ANI

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

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in

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DEDICATION

To the women of Thupten Choling Monastery.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my parents, Berto and Barbara Gorham, and to my mentors, Thomas Kelly and Jennifer Boles.

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ABSTRACT

This film and accompanying paper thesis delve into the intricacies of life within a nunnery amidst the landscapes of the Himalayas. Through the lens of sensory ethnography and observational filmmaking, the project offers a nuanced portrait of the daily rituals, spiritual practices, and communal relationships that define the existence of the nuns within this remote sanctuary. Employing asynchronous sound and poetic filmmaking techniques, the project reassesses traditional documentary conventions, aiming to evoke a visceral and immersive experience for the audience. As viewers exist within the nunnery's spaces, they are enveloped by the resonant chants of prayers, the whispers of mountain winds, and the rustle of prayer flags, inviting them into a state of contemplation and introspection. Drawing on extended periods of intimate engagement with the space, the film captures moments of quiet reflection, collective meditation, and acts of devotion that speak to the rhythms of monastic life. Through lingering shots and evocative compositions, it seeks to convey not only the outward manifestations of religious practice but also the inner landscapes of the relationships between the nuns and their environment. In tandem with the film, the accompanying thesis paper provides a theoretical framework for understanding the methodological and aesthetic choices underlying the project. It explores the intersection of sensory ethnography, observational filmmaking, and poetic representation, arguing for their collective potential to convey the complex dimensions of lived experience. Ultimately, *Ani* invites viewers to contemplate assumption, relationality, and human curiosity.

BACKGROUND

Filmmaker Bio

Olivia Gorham is a filmmaker based in Bozeman, Montana. Her interests are in ecological filmmaking, microscopic worlds, narrative fragmentation, and synesthetic experiences. Her work has been showcased in festivals such as the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival and on PBS. She was also the 2021 winner of the Yellowstone National Park media grant. She received her MFA in the Science and Natural History Filmmaking program in 2024 at Montana State University in Bozeman, Montana where she is currently creating a short portrait film exploring regenerative ranching practices in Southwest Montana.

Filmmaker Artist Statement

In my practice, I employ experiential film techniques to transport viewers into realms of heightened awareness and contemplation. Each frame is carefully composed to evoke not just what is seen, but also what is felt. My films are not mere records of events but rather immersive journeys exploring reality versus truth. By eschewing traditional narrative structures in favor of a more intuitive and sensory-driven approach, I invite viewers to inhabit the spaces and rhythms of the worlds we exist in.

Film Logline

Ani is a meditative and lyrical portrait of the rhythms of life and the interconnections between the spiritual and natural world within a community of nuns residing deep within the high Himalayas.

Film Synopsis

Deep within the Himalayan mountains resides a community of Tibetan Buddhist nuns (Ani). Within this spiritual community of Thupten Choling Monastery, a group of women exist in tune with the rhythms of their surroundings. Tasked with praying for deceased humans and animals, the nuns hold a shared dedication to the manifestation of peace and wellbeing–a tradition that has lasted through generations of women through feminine oral history and practices.

Crew Statement

Olivia Gorham served as the writer, director, cinematographer, editor, and sound designer on this project. Olivia also oversaw color grading by Natasha Nair and sound mixing by Kate In.

Financial Information

Table 1. Production Budget

Production Title: Ani					
Production Days: 14					
Director: Olivia Gorham					
Category	**Description**	**Rate**	**Days**	**Notes**	**Total**
Pre-Prod.	Airfare	$1,300.00	n/a	Flat	$1,300.00
Total Pre-Production					**$1,300.00**
Production	Donation	$10.00	14	Day Rate	$140.00
Production	Taxi	$50.00	2	Day Rate	$100.00
Total Production					**$240.00**
Post-Prod.	Sound Mix	$450.00	4	Day Rate	$1,800.00
Post – Prod.	Color	$600.00	n/a	Flat	$600.00
Total Post-Production					**$2,400.00**
Distribution	Festival Fees	$500.00	n/a	Allow	$500.00
Total Distribution					**$500.00**
Grand Total					**$4,400.00**

