

Fifteenth annual Doc Fortnight addresses urgent issues

By [Daniel Eagan](#) Feb 19, 2016



ScreeenerBlog



This year's edition of [Doc Fortnight](#) marks the 15th in the series. Running Feb. 19-29 at New York's Museum of Modern Art, the series gives viewers the opportunity to see movies by new and veteran filmmakers from around the world.

Organized by Sally Berger, assistant curator at the Department of Film, with David Neary, festival liaison,

Doc Fortnight 2016 will be screening 20 features and nine shorts, several of them receiving world premieres.

Speaking at a reception for the Museum's Department of Film, Berger singled out selection committee members artist Yto Barrada and Toby Lee, associate professor of Cinema Studies at New York University, for helping find common themes from some 400 titles considered.

Movies screening in this year's series address current events like the war in Syria (*Coma, My Aleppo*) and the migrant crisis (*Out of Norway, The Great Wall*), but with insight and sophistication that raise them above news reporting.

Doc Fortnight opens tonight with *And When I Die, I Won't Stay Dead*, director Billy Woodberry's study of Beat poet Bob Kaufman. Through interviews, archival footage and dramatic interpretations of Kaufman's poetry, Woodberry brings to life a pivotal artist whose work is largely unknown today. Like *Magic Trip: Ken Kesey's Search for a Kool Place*, the documentary is suffused with melancholy, of possibilities lost, chances squandered, plans delayed or abandoned.

Woodberry was a key figure in the "L.A. Rebellion," a loose group of black filmmakers that included

Charles Burnett and Haile Gerima. His 1984 feature *Bless Their Little Hearts* was added to the National Film Registry in 2013.

Other archival-based entries in this year's Doc Fortnight include Jihan El-Tahri's *Nasser* (Feb. 22 and 24), which depicts how General Gamal Abdel Nasser led a successful rebellion against King Farouk in 1952. Newsreels and interviews with surviving eyewitnesses and participants alternate with clips from feature films like *Autumn Quail*. The movie connects Nasser's story to the Arab Spring uprising in Tahrir Square, the parallels both powerful and depressing.



In August 1991, hard-liners tried to oust President Mikhail Gorbachev, precipitating a chain of events that led to the fall of the Soviet empire. Sergei Loznitsa's *Sobytie (The Event)*, (Feb. 22 and 24) uses archival footage to depict day-to-day events in an unfolding revolution. A long shot pans across a square filled with thousands of demonstrators; as they observe a minute of silence for the fallen, one by one they raise an arm in solidarity. Some of the clandestine material is eerily evocative of *Czechoslovakia 1968*, suggesting that each generation faces a new battle for freedom.



One example of what makes Doc Fortnight so distinctive is *Out of Norway*. In the 2012 series, filmmaker Thomas Østbye showed *Imagining Emanuel*, a character study of Liberian immigrant Emanuel Agara and his journey from Africa to Norway. Without papers, it was illegal for Agara to stay in Norway and illegal to leave. For this movie, Østbye gave Agara his own camera to document his

efforts to return to Africa after over ten years in exile.

Out of Norway is screening Feb. 23 and 24 with *La France est notre patrie (France Is Our Mother Country)*, the North American premiere of Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh's follow-up to *The Missing Picture*. A master of archival montage, Panh uses newsreels and home movies to examine the French colonial leaders whose rule helped lead to the Khmer Rouge regime. Panh's cold logic, his grasp of the power of images, and his personal memories and experiences give his movies a searing intensity.

Some of the Doc Fortnight entries link back to earlier documentary traditions. *La France est notre patrie* uses a mocking tone to reveal the political ideologies behind travelogues, for example.

Ettrick (Feb. 26 and 29) looks back to the nature films of the 1930s by artists like Ralph Steiner, whose 1929 short *H₂O* turned rain, streams and harbors into abstract patterns. Director Jacques Perconte does the same to landscapes of Scotland, transforming moors



and highlands through digital effects into abstractions that resemble Impressionistic paintings, computer landscapes, even tweeds. Even fabric evolves into something new, as Perconte shows in mill factory footage. Disorienting, hallucinatory, *Ettrick* suggests a visit to another planet, or perception through alien senses—challenging the limits and meanings of the term "documentary."



Perconte's movie is showing with the world premiere of an extended version of *Scrumpled*, which uses shifting focus and chanting to examine a Buddhist temple in South Korea. Director Seoungcho Cho and Perconte will talk about their works after the screenings.

Other entries in this year's Doc Fortnight try different techniques to expand the boundaries of what constitutes a documentary. Using actors, recreating scenes, staging footage, these movies are still trying to portray a "truth," however subjective.

The Norwegian entry *Tiden går (Time Passes)*, Feb. 20 and 21) uses homelessness to examine social issues closely related to *Out of Norway*. In it, an art student and a homeless Roma woman explore how politics and economics lead to the systematic oppression of the poor. The movie combines performance art with actuality footage.

So does *Chi (Mr. Zhang Believes)*, Feb. 20 and 21), a profile of Zhang Xianchi, a sort of political outlier whose personal history reflects the changes in China over the past 70 years. Also a well-known painter as well as the director of 2012's *My Mother's Rhapsody*, Qiu Jiongiong combines straight reporting with experimental theatre to help explain an independent thinker whose choices led to imprisonment.

Doc Fortnight closes on Feb. 29 with the world premiere of *INAATE/SE/ [it shines a certain way. to a certain place./it flies. falls./]*, a piece about the Ojibway of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. Native American video artists Adam and Zack Khalil blend animation, performance and interviews to recapture the narrative of a people whose stories until now have been told by others.

Just as Doc Fortnight lets documentarians bear witness to vital issues, it gives viewers the chance to encounter hidden voices and unknown lives, without the formulas and conventions that make so much nonfiction seem so disposable.



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