

ZEBRA 2019: A Beginner's Guide, featuring an interview with ZEBRA Artistic Director – Thomas Zandegiacomo Del Bel

Rebecca Hilton, March 2020

ZEBRA: Poetry Film Champion

Brainchild of the Berlin-based literary champion, Haus Für Poesie, ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival was launched in 2002. Eighteen years on, what form did the festival take for its 2019 rendition?

Poetry film is often branded the sore thumb of the U.K. literary scene; breaking away from the conventions of poetry. There are pockets of poetry film events across the country, however Germany's response towards the subject is groundbreaking. Berlin's unreserved, candid and bold style provided the perfect setting for ZEBRA 2019. Whilst attending my first ZEBRA, I was prompted to consider the responsibility of the film festival to represent the vast and growing genre of poetry film. What it includes, or excludes, ultimately defines the genre.

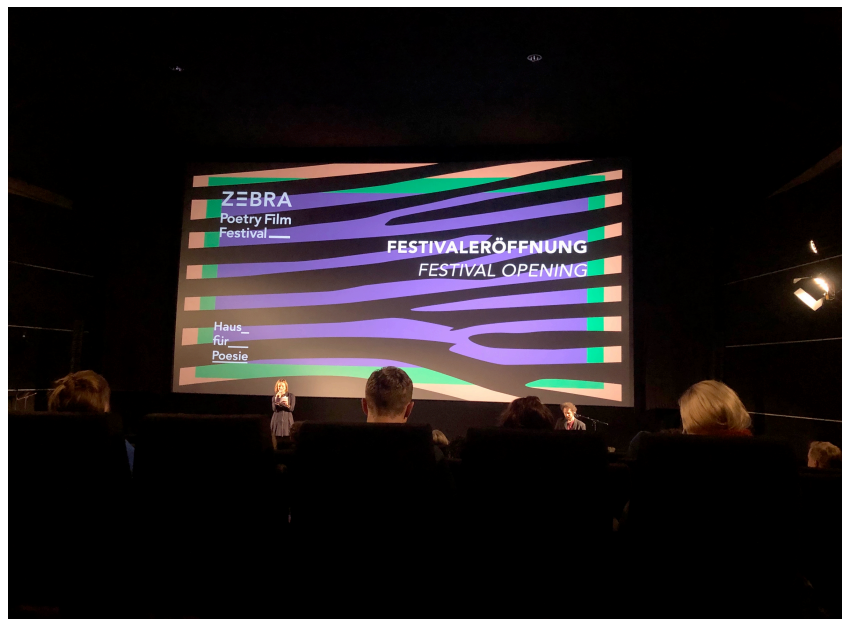
The organizers of ZEBRA, Haus Für Poesie, ensure that a diverse range of poets and filmmakers gather and are represented, with the recent selection including artists from Syria, the United Arab Emirates and Brazil. The team worked tirelessly on the December 2019 festival, collaborating with students across ten German universities. With a focus on German and U.K. films, ZEBRA 2019 was held close to home at Kino in der Kulturbrauerei, in the Prenzlauer Berg district of Berlin.

The ZEBRA community

The opening night brought a range of creative people together: poets, theatre managers, filmmakers, charity organizers, sound artists, art and film curators, ceramicists, (even hospital administrators!). Everyone gathered to talk poetry film. Also, to discover the location for the private party on the final night!

Haus Für Poesie maintain ZEBRA's shape-shifting ability. Firstly, ZEBRA adapts to change within an interminable poetry film scene through new themes, lectures and workshops. Secondly, they encourage younger filmmakers, like myself, to find their place within the genre. Thirdly, the festival utilizes its unfixed location to great advantage, exhibiting at over 50 countries worldwide.

Despite coming to the festival from an experimental video art background, I found the community within ZEBRA to be strong and very welcoming. Poetry film is rooted in collaboration; I was alone in having written, filmed and edited my film, *Storm Song* (2019). The majority of poets and filmmakers at ZEBRA work within supportive and multifaceted teams.



My ZEBRA 2019 Highlights

Animation took special precedence, with the return of animator and RCA tutor, Tim Webb. Webb was invited to join the judging panel for ZEBRA 2019. He won the first ZEBRA in 2002 with his somatic film, *15th February* (1995) incorporating Peter Reading's poem. The film is a humorous account of a wretched man, accompanied by his tragic and impeded expressions of love. Christine Hooper, one of Webb's graduate students, directed one of my favourite films from the festival, *On Loop* (2013). Hooper's film is a surreal, hilarious and dizzying world; alienating the protagonist and inviting the viewer to walk in their shoes.

ZEBRA's year-long collaboration with German universities teaching poetry film, evolved into the 'New Talents' section of the programme. This proved to be a profound gesture, bringing young, creative minds and voices to the discourse of poetry film.

