



Fernando Pérez, *Últimos días en la Habana* (Last Days in Havana), 2016, HD video, color, sound, 93 minutes. Diego (Jorge Martínez).

DIEGO (JORGE MARTÍNEZ) has been reduced to the status of permanent patient. Dying of AIDS, he lies in bed in the apartment he shares with Miguel (Patricio Wood), a friend with whom he has little in common other than that Miguel once defended him from bullies when they were both adolescents. In the depressed environs of contemporary Havana, Miguel has gone into a sort of internal exile. By day, he scrapes by as a dishwasher at a restaurant; at night, he gazes at a map in the kitchen of the United States, dreaming of escape, while in the bedroom, Diego holds court with his ferocious wit in gossip sessions with neighbors, hustlers, and distant relatives.

Through this concentrated, rather minimal storyline, *Últimos días en la Habana* (Last Days in Havana), the latest from Fernando Pérez, evokes the essence of life in the Cuban capital today—the street-level feel of abject desperation mixed with riotous humor and a wealth of creativity in managing the challenges of quotidian life. These rich emotions specific to the Cuban experience reach their apotheosis at the film's end, when, in an intimate and moving monologue, one of the characters confides, "My greatest fear isn't change—it's that nothing will change. That everything will remain the same."

It was cinematic force-fields like these for which the Berlin International Film Festival was built, and as its sixty-seventh edition wound to a close last week, I recklessly wandered through without submitting to any one particular program. There were too many discoveries to be made outside the feature competition: *Últimos días*, for instance, was in the noncompeting "Berlinale Special" program, while Bruce LaBruce's latest, *The Misandrists*, made a splash in the Panorama section. Here, LaBruce returns to his enduring obsession with radical leftist clans, this time bringing back *The Raspberry Reich's* (2004) Susanne Sachsse as the leader of an underground lesbian-separatist enclave on the rural outskirts of Berlin. With its international mix of professional actors and beautiful scenesters, *The Misandrists* is LaBruce's radical feminist hijacking of the "women-in-prison" and "girls' school" B-movie genres, demonstrating how humor as a political weapon is infinitely more tactical than didacticism... especially when it's combined with didacticism! It is one of his best films in years.

All but ignored by critics and the jury, newcomer Liu Jian's animated feature *Hao Ji Le* (Have a Nice Day) is a memorable black comedy-slash-violent thriller that centers on the theft of a bag containing a million yuan. The film's colorful palette is a spot-on evocation of China's neon-sleaze cityscapes, the voiceover acting is superb, and the sharp script offers a fresh take on materialistic obsession in today's not-so-red China. Another genre mashup, Japanese director Sabu's *Mr. Long*, begins as a blood-soaked martial-arts film before morphing into social drama then melting into a tender romance, then switching back to an edge-of-your-seat thriller culminating in tear-drenched drama. It could've been a mess, but Sabu expert direction, together with an understated performance by lead actor Chang Chen, made for a masterful piece of storytelling.

German filmmaking has never quite recovered from the storm of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Watching a restored version of Fassbinder's 1973 science-fiction miniseries *Welt am Draht* (World on a Wire) in a 205-minute-long marathon screening at the Berlinale pointed toward a gnawing lack: It all comes down to style. Fassbinder's great accomplishment was to make films as though he had never seen a film before, as though he were both a cine-naïf and someone with an encyclopedic knowledge of cinematic art. Style is a heightening of *affect* that is unique to each practitioner, and Fassbinder's position as a stylist is unparalleled. Though it is masterfully and complexly scripted, you can watch a work like *Welt am Draht* in terms of pure style, following the magnificent Fassbinderian flow of affect: the 360-degree revolving shots, the sudden and inexplicable crescendo in a character's spiel, the casting of exclusively smoky-voiced male baritones, the bizarre gesticulations of a supporting character in the distant background... Watching Fassbinder in the context of the contemporary filmmaking showcased by the Berlinale highlights the relative flatness—or affectlessness—that passes for style today, but which is actually a *lack* of style. In the end, the very presence of Fassbinder at this year's Berlinale made the absence of any disrupting force acutely felt.

— Travis Jeppesen

The Sixty-Seventh International Filmfestspiele Berlin ran February 9 through 19.