

Festival Report

Meena Karnik

Oberhausen Short Film Festival



Meena Karnik (India), with FIPRESCI jury colleagues Amirata Joolaei (Iran), and Fabian Tietke (Germany) at the 72nd Oberhausen International Short Film Festival, Germany, 28 April – 3 May 2026.

What exactly do you expect from a short film festival? What kinds of films do you want to see? Is a short film simply a story that can be told in fewer words or frames? Or is a short film something that moves beyond story — a form for presenting emotions, experiences, or memories, a space for formal experimentation? The Oberhausen International Short Film Festival provided answers to all of those questions.

Held in a small German town of Oberhausen, this festival celebrated its 72nd year. Launched in 1954, the festival has seen many ups and downs, changes, and experiments. In recent years a section of the festival has often been organized around a special theme — like “Memories Can Wait, Film Without Film” or “Solidarity Is Disruption”. This year’s theme dealt with the massive intervention of AI: “Based on True Events?”

Even today the festival is not wealthy financially, but the organizers clearly know where to use their resources. The festival maintains its own video library that's open to guests; its archives contain thousands of short films important to film history from the past seventy-plus years. For short filmmakers worldwide, this festival has become an important platform. According to festival directors Madeleine Bernstoff and Susannah Pollheim, "This year the number of submissions increased by twenty percent... We also, however, consistently have to consider the conditions under which such a festival can take place. Particularly at this time of growing economic challenges, being able to secure spaces for artistic freedom, critical discourse and international encounters is not something to be taken for granted." That's why this cultural gathering is significant — especially when it takes place in a small town like Oberhausen.



Opera

The FIPRESCI jury had Fabian Tietke from Germany and Amirata Joolae from Iran (who has lived in Germany for the past two or three years) with me. Over six days we watched more than fifty short films. The selection included fiction and documentaries, docudramas and bits of pure comedy. Some filmmakers told a story, some confronted

their past. Displacement was a recurring theme. After seeing so many films, choosing one that stood out was especially difficult. But then *Opera* was the clear winner.

Perception and reality is presented so effectively in Igor Zelic's 19-minute-40-second film from Croatia that it leaves you speechless. Nocturnal darkness covers a rural road in the night. Bit by bit lights are added, interspersing the darkness with bright spots, thus revealing the depths of the space. Over the whole length of the film a carefully choreographed movement of lights adds and subtracts visible elements allowing us glimpses into the mysterious space lining the road. The pale glow of colours gives the image the beauty of a painting of light, the appearance and disappearance of people turns the road into a nocturnal theatre stage until the arrival of the daylight sets an early end to the night's magic. The harsh reality in the morning light is almost shocking.

Throughout the film the camera remains in one spot. From a single angle we watch this play, yet we experience multiple impressions, the film raises many questions in our minds, and we are left looking for the answers. The director choreographs the night's interplay of lights as if it were a dance. A mysterious quality lingers the entire time. The director's use of light, sound and space — the film's elemental tools — is extraordinary. The film combines artistry and craftsmanship, in an interesting way.

But *Opera* was only one of many interesting films. China's Yu Zhe's 11-minute *Dark Channel* is another example of a film that says something without narrating any story. Like *Opera*, it plays with time and space. The entire film takes place in a small

tunnel. We witness a canal in this tunnel across the four seasons and through nights and days: rising water in night rains, the morning reflections in the water, a bicyclist passing, a heron glimpsed on a wall in fragments, a green frog sitting on dry land the next day. The ripples made by the bicycle wheel sometimes look like currents of electricity and at other times like a simple ephemeral shape. The narrow space of the canal produces a sense of breathlessness, while the reflections in the water provide feelings of release. The director has the power to evoke two opposite feelings at once. The film goes well beyond conventional storytelling.



Dark Channel

In both *Opera* and *Dark Channel* there is not a single dialogue and no conventional plot, yet both have the power to hold viewers.

By contrast, *5-6-7-8*, a 9.5-minute film by Emilio Bianchic (Uruguay/Mexico), does have a clear story. A bolt of electricity transforms an ordinary makeup artist into a dancing performer, and we follow that performer's rise to fame and fall back to the ground. The film shows many dances including pole dancing. But the real marvel isn't the story or the dancing alone — the director stages the whole story using human fingers. All the dances are performed by

fingers, and you actually feel as if a real person is dancing before you. After a while the fingers fade away, and those gestures seem to become the actual personae.

August and the War also has a narrative. Presented with irony, comedy and satire, the 14-minute film is by Leandro Netzell Ceron and Samori Tovatt from Sweden. August is a young man whose extreme height and awkward gait mark him as odd. He loves music but wonders whether he is ready to fight for his country. At the family dinner table his mother answers plainly: "If you want responsibility, start with the housework. Do the laundry." A machine gun arrives in a package instead of a musical instrument at his home; simply removing it leaves him breathless. Through small comic incidents and dialogues, the directors convey their antiwar stance clearly.

