2019 <http://onf-nfb.gc.ca/en/about-the-nfb/publications/institutional-publications/departmental-plan-2018-2019/departmental-plan-2018-2019-html/>, last access February 1, 2019.