

Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri is perhaps the most culturally significant movie of the last year. In the protagonist Mildred, director Martin McDonagh portrays a woman who's had enough of the town's corruption plaguing her life and decides to do something about it.

Weaving a tale of vigilante justice with themes of rape, violence and revenge, McDonagh's dark comedy follows a mother, Mildred Hayes (Frances McDormand), as she wages war on the local police who have failed to solve her daughter's murder. Angered by the lack of arrests, she emblazons the words "RAPED WHILE DYING. STILL NO ARRESTS. HOW COME, CHIEF WILLOUGHBY?" on three billboards to shame the local lawmen, particularly police chief Willoughby (Woody Harrelson), for their inaction. Mildred refuses to let her daughter's murder be swept under the rug as an inconsequential act of sexual violence. She is driven and motivated by anger but it also frees her in a way nothing else does. Her fury and resentment is evident in every scowl and caustic remark, always simmering beneath the surface until it hits you full throttle. Then, I had to clutch the edge of my seat as Mildred drills a hole in her bigoted dentist's thumb by day and throws bombs at the local police station by night (among other things).

# THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING, MISSOURI IS A RETELLING OF AMERICA'S CURRENT CULTURAL CLIMATE

MITHI CHOWDHURY

McDonagh has a knack for injecting even the most serious or tragic subject matters with crude humour. His film *In Bruges* (2008) is one of my personal favourites because of its enduring ability to make me recoil in horror or laugh out loud in the most unbefitting situations. The dialogues are crisp, sarcastic and delightfully nihilistic, a testament to McDonagh's prominent background as a playwright. This outrageous dark humour laces every interaction, particularly apparent in Mildred's cynical one-liners and sardonic exchanges with the other characters. McDonagh treads a fine line between tragedy and comedy, never letting the film slip fully into either, thus striking the perfect balance. One of the most comical scenes is also the most grotesque as we witness racist policeman, Jason Dixon (Sam Rockwell), haul a bleeding man out of a window to the tune of "His Master's Voice" by Monsters of Folk. (Did I mention that this scene was shot in one take?)

Despite her hatred and cruelty towards others, I found myself rooting for Mildred. Her grief is devastating and relatable to anyone who's lost a loved one to violence. In spite of her immutable rage and sadness, Mildred has her moments of empathy. By the end of the film, she morphs into a vigilante of sorts, donning her trademark blue overalls as she sets out to punish a potential rapist. Only an actress of McDormand's stature could have breathed life into a character as stoic as Mildred Hayes. Her dialogues are cutting but for me, her silence made her truly iconic. McDormand shines during those quiet moments when Mildred stares deadpan into the camera, saying nothing and everything all at once.

Perhaps, the film's biggest success lies in the attention paid to seemingly unnecessary plot devices. Every character, no matter how limited their screen time, has their moments. For instance, Mildred's ex-husband's 19-year-old girlfriend states one of the most profound dialogues throughout the film, "Anger only begets more anger." Peter Dinklage plays a forlorn car salesman who displays incredible compassion and empathy at a moment when Mildred's actions could have destroyed her life. One of the funniest characters in the film, Jason



hated since the beginning of the film. Thus, we witness Dixon transform from bad cop to flawed hero in a matter of minutes. By the end, the two have successfully joined forces, a move that seemed, to me, aimed for Dixon's redemption.

I did not find this transformation believable for Dixon. Throughout the story, he is portrayed as an unabashedly ignorant and racist cop with a tendency for racially-charged violence. He stumbles onto bar-room tittle-tattle, and it was depicted to be a strong enough stimulus to change such a morally bankrupt man for the better. As April Wolfe so aptly put in her review at the Village Voice, "McDonagh painstakingly humanises a character who we find has unapologetically tortured a black man in police custody ... and then *Three Billboards* seems to ask audiences to forgive and forget wrongs like police violence, domestic abuse, and sexual assault without demonstrating a full understanding of the centuries-long toll these crimes have taken on victims in real life."

*Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* is, by no measure, cinematic perfection. There are flaws, some quite obvious, and interpretations can be many. Yet, when the film ended, I kept recalling the unmistakable hint of hope at the end of Mildred's violence-soaked



Dixon, is also the most morally reprehensible as a cop with a history of torturing a black man in custody. By the end of the film, Jason Dixon and Mildred Hayes's paths merge as we witness a role-reversal of sorts. While drinking at a bar, Dixon eavesdrops on a conversation where a man brags about rape. Believing him to be Mildred's daughter's killer, he promptly dives into investigative mode to help out the woman he's

trajectory. It's the final scene of the movie and in that moment, you know that she is her own saviour. Yes, *Three Billboards* isn't perfect but it culminates in a satisfying end for a deeply-tortured heroine. It's one of the few films I would rewatch.

Mithi Chowdhury is a soon-to-be graduate of the Institution of Business Administration, Dhaka University and a contributor for Star Weekend and Shout, The Daily Star.

## FILM REVIEW

## FILM

One of my favourite childhood memories about cinema is of sitting on one of the large floor mats placed on an open field in a tiny village called Bibirhat in rural Bangladesh on a misty January evening of 1994. A local cultural group was holding a film screening, having rented a projector and a white screen from the nearest city—an annual village tradition. Hundreds of villagers flocked to the field to watch a movie that I don't remember the title or story of, but the experience is lucid in memory.

And that has been the traditional interface between cinema and its audience for as long as I have known it—that of a short distance between a rectangular screen and a seat in a (relatively) closed space. Be it sitting in a theatre in front of a large screen, a CRT TV hooked to a VHS player, or a laptop streaming Netflix, it is still largely how cinema is consumed: on a two-dimensional field of sight in a (relatively) confined area.

24 years later, a world away from Bibirhat, last month at the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) 2018, that relationship changed, at least for me. In the last few decades, visual arts have been leaping and bounding in their form and content—where photographs form sculptures and line drawings become moving images. Cinema—the most complex of visual art forms—has been making its strides too, but Rotterdam is the only major mainstream film festival where you'll truly realise it. IFFR has been championing the cause of experimental filmmaking not just in its content but its core form, blurring the boundaries of what we perceive as cinema.

From the subliminal to the visceral, from depravity to overloading, from the heart-warming to the gut-clenching, and from the unassuming to the all-encompassing—this year's IFFR programmes going beyond the average cinematic experience for its audience was, for me, the highlight of the festival.

Part of the festival's Art Directions Programme included works that dealt not just in the concrete visual and audible, but rather delved into the subconscious of the audience who essentially became participants instead of mere spectators.

Master Thai auteur Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL*—one of the flagships of this year's festival—is a prime example. Known for his signature use of sleep in his films, his contribution at this year's festival redefined the 'cinematic experience' as part of the inaugural edition of the festival's new platform Frameworks—its attempt to associate more intimately with visual arts. A fully-functioning one-off hotel at the World Trade Centre Rotterdam welcomed its guests—visitors and inhabitants alike—inside the film rather than in front of it. Watching from the balcony gallery behind the beds put on scaffolds, visuals of found footage and ambient sounds on an oculus screen over a glass wall was a transcendent look into the filmmaker's vision and philosophy of the dynamics of sleep and dreams. Those who slept at the Sleep

Cinema Hotel had more rounded, but individual, experiences. For instance, one mentioned to Apichatpong that it was the first time in months that he had slept soundly.

