

A Restless, Throbbing Ballet

A variety of cinematic approaches characterized a recent film festival in France that explored the lives and cultures of fishermen of the world

From 19 to 22 March 2008, a film festival called 'Fishermen of the World' took place in Lorient, France. It was organized by the non-governmental organization (NGO), Collectif Pêche et Développement, in collaboration with various local associations and administrative entities (regional, departmental and community). The idea for the event stemmed from a reflection on how issues related to oceans and fisheries are being increasingly debated in the media, which convey the image of a deep crisis plaguing the marine environment and its resources. The general public is fed on pictures and films that often attain widespread distribution, like *Darwin's Nightmare*, *We Feed the World*, and Greenpeace and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) documentaries on dolphins, tortoises, sharks... Amidst this visual abundance, the voices of fishermen are rarely heard. These actors occupy centrestage only in times of deep crisis. And the media usually prefer to circulate pictures of doom rather than focus on alternatives, which need time and sustained effort to both materialize and get expatiated. In this context, fishermen tend to appear as senseless predators, a far cry from the reality of courageous men engaged in an occupation that is both captivating and dangerous. They are often portrayed as the main villains in the drama.

These days, images are essential for shaping public opinion. The Lorient film festival aimed, therefore, to provide a forum for fishermen (most of them owner-operators) to counterpose their vision of the situation in fisheries against the perception of film producers. It was also an effort to focus the debate on the

human aspects of fisheries, and to bring fishermen and their families under the spotlight. Yet in no way was the intention to minimize the problems of resource availability or degradation, nor to shirk the responsibility of fishermen in the generation of the crisis in world fisheries. It is important that these men and women be brought centrestage, even while recognizing that other actors (consumers, environmental NGOs, scientists) also have roles to play in finding solutions to the crisis.

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at international forums, given that the sector is highly globalized. The event had the indispensable elements of any film festival, complete with an organizing committee, a selection committee, a jury and awards. In order to promote a diversity of outlook and fruitful dialogue, the committees included specialists on art, fishermen and fisheries, as well as NGO representatives.

Documentaries

Fourteen films were selected; one day was set aside for schoolchildren; and in one room, visitors could view videos produced by fishermen themselves as well as documentaries from film archives.

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In retrospect, the objectives of the festival were, by and large, attained. At the time of the festival the local fishermen in Lorient were completely mobilized on another front, demonstrating against the high cost of fuel. The festival organizers and participants were impressed by the vividness, quality and duration of the debates that took place after each show. And the audience appreciated the variety of approaches in the films presented: reportage, *cinéma verité*, cartoons, personal narratives, documentary analysis... Uniformity was not the byword: the new filmmakers have really creative talent. Some go deep into analysis, others dwell on the words and personalities of the men and women they show, raising a good measure of empathy among the audience. The jury seemed to appreciate that type of documentary and awarded top honours to *Le Bateau de Gaëlle* by Philippe Lubliner, which presents a fisherman and his wife from Le Guilvinec, France. They are about to retire from fishing and, in spite of it all, they express their strong attachment to their way of life, and their love for their boat which is bound for destruction. The jury also recognized *Men on the Edge*, by an Israeli producer. The film narrates the evolution of relationships, over a period of four years, among a crew of Palestinian and Israeli fishermen. The festival jury also praised *M'bissa*, a

film by two young Senegalese, for its originality and rendering of women's feelings and points of views.

Among the 14 selected films, those that won awards had one thing in common: they all put women at the centre of the stage. In *Men on the Edge*, the characters are essentially men, but the co-producer casts a clearly feminist eye on an otherwise macho society. The festival has certainly contributed to documenting the important role played by women in the fisheries sector. The selected films show that the fisheries crisis is a worldwide phenomenon, that fisherfolk (men and women) are deeply rooted in their type of life and livelihood. Fishing is not just another trade: it is a way of life, with a particular tempo, and calls for specific knowhow and keen knowledge of the environment. Through their constant interaction with nature, fishermen have evolved a set of observations that are alien to people not familiar with the maritime world. Fishermen know a lot about the sea bottom and the diverse behaviours of different fish species.

Will they be able to pass on that heritage to the next generation? From a number of films screened at the festival, it appeared that the children are reluctant, or unable, to follow the path of their fathers. In Senegal, they are fleeing to Europe; in France, those who remain on the job shy away from becoming owner-operators, which would be too much trouble (as revealed in the film, *Le Bateau de Gaëlle*).

The selected films also outlined some emerging issues, such as the marine protected area (MPA) concept, which, in practice, may badly affect fishermen. In India, the creation of some MPAs has had dramatic consequences on neighbouring communities. In Senegal, fishermen try to make the best of such new developments by playing the ecotourism card. The film *Accrocs sur le poisson* underlines the problems created by the increasing spaces occupied by pleasure boating and sport fishing. In the debate that followed the show, some fishermen commented vividly on these aspects. In southern Brittany, France, as on the Mediterranean coast, pleasure boaters are steadily encroaching on the space

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Philippe Lubliner with Mamayawa Sandouno, Member, ICSF, and James Smith, Honorary Member, ICSF, at the 'Fishermen of the World' film festival

traditionally occupied by bona fide fishermen.

The rich documentaries at the festival generated strong emotions, vivid debates and sharp analyses, which led to productive, albeit at times conflicting, exchanges. Above all, it testified to the negative effects of the worldwide fisheries crisis on fishermen and their families.