Two other very short comic films are worth noting. *Toast* (directed by Nela Gluhak, Croatia) is two minutes long, while *Slow Fast Slow* (directed by Jagoda Zharnek, Poland) lasts only a minute. In *Toast* a girl says she received a toaster as a gift and has been obsessed with making toast ever since. "On the 24th of June 2024 my mother bought me a toaster, and my life has changed forever," she declares, while the screen shows many varieties of toast. At one point some food appears and we hear, "This is not toast." The piece has a larky charm. Nothing much happens otherwise, but it's fun.

Calling *Slow Fast Slow* "funny" might be bold. We see a sleeping girl; the alarm clock rings loudly; she wakes up with a jolt, falls to the floor, and something dramatic ensues. That's it. Do humans live to the rhythm of the clock? Is life slipping from our

hands? A one-minute film leaves the viewers to draw whatever meanings they choose.

Alongside such fiction movies (including India's Bhavya Kartikeyan's 23-minute *Tea Powder*) there were many documentaries. *Daylight* (directed by Anna Heisterkamp, USA/Ireland, 22 minutes), about a Manhattan's Chinatown prison built in 1838 that has been altered four times since, explores who the architects were and how aware they were of the conditions of the prisoners. Turkish filmmaker Ece Era's *Dogs and Dust* is a roughly 14-minute documentary, also related to prisons. She makes experimental films and studies street animals and life outside the boundary; this film was no exception. At the European border of Turkey there is a desolate stretch with remnants of war and hundreds of dogs roaming. That place has become their home. The site is due to be cleared for a new prison; Ece Era documents the last few days before construction begins. The displacement of dogs becomes a symbol; the need to build new prisons is the reality. The director weaves the two strands beautifully.

An Open Field begins with a curious line: "A film I did not want to make." Director Toboho Adkins (France, Germany, South Africa, 38.06 minutes) made this documentary as a kind of homage to his brother who died in a plane crash. Six years earlier, a Boeing plane crashed in Ethiopia because of faults in the company's software, killing all the 157 passengers. Toboho and his father visited the crash site last year and made this documentary. When they arrived, they realized that locals had, for six years, commemorated the crash day through their customs. They were honouring the dead. In a

way, these rituals bring a sort of closure to the father. On the other hand, the father of the pilot from the airline says, "All the blame was placed on my son." Toboho's father tries to persuade him to unite and fight, but he isn't as optimistic as Toboho's father, knowing fully well how difficult, rather impossible it is to fight the rich corporations.

In documentaries like *Flow*, director Kagoma Ya Twahirva (Rwanda, 22.15 minutes) presents the story of a girl born after the 1984 Rwandan genocide who grew up searching for her own voice. Close-ups of the girl convey her distress. It's as if the pain cannot be put into words, yet it's visible on her face. While young people around her talk about their childhood experiences, there is no performative acting; no explicit violence appears on screen, but the aftermath of that history affecting the next generation is effectively portrayed.

Displacement, war, confronting the past, narrating one's suffering, family stories, searching for roots — these themes were handled by many directors.



An Autobiography of My Diabetes

Among the films that lingered longest in my mind after *Opera* was the documentary *An Autobiography of My Diabetes*. Matthew Lancit was diagnosed with diabetes in childhood. The film shows, in detail, how

diabetes affected his life and body, but not in a direct didactic way. Lancit frames it through cinema — he has long loved the genre of body horror. He juxtaposes images of corporeal decay, disintegrating organs, and violent bodily effects from body-horror films with memories and medical texts. “After the making of my previous film (PLAY DEAD!), some unfinished business remained on my desktop. Home movies and various body horror films from my childhood cluttered my computer screen. Part medical treatise, part self-anamnesis, and a mashup tinged with nostalgia, this video essay reclaims the images emanating from my computer screen to the everyday gaze of a diabetic,” says the director of this documentary.

It is rare to see such a detached gaze at an illness. The film does not seek pity. Personally, body horror is not my favourite genre; across the years I have never formed much of an attachment to horror. Yet the director’s juxtapositioning of body-horror imagery with the real bodily effects of

diabetes is so effective that it demands admiration.

After watching all these films, one clear impression remained: the majority of these directors did not use ordinary narrative to express what they wanted to say. These filmmakers are young, their modes of expression are modern, and they speak with conviction. That does not mean every film was outstanding or that every film had something profound to say. But the urge to experiment was present in all of them. We must move beyond the reductive definition of the short film as a mere condensation of a feature-length narrative. Instead, the works presented here demand a re-evaluation of the form as an independent space for expressing intuitive emotions, experiential textures, and the hazy architecture of memory. It is an autonomous medium with its own grammar, its own presentation methods, and a distinct place within audiovisual art. This festival serves as a critical site for the short film medium.

Meena Karnik is a member of FIPRESCI.