

# Lumpy-Throated and Teary in Nyon: Visions du Réel 2018

by [Pamela Cohn](#)

in [Festivals & Events](#)

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*My Father is My Mother's Brother*

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[1999](#), [Dominic Gagnon](#), [Gabrielle Brady](#), [Island of the Hungry Ghosts](#), [Maria Augusta Ramos](#), [My Father is My Mother's Brother](#), [Samara Grace Chadwick](#), [The Trial](#), [To the North](#), [Vadym Ilkov](#), [Visions du Réel](#)

So soon after [Thessaloniki International Doc Fest](#) I wasn't expecting to be all that inspired to write about yet another festival, but an unexpected invitation saw me traveling to Nyon, Switzerland for the last few days of the 49th edition of Visions du Réel, an event I've been curious about for quite a while. But even after just a brief 72-hour visit, Visions inspired me greatly in the quietest, most refined of ways — the

festival created a flawlessly professional but relaxed atmosphere to mingle and take in the beauty of the town, where every well-dressed denizen looks like they just stepped out of *Town and Country* magazine and the light and atmosphere are so beautiful. One can even pomp around in a grand Château overlooking Lake Geneva. Even though I felt like Steve Martin in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* most of the time, I tried to blend, pretending that spending fifteen euros for a croissant and a bad cup of coffee is a *de rigueur* thing in my life.

After almost a decade of leadership under the expansive gaze of Luciano Barrisone, this year was Emilie Bujès' first time as the festival's public-facing artistic visionary — a young vibrant curator for an event that will celebrate its half-century mark next year. The 38-year-old Bujès is at once both elegant and earthy, a friendly godmother guiding her charges to the best spots, the best parties, the best gatherings, the best films. And you never really have to go very far for any of it, and there is always a stunningly beautiful view to refresh the eyeballs. Bujès has been on the selection committee of the festival for several years and served as deputy artistic director working with Barrisone before stepping gracefully into this well-earned leadership role. She's also worked as exhibitions curator at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva, her focus centered on the film archives, as well as a deep exploration of documentary practices and their relationship to history and memory.

This year there was an excellently curated focus on films from Serbia; a tribute to French filmmaker Claire Simon, celebrated with Visions's *Maître du Réel* for her profoundly intimate and transcendent vérité and fiction work; and two ateliers with American filmmaker Robert Greene and German filmmakers Philip Scheffner and Merle Kröger. (An atelier, in this context, is meant to convey an invitation to come into the "private workshop" or studio of a professional artist.) I was slightly dazzled by it all, but the beauty of the festival's small organization is that everything runs so lightly and efficiently; there is literally no stress. Add an open, unpretentious inclusivity and lots of opportunities to drink — sekt day drinking an apparent must with the Swiss set in the springtime. Add also polite friendly gentle people and lots of red arrows to tell you where to go as if you're entering a magic forest (which you kind of are) so you can just flutter like a slightly drunken butterfly from cinema to cinema. And it is all about the cinema — there is not one person you meet there that does not embody this love and dedication to it. Seeing Robert Greene and long-time Visions selection committee member Giona Nazzaro in conversation with the sparkling jewel of Lake Geneva behind them was such a mirthful culture clash of sorts. Generally speaking, Europeans are much less demonstrative than Americans, so Greene in Nyon felt like a blast of loud fresh light shed upon a warm, curious, but somewhat provincial, audience. It was a wonderful way to start my Nyon experience.

The reputation of the festival is such that new filmmakers from as far away as India and the US make their way to Nyon. Rishi Chandna's 14-minute film *Tungrus* had its