In particular, it showed that ill-thought, badly implemented protective measures may have dire consequences on communities when they do not integrate the views and concerns of the local populations. The resource crisis is also a deep social crisis. If one is to see an end to the resource crisis, the social aspects have to be addressed. Otherwise things will get even worse.

The programme on the special day for schools and apprentices was drawn up by Pierre Mollo, a scientist and expert teacher and filmmaker. In the first film—*Namouic* by Gilles Capelle—these young people were introduced to the severe crisis of the 1990s, which saw dozens of boats being dismantled and burned, and young fishermen battling to refund loans in a context of increasing fish imports and expanding pleasure boating/fishing. Real fishermen took part in the making of the film, with real-life episodes feeding into the scenario. Throughout the film, these fishermen are indeed the main actors. This creative and emotional production appealed to the younger audience, budding fishermen and high-school students.

Then Pierre Mollo presented his own films on the wealth of the oceans, in particular the planktonic elements. *La mer féconde* (1981) shows how the traditional salt-marshes enhance the vitality of that environment, and favour shell culture and coastal fisheries. By fighting for the survival of their traditional spaces against encroaching real-estate projects and the tourism industry, the *paludiers* (salt workers) were able to save their livelihoods and the livelihoods of hundreds of fishermen. On the same subject, *Planctonique*, made by a young producer in collaboration with Pierre Mollo, is a sparkling and pregnant presentation of



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the fact that plankton is the source of life in the marine world.

After that, scientists from the Institut français de recherche pour l'exploitation de la mer (IFREMER, the French Research Institute for Exploitation of the Sea) and the Centre de Culture Scientifique, Technique et Industrielle (CCSTI) made slide presentations of their research on fish resources and fishing gear. They also conducted a role-playing game with the fishermen and a WWF representative.

Warm collaboration

At the end of the day, there was a presentation of a development project initiated by the *paludiers* of Guérande, Brittany, in collaboration with women salt producers in Benin. In order to protect the mangroves, they showed them how to make salt through solar evaporation instead of burning a lot of wood to concentrate the brine. The film *Houla Ko* outlines the complexity of the technological transfer process on the ground, and notes the warm collaboration that prevailed between these partners.

As one journalist in the audience put it, Pierre Mollo succeeded in turning the humble plankton into the star of the Fishermen of the World film festival. This is apt praise for a man on the verge of retirement. The programme he drew up testifies to his deep attachment to

the sea, the plankton and the men and women who depend on them for their livelihoods.

“Displaying something is the first stage for making it understood,” says Pierre Mollo. “The images I produce, I offer them to the coastal communities who, in the course of time, shaped my mind and made me a man of the sea. My research in the field of marine biology led to an encounter with minute things, called planktons, for which I developed a passion. By observing and deciphering the processes in the ecosystems, one is able to comprehend more fully the dysfunctions of marine life. With the camera secured to the tip of a microscope, I enter a lilliputian world and share with others the excitement of the visit. The world

Through the lens of Pierre Mollo’s camera, “the tiny people of the sea are engaged in a restless, throbbing ballet, with a real sense of drama”, to quote a journalist who viewed *Planctonique*, a short film produced by Eric Billon, one of Pierre Mollo’s students. When drawing attention to the importance of plankton, Pierre Mollo refocuses the debate over the future of the oceans and their resources. There is a pressing need to question the acceptability of some fishing practices. But, in fact, the degradation of plankton, in terms of quantity and quality, is even more worrying than the decline of fish stocks. There are occurrences of toxic plankton, which is difficult to get rid of. The degradation, which may go unnoticed, disrupts the very base of the food chain. The blame cannot be put on the fishermen; it rests on the multiple terrestrial activities that send chemicals, heavy metals and fertilizer and pesticide runoff into the sea. There is a lot of talk about the scarcity of fish; little is said about the degradation of the planktonic populations. It is, of course, easier to point an accusing finger at specific operators instead of questioning the validity of production and development processes that deliberately tend to sacrifice marine life and environment.

The eye can see the progressive demise of a forest, not so the alteration of the planktonic populations, where 50 per cent of the earth’s oxygen originates. With the help of a microscope, Pierre Mollo’s camera gently leads the audience to take cognizance of that aspect. Everyone must ask: “What part have I played in that situation?”. We must thank Pierre Mollo for his demonstration of humanistic ecology. 

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is mirrored in a single drop of water, which is proof of the throbbing vitality of the oceanic expanse. That wealth must be preserved, for the future of our planet is at stake.”

“Documentaries differ from reportage in the sense that they tell a story based on reality, but with an added backdrop. It is more than a mere transcript of realities. Documentaries need colours, a conducting thread, a plot. I don’t make scientific films, I add a degree of emotions to my work by playing with the colours, the light. Far from trying to impose a particular point of view on the audience, I just put forward a number of items from which people may derive their own opinion. There is no search for sensationalism, no mind bashing. But naturally there are some signboards, and one may point gently to a number of unsavoury aspects. The images and the emotion are the things that matter. When I make a film, I don’t aim at trumpeting a message: the film must be quietly self-explanatory.” (from *Festival Imagimer*, September 2005).

For more

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www.ifremer.fr/anglais

IFREMER (French Research Institute for Exploitation of the Sea)