

James Lattimer on the FoR Shorts Programmes

For a category so ridiculously ill-defined, the documentary has demonstrated surprisingly remarkable tenacity and longevity. ‘Documentary’ is a label slapped onto all manner of disparate forms to undermine their distinctiveness and render them more easily consumable, as if taming them might also tame the unruly worlds they depict. With this year’s edition of FRAMES of REPRESENTATION dedicated to Deframing, it’s thus no surprise that the category of the documentary proves a most insufficient reading aid to navigate the festival’s two shorts programmes. This selection of films are as happy to invent or manipulate as they are to observe or document; they speak to the impossibility of finding one convenient objectivity, play around with modes, genres, frames and framing devices and work as much with the unsaid, the invisible, the constructed and the suggested as anything approaching the ‘real’.

The first FRAMES of REPRESENTATION shorts programme opens with Laura Huertas Millán’s *The Labyrinth*, a hypnotic exploration of the many boundaries blurred when fictional aspirations are made flesh: a hubristic drug lord once built a replica of the mansion from *Dynasty* in the Amazonian jungle that would eventually crumble along with his power. Shifting almost imperceptibly between images and accounts of past wealth and their traces in the present day, a portrait of a truly in-between realm comes into focus, equal parts Colombia and Colorado, immaculate and overgrown, real and imagined. Elena López Riera’s *Those Who Desire* observes a peculiar pastime conducted by men in southern Spain, whereby each contestant paints a male pigeon in bright colours to compete for the affections of the one solitary female. Eschewing any direct commentary or easily definable viewpoint – aside from selected rules of the contest read out in voiceover – the wonderfully deadpan film allows the viewer to decide just what parallels to human courtship are being drawn and how seriously they are to be taken. And in Sara Fgaier’s *The Years*, fragments of French author Annie Ernaux’s memoir of the same name give structure, meaning and great resonance to flickering film reels of family life in Sardinia. This found-footage literary adaptation undermines two apparent necessities in one: the subjecthood of the essay film and the biographical link of the home movie.

João Vladimiro's *Anteu* opens the second FRAMES of REPRESENTATION shorts programme and takes an equally unorthodox approach to biography, albeit within a fictional framework. Although the trajectory followed by the 17-year-old Anteu – the last inhabitant of a Portuguese village facing extinction – does indeed move from cradle to grave, the conventional pivotal moments are conspicuously lacking, replaced instead by barrel rolling, ravishing landscapes, mathematical digressions in voiceover and the construction of a mysterious machine; a life story governed by the droll and the oblique. The undulating mounds of foam that suffuse Yalda Afsah's *Tourneur* feel like they've wandered in from some science fiction film, not least due to the droning noises and exquisitely precise sound design that accompany them. Although they are soon revealed to be just one extra attraction at a bullfight in southern France, the sense of otherworldliness they convey attaches itself to the entire spectacle, as the carefully restricted framings continually destabilise what's being seen: an everyday event transformed into a surreal choreography of bodies, collisions and swirling movements. What a frame can capture and what it cannot is at the heart of Khaled Abdulwahed's *Backyard*, which traces how a photograph taken back in 1998 close to the director's former home in Damascus is projected, sketched out, scanned and eventually reproduced via a 3D printer. The cactus field, the row of poplars to the rear of the image, and the table beneath the tree are all duly transposed, but what about everything else they once embodied? Surplus spills out from every frame.

James Lattimer is a festival programmer and film critic.