HISTORY, CONTEXT, AND ARTISTIC APPROACH

Research

Ani was filmed at the Thupten Choling monastery in the Solukhumbu district of Nepal. The monastery was built by Tibetan Buddhist master Trulshik Rinpoche, who fled to Nepal during the invasion of Tibet by China in 1959 known as the Tibetan Uprising. During this invasion, thousands of Tibetans were killed, while many others fled to Nepal for asylum. Trulshik Rinpoche and many others at the time had expected the Chinese occupation of Tibet to subside, however, as time progressed, the occupation became more powerful. As the first point of refuge for Tibetans escaping the occupation, Thupten Choling monastery gained a large following of monks and nuns who decided to join the monastery as permanent residents. After gaining a substantial following, the monastery underwent a reconstruction in the early 2000s, and now still stands as a community and home to three hundred refugees and practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism (Downs, 25).

Tibetan Buddhist beliefs are ingrained with socioreligious ecological ethics (Terrone, 460). This is evident in the Buddhist concepts of interconnectedness, compassion, and altruism describing the inherent shared existence among all things, including humans, animals, plants, and the other aspects of the natural environment (water, earth, etc). In the belief of interconnectedness and compassion, a degree of devotion to an ecologically ethical lifestyle is implemented to prevent the suffering of all things (Simonds, 239). This spiritual exploration of environmental ethics and ecology provides valuable insight into the traditional and nonwestern practices of minimalism, and how this can inform sustainable practices.

Being that the foundation of Buddhism is patriarchal, I chose to approach my film from an ecofeminist perspective, illuminating the existence of both the female and environmental, and how these perspectives shape the lifestyle of the monastery. In an ecofeminist context, existence is attributed to oppression of both the feminine and the natural environment. In her paper “The Feminine Dharma: Buddhist Women and Duty to the Earth" Amanda LaPointe discusses the lack of understanding of the female experience within Buddhism, and how cultivating female relationships between women and the environment is helping to reclaim this loss of understanding (16). Although I am not attempting to illustrate the experience of these women, these topics have influenced my interest in their shared experience. The modern responsibilities of monks and nuns at Thupten Choling Monastery vary with age. Those who are younger attend school, where they learn the Tibetan language, Tibetan oral history, and English. The elderly and those with disabilities pray morning to evening in the monastery temple, or in the prayer wheel chambers. However, all residents of the monastery and practitioners of Buddhism share the common goal of attaining enlightenment, freedom from all attachment (Welbon, 301). This desire to be freed from attachment was prevalent in the nuns’ minimalistic lifestyles, for example owning very little clothing and eating very simple meals. The nuns also talked and laughed while conducting work which made it seem like a very social atmosphere. I wanted to highlight these interactions at work as part of my focus on the female perspective.

There are a few central teachings of Buddhism that present themselves as visual motifs throughout the film. The first example of this is Samsara, or the wheel, representing the cyclical nature of life, death and rebirth (Tieser, 141). It is believed that in Samsara, all living beings are subjected to a cycle of continuous change and impermanence and will remain in this state due to

attachment to worldly possessions, desires, or ways of being (Welbon, 301). A living being is only released through the achievement of Nirvana, attaining wisdom, peace, and freedom from the unrelenting cycle of existence (Welbon, 301). The symbol of the wheel presents itself within the film in the context of the outdoor, water-powered prayer wheels, and the indoor prayer wheels that the elderly nuns spin by hand to manifest the welfare of the world.

Water is a second visual and aural motif central to the film. Within the context of Buddhism, water is a symbol of clarity and the cleansing of negativity. All prayer wheels within the monastery, including those that are water-powered, are inscribed with Buddhist mantras (prayers) which are released when the prayer wheels are spun. Thematically, water is used often throughout the film as a tool of porosity between inside and outside, navigating the space through the many forms of water that exists in and around the monastery. The theme of water in the film is also an example of a lifestyle in tune with nature, where the water from streams and rivers is harnessed to spin the prayer wheels and release prayers into the universe (Downs, 65). This idea is also represented in the prayer flags which use wind to release prayers, both serving as examples of how the Ani live in tune with the elements and rhythms of their natural environment.