Why YOU should go to ZEBRA

Unlike most film festivals, ZEBRA is centred around the accessibility of poetry film. To present a genre, which for the most part is rather obscure, it must have a welcoming

environment, be affordable and open to a variety of age groups. ZEBRA is neither exclusive, nor elitist: on the contrary, it actively welcomes new audiences from a range of backgrounds and ensures ticket prices are fair value. More and more, we see artistic mediums cross paths, generating entirely new forms of art. ZEBRA is the epitome of this, celebrating the dual force of both poetry and film.

Behind the Stripes: Interview with ZEBRA's Artistic Director – Thomas Zandegiacomo Del Bel

RH: Hi Thomas, what is the meaning behind the festival name 'ZEBRA'?

TZDB: ZEBRA or the animal Zebra is an allegory for the black and white stripes of poetry and film. It proves how well the two art forms fit together. The idea was born during a brainstorming session, where we thought about the two art forms and the black and white colours on the 'zebra'.

RH: How do you feel ZEBRA has developed over the years?

TZDB: The ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival is an incredible success story. Originally part of the Poesiefestival-Berlin, it grew quickly and needed a festival of its own. Even for the very first ZEBRA in 2002, 610 films from 35 countries were entered for the competition; by the second ZEBRA (2004), this number had grown to more than 800 films from 57 countries. In the fourth ZEBRA (2008), entries were topping 1000, from 58 countries. At the fifth ZEBRA (2010), filmmakers from 69 countries participated.

This expanded to 870 film entries for the sixth ZEBRA (2012) from 63 countries. In 2016, we received more than 1,100 submissions from 86 countries for the eighth ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival. In this event 80 were nominated by the programme commission, to compete in the international and national competitions.

RH: The growth of ZEBRA over the years is remarkable! The festival is making leaps and bounds within the poetry film world! Can you tell me what ZEBRA hopes to achieve with its cultural positioning?

TZDB: I think it is a little bit of everything. We would like to introduce new people to poetry film and to sell more tickets. With various events, projects, workshops and masterclasses, we try to promote the cooperation of poets and filmmakers. Readings also aim to awaken interest in poetry. In order to inspire young audiences, we organize poetry film workshops and accompany filmmakers and authors to schools and universities. We also hold workshops with teachers to prepare them for working with poetry films in the classroom.

RH: Finally, what can we expect from ZEBRA 2020?

TZDB: In 2020, the country focus will be Canada. The festival will again take place in Berlin and we will have an international competition. Also, this year we will again announce a festival poem, which can be filmed by international filmmakers. We are planning a colloquium, a masterclass, workshops and a close collaboration with students. There will not be a specific theme, but we will pay close attention to trends and tendencies and try to reflect them in our programme.

RH: Thank you, Thomas!

After ZEBRA: Homage to Rainer Maria Rilke

Rilke was a renowned and celebrated German-language poet. Born in 1875, he grew up in Prague where he attended military boarding school, but was made to leave on grounds of ill health. From this point, Rilke travelled the world and worked passionately on his writing. Through his letter exchange with young military school student (the same school as Rilke) and aspiring poet, Franz Xaver Kappus, we discover Rilke's sentiments on being a writer:

'ask yourself in your night's quietest hour: *must* I write? [...] if it is given to you to respond to this serious question with a loud and simple "*I must*", then construct your life according to this necessity' (*Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*, Letters to a Young Poet, 1929).



(*Rainer Maria Rilke, Berlin 2019*, by Rebecca Hilton)

On my final day in Berlin, I took time to travel to the outskirts of the city, into the quiet, residential area of Berlin-Schmargendorf, where Rilke lived for a short time. His memorial plaque was pale blue, shining and well kept, embedded in the canary yellow building. I remember it was a beautiful day, but with biting, Berlin winds. Tearing a page from my copy of *Letters to a Young Poet*, I began writing a tribute and gratitude to the great Rilke.

Wedging the little note near to the plaque, I took a step back to take in the yellow apartment block. Where I stood in December 2019, Rilke was here too, 120 years ago, writing the beginning of *Das Stunden-Buch* (The Book of Hours) (1905). Turning around, I observed the view Rilke would have seen as he left the apartment block. Perhaps he would be thinking back to his travels earlier that year; Vienna, Arco, Russia, to name a few.

I headed back to central Berlin to catch my plane, my ZEBRA trip had come full circle. Returning to Rilke reminded me of where it had all started; why I must write, and film. Also, why many others at ZEBRA must write and film too. Because we *must*.

Special thanks

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About the writer:

Rebecca Hilton is a young British artist. She graduated from Central Saint Martins, achieving a First-Class BA Honours in Fine Art. Her poetry film, *Storm Song* (2019), featured at ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival 2019. Her most recent poetry film, *Truth* (2019), was screened at Bath Digital Festival 2019.

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Storm Song: <https://vimeo.com/333132412>

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