international debut in the International Medium Length and Short Film Competition. It's a hilarious observational glimpse into one family's rocky relationship with their adopted pet chick, a pet that grows into a havoc-wreaking avian tyrant and causes the near-destruction of the Mumbai household's carefully contrived bid at a middle-class sensibility. With each episode of terrorizing the two resident cats, constant cavalier squirts of liquid shit on the polished floors, and sustained cock-crow screeching day and night, the animal brings itself closer to its own inevitable end — its owner's dinner plate. The film's next stop will be at Hot Docs in Toronto. Producer/director team Samuel Mantell and Matthew Siretta's debut feature film *Disco'd* was invited into the Market and even though the film had not been selected for the main program, the filmmakers made their way to Nyon anyway, knowing that their presence meant a boost to the film's showcase in the video library, an extremely useful invitation considering the caliber of film professional that has access to that for a very generous three months. I am always deeply impressed by young ambitious filmmakers like these who know the value of "being there" because that's what it takes to make the all-important connections one needs to traverse today's robust but clotted landscape of moving image work. (How else would they have ended up in *Filmmaker*?) Siretta meant to nab his hero Frederick Wiseman as his mentor and he succeeded, so maybe keep an eye peeled. At Visions du Réel, fragile, personal, textural films with narrative rhythms both familiar and distinctive offer visual imagery that stays in your orbital memory for days, flashes of the oddest juxtapositions of sight and sound, beautiful, eerie, disturbing, clandestine in their meaning but revelatory in their artistic language. The attending group of filmmakers is culturally diverse but most are young, burgeoning talents from places where we know, perhaps, superficial layers but actually, really, nothing. These are places ignored or even worse — profoundly misunderstood due to the sheer journalistic chicanery that passes for reportage from Brazil, Ukraine, Palestine, Syria, and so on. These directors are not accidental filmmakers as many are these days. And while there's navel-gazing here, it tends to have a kick of humor and a deliberate lack of finesse lest it be taken too seriously — or not seriously enough. I did not recognize or know most jury members and that was also delightful.

VdN is Francophone, but it's a very expansive Francophone universe, embodying much more than a shared language, lexicon, or certain point of view from the French-speaking world. This hidden politics of language or spoken expression is embedded within most of the storytelling as the program offers a huge array of narrative devices with which to tease out elliptical biography, history, socio-economic ills, and the indomitability of holding up a mirror to what damages us all, reminding us that we are complicit the moment we receive and learn about certain places and the people who inhabit them, the exterior and interior landscapes reverberating out, perhaps even into the places where you and I reside.

I only managed to see a handful of films in the cinemas during my time in Nyon and naturally gravitated toward those made by filmmakers whose work I already know and love, as well as new films by friends and acquaintances. (I cannot resist the longing in the eyes of a filmmaker asking me to honor their work by seeing it in a cinema, so I did the best I could.) Canadian artist Dominic Gagnon's new film *Going South* had its world premiere in Nyon in Competition. His latest is really not so much a companion piece for *To the North* (a work that ended up exploding in the filmmaker's face resulting in him ultimately being thrown under the bus by the people who had championed the film in the first place), but it is an argument for the myriad ways in which an artist can use the volumes of found material that sludges up the Internet. I loved this film for its unmitigated playfulness juxtaposed with the tragic loneliness of those for whom self-reflexive daily episodes in front of their own video cameras is read as a tool for survival — literally, you feel this is their oxygen tank. Some, like a 16-year-old transgendered woman, even spikily address their haters as they leave themselves open to the most heinous, vicious remarks from the invisible, anonymous quorum of hanging judges that make up part of the population of their viewers. The constant pleas of "Please like me!" mashed my heart into pieces. The editing and weaving and re-weaving of stories here is exhilarating. There's a crackling sound design that adds a def-con level of sensory experience sans VR headset. (Gagnon and VR would be terrifying.) But what the film does is totally verify many feelings right now that our world is, indeed, "going south" in an almost formalist manner. Gagnon says, "To me, making a film or a video is ritualistic. I get really alienated in the process myself, and by overexposing myself to a lot of information, I get kind of info-drunk, paranoid. I scare myself."

Gabrielle Brady's gorgeous *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* in its International Premiere (it went on to play the Tribeca Film Festival) tells the story of Poh Lin, a trauma counselor living on Christmas Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean. Deep within the island's jungles is a high-security detention center filled with asylum seekers where Lin works. The correlative to the human trajectory of forced and inevitable immigration due to more powerful forces are the 40 million land crabs that have lived on the island since forever. Every full moon they painstakingly skitter from the jungle to the island's coastline. A third layer of this beautifully rendered portrait of an alien landscape are the locals who perform the "hungry ghost" rituals, communal appeasement for those who died on the island but have never been given a proper burial. Reality is suspended and in its place Brady's surrealist dreamscape, shot breathtakingly by Michael Latham, becomes an all-encompassing tribunal on man's inhumanity to man in a clandestine landscape filled with lost spirits — ones that are dead, ones that are alive, and those that are a little of both. The film won the Prix Buyens-Chagoll, a juried prize honoring work with a humanist dimension, based on stories that develop values that give meaning to the future of humankind.