The third and final motif in the film is the prayer lamps that the Anis make from butter and light continuously through day and night. The prayer lamp holds significance in many different ways in Tibetan Buddhism, but most simply put is an offering. This can mean an offering to a specific person or being who is suffering or recently deceased. The prayer lamps are also lit as a form of manifestation of welfare (Kelly). As described in the oral history at the end of the film, the prayer lamp is also present in Tibetan oral history. In this example, Nawong

shares the story of a female relative of the Buddha, who journeyed with him to collect ghee (butter) from a nearby village. He collected small amounts of ghee and was questioned by others whether he had collected enough to sufficiently make an offering. Against all doubt, Buddha's sister assured him that the amount of ghee was sufficient, and so instructed Buddha to tend to the lamp, and to never let it die out. As an ode to this story, and to her wisdom, the Ani make and light prayer lamps continuously for the reincarnation of deceased humans and animals in their villages. The prayer lamps are present throughout the film particularly in the oral history scene, though the sun and moon also function as symbolic lamps at the beginning and ending of the film.

Connection to the Broader Field

The process of creating Ani was informed by reassessments of both observational filmmaking and sensory ethnography. Historically, as filmmaker and theorist Trinh Min-Ha discusses in her article "Outside In Inside Out", observational filmmaking, particularly when entering a community that is not one's own, has been characterized as a translation, attempting to uncover and relay specific information about a culture perceived as the other (133). The direct observation at work in traditional observational films claim minimal intervention and thus feign a representation of objective truth. In this way, these films that simply seek to master and reveal a specific narrative fall short of the opportunities observational film can truly provide.

To deviate from this convention, I questioned the idea that direct cinema is simply a tool for interpretation, as a way to embrace my incomplete understanding of the place, the women, and the complexity of my surroundings. To this end, choosing not to educate, inform, or illustrate was my first major stylistic decision. In contrast to these traditional forms of "informational"

documentaries is sensory ethnography filmmaking, founded by Harvard anthropologist Lucien Castaing-Taylor. Film scholar Erika Balsom describes this practice as a deviation from the practice of domination to an attunement to the complexities and unexplainable phenomena of the world (8). Sensory ethnography films deviate from the observational mode in allowing the events and subjects of the film speak for themselves through techniques of immersion to achieve a concrete sense of reality through experiential cinema, rather than through informational forms seen in more conventional documentaries. I was influenced by the sensory ethnography practice as it speaks to films such as *El Mar La Mar*, directed by J.P. Sniadecki and Joshua Bonnetta. The film is a portrait of the encounters within the vastness of the Sonoran Desert on the U.S.-Mexico border, artfully juxtaposing asynchronous soundscapes with 16mm film footage of both artifacts left behind and the textures of the natural environment. To accompany these audio-visual elements are interview and oral histories from a small group of immigrants of their encounters, whom we never see onscreen. Through these strategies, *El Mar La Mar* relates real experiences without a desire for a discernable sense of reality, incorporating both a politicized environmental element as well as a circulation back from sensory ethnography to a more informed observational approach. For example, unlike some sensory ethnography films, *El Mar La Mar* does not attempt to immerse viewers but to disorient them, particularly through the use of audio-visual dissonance, but not to the degree that the immersiveness disempowers the message of weaponization of the desert at the hands of political conflict (Navaro 36). In the words of Balsom,

> The film largely avoids attempts at interpretation and makes no claims of total comprehension. On the contrary, almost from its opening sequence, *El Mar La Mar* stages a crisis of vision and understanding, foregrounding the immense difficulty—the impossibility, even—of grasping reality (Balsom 189).

In summary, *El Mar La Mar* does not use immersive sensory ethnographic techniques in an attempt at the raw, unmediated "real", nor does it employ observational filmmaking techniques to provide explanation, but "these images are co-constituted through a triangulation of forces, bringing into communion the agencies of the filmmakers, the world viewed, and the filmic machine" (Balsom 191). In this way *El Mar La Mar* makes use of experiential techniques such as asynchronous sound, visual texture and oral history to create a vessel of coinhabitance for the film participants, the filmmakers, the environment, and the audience.