Dutch artist Simon Heijdens' *Silent Room* was in its own way the antithesis of visual art. Placed smack in the middle of the busy intersection of Kruisplein, this 'sensory deprivation chamber' is a 40 foot dark, soundproof box with diffused lights inside, where within just one minute the spectator can lose sense of time, hear their own breathing with

experimental art) this VR/performance case study by Danish artist-director Jesper Dalgaard is a viscerally introspective look at identity and self. From its bizarre, unnerving opening where each participant is handed an actual raw heart of an animal by a ghostly body-painted man fully in the nude, to a first-person VR experience of pulling a rifle trigger through your own brains, the experience becomes extremely personal—even through the journey across a rapidly shifting portrayal of the afterlife—while being

# CINEMA, FROM THE INSIDE OUT

How IFFR 2018 pushed the immersive cinema envelope

FAHMIM FERDOUS, back from Rotterdam



Brooklyn Experience



Doom Room

almost ominous clarity, and have their mind wander to distant places. Like the principle of the ganzfeld effect, which says when the brain receives no stimulus it starts producing its own after a while, *Silent Room* can be a quiet, contemplative moment or a trippy one for the audience. Only their subconscious can decide.

At the other end of the spectrum was the *Doom Room*, billed quite appropriately a 'mixed reality' experience. Part of the IFFR Pro X VR Days and aptly located at the Slash Gallery of WORM (a hub of new media

aware of the people around you, be it the other five participants or the two performers. The resulting experience is a hyper-vivid visual and auditory portrayal of your own most introspective thoughts, manifested by the artist.

VR remained an integral part of the festival this year, especially with the four, more traditional VR shorts which were part of the Pan-African Cinema Today (PACT) programme. They ranged from the festive *Spirit Robot* (by Ghanaian Jonathan Dotse) that transports the viewer to the Chale Wote Street Art

Festival in Accra to the intense, political, and almost interactive *Let This Be A Warning* by Kenya's The Nest Collective that begs the question: "If black worlds exist(ed), would you be welcome in them?" The other work in the Virtual Reality medium (which is gradually becoming a staple of film festivals) was *Brooklyn Experience* by José Celestino Campusano, which utilised the expanded 360-degree field of vision as the key tool to tell the story of a dysfunctional New York family going through the US immigration crackdown.

But then there were the 'anti-VR' pieces which, instead of exclusively feeding your senses a specific audiovisual feed, laid the work out in the open where the cinema became part of the environment. *Plot Point* by Belgian filmmaker Nicolas Provost was the first point of contact for any visitor coming to the festival through the Rotterdam Centraal train station, where it screened on a continuous loop in a special booth. Using the ambiance of the space—the bustling, populous train and bus station—the finely-edited collection of clips from what appears to be hidden cameras of busy New York streets and their cops, creates an air of tension with its smart editing and sound design. The experience is enhanced because the viewer is aware of his environment—a busy, high foot-traffic public place. Of the other works of silent brilliance in using a public space was *The Origin of Creepers* by Dutch visual artist-animator Jan van Nuenen, a display so inconspicuous that many festival-goers might have missed it despite it being playing at de Doelen, the heart of the festival. Projected on the slanting wall, pillars and floor of the Pathémultiplex every evening, it would appear like a random light display but on closer inspection was a fascinating, almost hypnotic series of moving thermal images of organisms in their natural habitat moving about in a forest—a minimalistic universe of its own.

*The Eyeslicer 90s Hangout* was another work of note at this year's festival: a time-travelling space to screen *The Eyeslicer*—a '90s-style 'variety TV show' of shorts by 55 US filmmakers brought together by Dan Schoenbrun and Vanessa McDonnell. Nestled inside the chic art and architecture institute Het Nieuwe Instituut was a cosy basement living room in the US from the yester-decades, filled with '90s nostalgic paraphernalia including tiny CRT TVs, cassette players, posters and even pinball machines themed on classic films like *The Terminator* and *Dracula*.

At a session early in the festival I heard festival director Bero Beyer calling IFFR 'The coolest film festival in the world', and through the course of my 11 days in Rotterdam it became more and more evident that there was no hyperbole in that statement. In the ever-evolving realm of visual art, Rotterdam is soaring ahead of the curve, and the onus now is on the rest of the European, if not global, film festival circuit to catch up.

The Daily Star's Fahmim Ferdous attended the 47th International Film Festival Rotterdam (Jan 24-Feb 3, 2018) as part of its Young Film Critics Programme. More of his coverage of the festival can be found at [iffrr.com/en/blog](http://iffrr.com/en/blog)