Ukrainian filmmaker and cinematographer Vadym Ilkov's debut feature film *My Father Is My Mother's Brother* (*Tato – mamyn brat*) received the Prix du Jury

Régionyon, a nod to the most innovative feature in the international competition — and no, it's not about incest as the title might suggest. This was also its World Premiere, and it's on its way to Hot Docs in Canada next. Underground Ukrainian artist Tolik is raising his sister's little girl, Katya. Tolik's sister and Katya's mother Anya lives in a psychiatric hospital, and in quiet mundane domestic scenes of a broken family's life, we see that the familial legacy might be emotional fragility. There is also a legacy of healing through gestures of art in Tolik's music and in the little girl's ability to also express herself nonverbally through her own art making. It is a delicate situation fraught with unexpressed emotion. Simple, beautiful and patient, this is observational cinema (with a twist) at a most humane and creative pinnacle. Maria Augusta Ramos is a veteran Brazilian filmmaker who has long explored boundaries between fiction and documentary and is a Visions du Réel alum and winner there for her 2015 film, *Drought*. This year her latest film *The Trial (O Processo)* again took the Best Feature prize. Admitting that this was an exceedingly hard film to make, Ramos reconstructs the moments leading up to Brazil's recent presidential impeachment of Dilma Rousseff. VdR is a festival that has expansive programming imperatives in terms of the ways in which historical records of note — or the “official versions” — are presented, and Ramos, like filmmakers Robert Greene and Claire Simon, takes these official versions and turns them on their heads to see what lies beneath, finding the liminal but vital spaces between the visible action. Brazil is a country mired in deep crises, and Ramos clears the cobwebs and painstakingly seems to slow down time enough to present cogent and powerful truths about injustices writ large against an entire nation.

Canadian filmmaker Samara Grace Chadwick's debut feature *1999 – Wish You Were Here* played in the Compétition Nationale, a strand of films dedicated to feature and medium-length films produced or co-produced in Switzerland. A co-production between Canada and Switzerland, Chadwick's project was part of the pitching forum at Visions a couple of years ago. The film is a profoundly personal but strikingly universal diaristic look back at a particular place and time — the years Chadwick attended the Mathieu-Martin High School in her hometown of Moncton. The school was dubbed “Suicide High” due to a handful of students who killed themselves over a span of only a few years, meaning there were thousands of students who had a high school experience that included a classmate's suicide. Sixteen years later, Chadwick faces that time again with a group of friends who were also affected by these untimely and somewhat mysterious deaths of a sibling, or best friend, or just an oft-glimpsed classmate that no one knew so well. Fiercely articulate, but still wounded by these acts, Chadwick and her closest friends from high school (including one teacher) charge through loaded emotional territory to help one another continue to heal. Looking through the prism of memory, with cracks in that prism that let in light that only warps and bends things even more than it illuminates, Chadwick intrepidly shifts backwards and forwards in time, she and her protagonists speaking in their native Chiac, a very odd admixture of English and French that signifies their Arcadian

heritage, while also reinvigorating the local slang that no one outside that community speaks in that particular way. A concession towards peacemaking between the English and French colonists, the language flows sometimes literally word by word between the two languages. The film does the same between past and present, re-creating those bonds from that time of life filled with secret passions, secret pains, and the secret lives of others. I appreciated the film's angst and awkwardness interposed with the lovely silliness and warmth in the ways the now 30-somethings reminisce about a time that ended up being far from innocent, a piece of their fragile adolescence rudely stripped away. The tracking shots of the high school by Pablo Alvarez-Mesa reminded me of Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*, the rows and rows of brightly colored banged-up lockers reflecting and refracting against grainy VHS material that has all but disintegrated giving the film a tangible, brooding texture that is completely missing when oriented against today's view of the town of Moncton, all box-house and box-store suburban blandness. But with a lovely smile on her face, one of the women that lost her very best friend to suicide back in high school tells Chadwick at the end of her interview, "It's been soothing." The communal act of remembering even something tragic can be so comforting. There are many surprising, tender, charming moments in this film amongst all the pain, and I, too, found it moving and soothing and oh, yes, deeply nostalgic. It made me feel alive when I myself feel half-dead most of the time.