A similar, reimagined form of observational film is present in *Palenque*, directed by Sebastian Pinzon Silva, whose work is influenced by that of J.P. Sniadecki. Throughout the film, audiences are guided through the melodies and rhythms of daily life in San Basilio de Palenque, the first town in the Americas to free itself from European colonization. The film is highly experiential, in tune with the natural rhythms of the surrounding environment, while still applying documentary as an artistic practice in its fragmented narrative and juxtaposition. This is evident in the opening scene of *Palenque*, which begins with a circular, yellow shape centered on screen, unidentifiable by the audience but resembling the sun. Moments later, a pair of handprints appear as if on the other side of a pane of plastic or canvas, immediately placing the audience inside of a drum, looking upwards at the invisible drummer's hands playing an upbeat percussive rhythm. This example of leaving the viewer without context speaks to what Balsom claims to be the key to this reimagined form of observational filmmaking. Rather than reducing documentary to an attempt at objective representation, there is great possibility in nurturing the subjectivity of the filmmaker to speak to the complexity and nuance of the world within the film.

In cultivating this subjectivity in observational film through techniques of asynchronous sound, fragmented narrative, and attunement to our subjective experiences other than onscreen reflexivity, we can fully engage with the idea that observational film has potential beyond imposing a specific narrative. This strategic employment of fictionalization is what I attempt to cultivate in Ani to participate in this reimagined observational filmmaking. How I choose to "cultivate fictionalization" within my film includes the use of asynchronous sound, juxtaposition, and personal accounts, combined with a fragmented narrative and a porosity between indoor and outdoor spaces to reflect themes of the impermanence of existence and interconnectedness of all things.

While *Ani* takes much inspiration from these films, it builds upon them through techniques that Elena Guzman and Emily Hong describe as feminist sensory ethnography, which not only discusses colonial practices within observational film but the loss of agency of filmmaker and film subject inherent of some sensory ethnography films. (186). Some specific ways in which they articulate this approach is through "narrative intimacy, and sensory accompaniment, that draw on feminist and non-western genealogies of sensory knowledge production." (185). They also describe the new obstacles ethnographic films present for decolonizing documentary in their immersive approaches, in erasing human agency and relationality between filmmaker and film participant (189). They argue that in using traditional sensory ethnography techniques, the effect of feigned objectivity can return with the loss of the filmmaker. In other words, while immersive techniques characteristic of sensory ethnographic filmmaking enhance nonhuman ways of knowing, the accompanying "removal" agency within a film risks a decrease of relationality between the filmmaker and film participant.

There are several ways in which I make use of feminist sensory ethnography techniques in *Ani*. Examples are embodied subjectivity and sensory accompaniment, which Guzman and Hong describe as the body of the filmmaker acting as an intermediary between people or places that may never directly interact (200). Deviating from some sensory ethnography films, feminist sensory ethnography encourages embodied subjective experiences through experiential filmmaking techniques, not to remove the filmmaker from the film, but to purposefully place them within it. One way in which I employ embodied subjectivity and sensory accompaniment are through stylistic choices of an animate, autonomous soundscape. Rather than mirroring the visuals present onscreen, sound acts as its own entity, creating liminal spaces within the inside and outside areas of the monastery. The relationship between visuals and sound also acts as a prioritization of different ways of knowing and experiencing a particular place, which I feel is more authentic to my own experience and informative of reality in a significant way.

Framing is another tool in which I experiment with embodied subjectivity within the film. For example, as I navigate the space, there are moments where proximity are unavoidable, to which I lean into and not only exist closer to the nuns but also engage in direct and extended eye contact as seen in the prayer wheel scene. In reflecting these sentiments through framing, my subjectivity is embodied within the way I occupy space throughout the film. In the prayer wheel scene, for example, I can't escape the fact that I am looking at this woman, and she is looking back at me, which evokes feelings of sense of belonging or outsiderness that I am feeling within this community.

The other way in which I employ feminist sensory ethnography techniques is through the incorporation of feminine oral history as a focus on female perspectives. This technique is

referenced in Guzman and Hong's article when discussing *Nobel Nok Dah,* a film directed by Emily Hong, Miasarah Mihai and Mariangela Lai about the separate experiences of three refugee women through separate interviews (199). They describe the use of oral history in the film as political, as a way " to facilitate an embodied proximity between audience members and the women portrayed in the film through experiences of sensory accompaniments and narrative intimacy" (*Nobel Nok Dah — Ethnocine*, n.d.). The final scene in *Ani* similarly makes use of a type of feminist oral history through inclusion of Buddha's sister's story. The reason this is significant relates to the connection of women in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition throughout generations, influencing contemporary practices and beliefs.