All of our important stories live beyond us in someone else if we're very lucky but a death, no matter how peaceful or tragic, leaves us certain that we can only live forever in the hearts and minds of others. Chadwick, here, takes the role of the listener, the gentle interlocutor, always in the frame, but either in three-quarter profile, with her back to the camera, or on the borders. This intentional stance, at least how I see it, makes clear that she is far behind her comrades who stayed in Moncton and are now having families of their own. She left town to pursue her dreams of becoming a filmmaker. You realize that as much as everyone she films with is healed anew through the making of *1999*, this might be the first time Chadwick herself has faced down some long-echoing demons of her own.

And then I walked out of the cinema still lumpy-throated and teary into the shiny marvelous light of the afternoon on my way to the only place in town that could provide my much-needed daily dose of good coffee. As I walked up the slight grade towards the main street, a funeral was going on at the church next door to the cinema. People of all generations, including small children, were dressed in black standing close together like a lost flock of crows, most with sunglasses on against the open cerulean sky and the blindingly sparkling water right there, if you just swung your body 180 degrees. They were standing watching the hearse pull out of the church's driveway, headed to the graveyard. Because of the warmth of the day all the car's windows were down, including those in the back of the wagon. I had to stop so as to allow the long limo to finish maneuvering a tight corner onto a very small street. I had to stand there so long that I ended up staring for several seconds at the card

embedded in the giant floral bouquet on top of the coffin. In thick black cursive it said: “Carlo, figlio di Maria e Giacomo.” (Really happened, I swear.)

The last film I’ll mention here is only ten minutes long and a powerhouse that hits you upside the head since the tone and timbre of the piece is in direct opposition to its subject matter. Appearing in the Compétition Internationale Moyens et Courts Métrages (medium length and shorts) and winning a jury special mention as well as an award for best film from the Youth Jury composed of students from the Nyon-Geneva region, Mahdi Fleifel’s *I Signed the Petition* has us eavesdropping on a morning phone conversation between a man in Berlin and a Palestinian friend in London. The titular petition signer is distraught at having put his name to an Internet petition that asked Thom Yorke and his band Radiohead to not play a concert date in Tel Aviv — there should be a boycott there such as there would be in apartheid South Africa. He is filled with regret and a bit of fear that by voluntarily signing, he has become exposed to different control systems that will target him as a threat somehow. But there is also the question of the usefulness or even validity of signing a petition. Is it really an effective way to take political action of any sort? His friend says, “As a Palestinian, you’re already so beaten down; you’re displaced. You can’t go back freely, even if you wanted to. You’d have to go back to some ghettoised canton. It’s a state of occupation and terror and it’s meant to be difficult. You’re meant to constantly have questions about fucking Radiohead and shit like that. This is a feature of the displacement, of the disempowerment, man.”

Against fragile archival of the very initial stages of the 1948 Palestinian expulsion, his friend also tells him, “...it’s very difficult to live life acknowledging that you’re a loser” — an overarching historical loser, on the losing side of everything, a loser “in the global game.” The friends have a good laugh about the fact that one of them is worried about signing a petition about Radiohead when it’s just another poke at the bear, something that might annoy someone enough to yes, put you on some list, or maybe something that might put you in an even more hopeless situation than the one you’ve always been in from birth. A small but brilliant piece of work here, sly, complex and insistent in its thesis, and another grand story to add to the ever growing canon of authentically fictional, deceptively truthful, sleight-of-hand intelligent cinema a festival like Visions du Réel will be sure to be celebrating in the next 50 years. Perhaps an 88-year-old Emilie Bujès will still be greeting us all, excited to share audio-visual gems from a fresh generation of makers. Let’s hope this will also be something that turns out to be true.