It is important to distinguish the intent of these tools as those of empowerment rather than empathy, so as not to attempt a complete understanding of a singular person, culture, place, or situation, but rather a way of responding to them. As Guzman and Hong explain, "the goal of feminist sensory ethnography is not to create empathy with the 'cultural other' but instead to 'validate and empower' those who are being represented" (197). A way in which this is present in *Ani* is through voiceover. Voiceover is a powerful tool in documentary filmmaking, and done improperly, has been used to rewrite or unwrite histories and experiences of marginalized groups (202). However, when used as a tool of narrative intimacy, it can effectively empower and give agency to film participants and their subjectivity, such as in my interview with Nawong where instead of seeking information on a specific topic, I chose to let her speak freely about what she wanted to share. This was not only essential to the filmmaking process in connecting me to Nawong, but an effective way of using narrative intimacy to empower her. Speaking further to the role of stylistic choices in accountability is Trinh Min-Ha's concept of "speaking nearby"

(89), where she describes a way of embodying "indirect language" and reflection onto oneself compared to attempts at mastery. In *Ani,* I employ this practice as the filmmaker through aesthetic evocations of incomplete understandings and subtle yet intentional inclusions of my own voice throughout the film.

Artistic Approach

Ani utilizes observational filmmaking combined with sensory ethnography techniques to invite the audience to accompany me throughout the monastery. Without the use of the expository mode and instead through attunement to the surrounding environment and subtle reflexivity, the audience is invited to experience this place alongside the filmmaker in many possible ways. For example, using observational techniques such as long takes, natural lighting, steady handheld camerawork, I, the filmmaker, exist subtly behind the camera without showing myself or speaking. This allows my voice into the film without the need for more obvious forms of reflexivity. This approach, while also not providing a specific narrative, both encourages the audience to confront their assumptions of this place and these women while illuminating the possibilities of observational filmmaking to embody the filmmaker's subjectivity.

Speaking to film content, the physical objects and artifacts in Ani hold extraordinary narrative power. Examples are prayer flags, straw baskets and plates, prayer wheels, and prayer lamps, as well as practical objects with less cultural and historical significance (plastic cups, plastic containers). The former are spiritually significant, for example prayer wheels and prayer flags are inscribed with written mantras, that, when spun or taken by the wind, are released into the universe in the same way a prayer emanates from a human voice. Butter candles, or prayer lamps, represent offerings, which the Ani make and continuously maintain in dedication of

welfare to the deceased and sick. Objects with less cultural significance signify the Anis' minimalistic lifestyle, speaking not only to a rejection of consumerism but to a life in tune with one's natural surroundings. For these reasons, Ani circumnavigates the monastery by ways of footage of objects and artifacts.

Ani also utilizes folklore and oral history to speak to the Eco feminine perspective. In *Ani,* the oral history included is purposely feminine. During the interview, I asked Nawong to speak about anything she wanted, guiding her storytelling very minimally in order to acquire small, specific details such as her name, and how she feels being at the monastery. From this she shared a story she learned in school, about Buddha's sister and the history of lighting prayer lamps as offerings. In the story, Nawong describes a journey that Buddha and his sister take to a distant village to acquire ghee for the prayer lamps. Amidst doubt and suspicion, a small amount of collected ghee was sufficient to light a single lamp, which Buddha's sister insisted they tend to through the days and nights. I chose to include the story because it was something that she gifted to me as opposed to something specific that I asked for. It was also important to me to include female oral histories to speak to the shared womanhood between myself, Nawong, and the rest of the Ani in the film.

Nawong narrates the story offscreen. The narration is coupled by visuals of prayer candles and the moon shrouded in clouds. The visuals, while not literal, complement the story symbolically while also allowing audiences to focus on the story being told. The significance of the oral history in *Ani* is that it acts as a form of shared knowledge and experience. With *Ani*, the story at the end of the film exists as a historic explanation of present-day practices,

where the story of Buddha's sister's attention to the continuously burning prayer lamp serves as a cultural instruction for the nuns in the film to do the same.

Ani encourages audiences to pay closer attention to the reality of the world within the film, particularly concerning the natural rhythms of the depicted place. The most powerful example of this in *Ani* begins where the older Ani are spinning the prayer wheels in the prayer wheel chamber. The rhythms of the prayer wheel bells in combination with the repetitive motions of the Ani lull the viewer into a sustained and deeply intimate sense of accompaniment with the Ani in the space, speaking to a shared experience and relationality between viewer, filmmaker, and film participant. As audiences experience the chiming of the bells and see lingering smoke from burning incense, they are immersed without a discernible sense of the reality of the situation, encouraging deep interaction without complete understanding.

Another important strategy at work in *Ani* is the aforementioned evocation of a porosity between inside and outside. This is largely achieved through sound, as evidenced where the sound of frying dough seamlessly fades into the sound of rain for the oncoming storm. When this transition occurs, the actual source of the sound is conflated in the viewer's mind, giving permission for experiential viewing and observation without explanation. The reason that "offering a mediated encounter with physical reality" (Balsom, 191) is such an important practice for this film is to provide *a* reality of my experience in this place rather than to assign its reality to it.

CONNECTION TO THE MATERIAL AND DISTRIBUTION PLANS

Connection to the Material

There were many contributing factors to my ultimate decision to make this film for my thesis. Throughout my education at Montana State University influenced by mentor faculty members Jennifer Boles and Cindy Stillwell, I have become interested in experimental filmmaking techniques as Science and Natural History filmmaking tools. For example, I am interested in exploring the ways in which experimental techniques which combine film artistry and film observation convey realness vs truth. For this reason, I knew I wanted to create a place - based portrait using experimental film techniques. The location of the film changed from Montana to Nepal due to personal health reasons which determined my thesis timeline, as well as an opportunity that arose to travel to Nepal to work with my family member and additional mentor, Thomas Kelly. While I was in Nepal, I was assisting with documentation of the Mani Rimdu festival but decided to travel to Thupten Choling Monastery on my own time. I spent 14 days at the monastery with the women that lived there, and eventually befriended Nawong Diki, a young nun who inspired me to make this film. Nawong had learned English at the Monastery, and after telling her I was a filmmaker, she agreed to sit for an interview with me. She eventually invited me along with her to various chores she had to complete and to prayer. My strategy for avoiding parachute filmmaking during production involved intentional research and decision- making informed by feminist sensory ethnographers and film scholars about the colonial histories and existing practices within documentary filmmaking. I also took into account the influences of filmmaking on the community of Thupten Choling, and let this information dictate my filmmaking. For example asking permission to film from the head Lama

of the monastery and articulating my purpose of visiting there. In my entering of a community outside of my own, my connection to the material mostly lies in experimenting with informed observational film forms to articulate realness versus trying to convey reality. In the words of Trinh Min-Ha,

> language is fundamentally reflexive, and only in poetic language can one deal with meaning in a revolutionary way. For the nature of poetry is to offer meaning in such a way that it can never end with what is said or shown, destabilizing thereby the speaking subject and exposing the fiction of all rationalization (Chen, 86).

This exposure of the "fiction of rationalization" is what helped me to create a film amidst my outsider status and move towards ways of relationality and shared experience.

Dissemination

I plan to return this film to Nawong and the community of nuns at Thupten Choling. What I hope this looks like is returning to the monastery to deliver the film to the Ani as a gesture of gratitude, and provide some sort of way in which they can view it, whether this is on a projector, computer, etc. I particularly would like Nawong to have it as she shared her personal experience with me in the name of the film's creation. I also have created a festival submission strategy for the film, focusing on festivals that accept experimental work. World Premiere/International Premiere: Sheffield (June 2024), Court Metrage (September 2024), Rotterdam (January 2025), Berlin (February 2025), Clermont Ferrand Short Film Festival (February 2025), CPH Dox (March 2025), Cinema du Reel (March 2025), City Doc Festival (April 2025), Alchemy Film and Moving Festival (May 2025), Oberhausen Film Festival (May 2025) North American Premiere: Toronto International Film Festival (September 2024), Morelia

International Film Festival (October 2024), Antimatter (October 2024), Images Festival (April 2025), Doxa Documentary Film Festival (May 2025), Hot Docs (April 2025).

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