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FILM COMMENT

Published by
Film at Lincoln Center
March-April 2020

AMERICA: THE EARLY WORKS

FIRST COW
KELLY REICHARDT'S
TALE OF FRIENDSHIP
AND FORTUNE

Plus:

BACURAU
STRIKES BACK

GEORGE
ROMERO'S
LOST MOVIE

KING VIDOR,
HOLLYWOOD
REALIST

LOU YE'S
CHINA





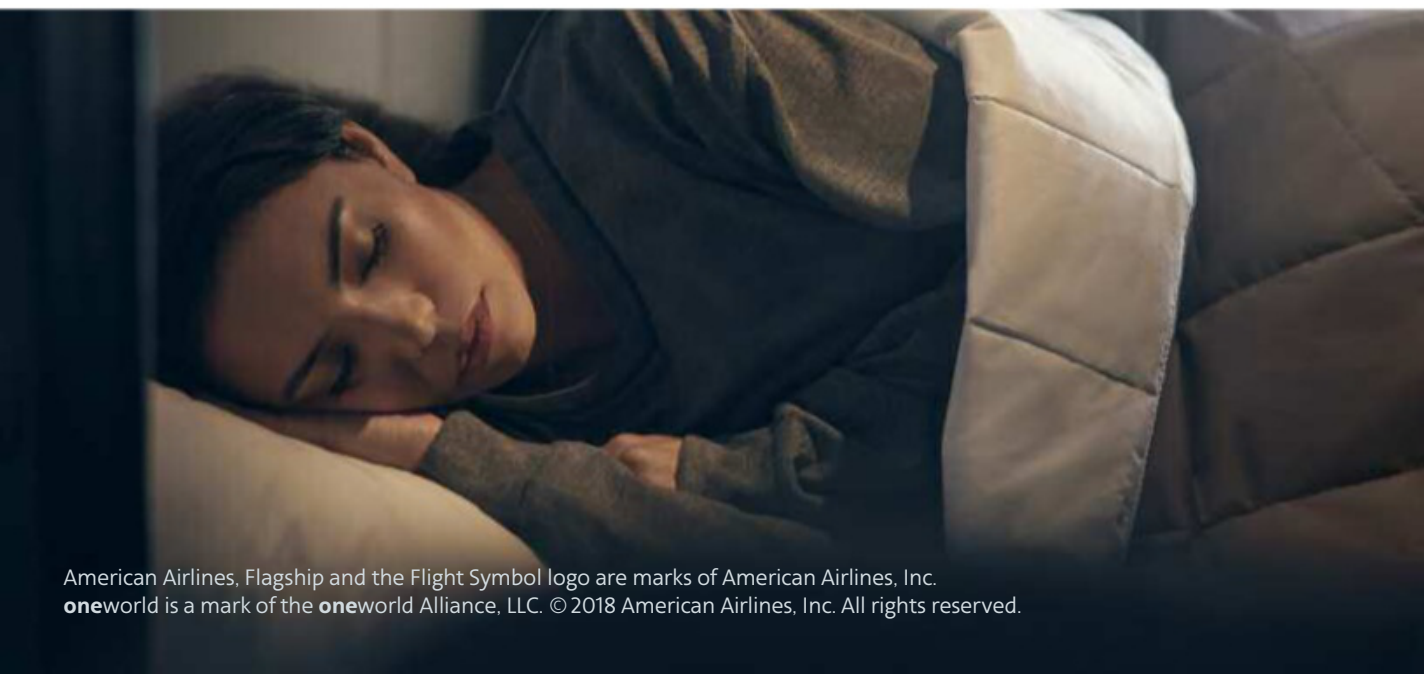
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March 13-24

Mapping *Bacurau*

March 25-April 5

New Directors/New Films

April 8-12

Spike Lee Retrospective

April 22-May 3

Art of the Real

April 27

46th Chaplin Award Gala Honoring Spike Lee

New Releases

Now Playing

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The Whistlers

Opens March 6

Bacurau

Opens March 20

The Truth

Opens April 17

Martin Eden



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This project is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, and is made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature. Image: *Starman*, screening on 70mm in Mapping *Bacurau*

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Ted CoConis

FROM THE EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS OF *THE WIRE*
BASED ON THE NOVEL BY PHILIP ROTH



THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA

FREEDOM IS NEVER COMPLETELY WON.
BUT IT CAN BE LOST.



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EDITOR'S LETTER

By Nicolas Rapold

YOU MIGHT THINK THAT *FILM Comment* folk run a tidy side hustle placing canny bets on the Academy Awards. But more often than not, we're busy championing movies that don't already have tens of millions of dollars—in box office, in marketing, in production costs—behind them. These are movies that we believe represent the best in moviemaking today, wherever it's happening, and which deserve and reward your attention. So it was a pleasant surprise to see the Academy catching up to what we had been saying for months: Bong Joon Ho and *Parasite* are the real deal.

Sure, Cannes had honored Bong's barn burner with the Palme d'Or last May, but when we put the movie on the cover of our September-October issue, it was not the obvious choice. Some were anticipating that a different (also excellent) fall movie would be in the spotlight—namely, *The Irishman*, which had yet to make its world premiere in the New York Film Festival. In any case, it was Bong's first *Film Comment* cover, though it would be only one of many "firsts" for the affable filmmaker, who, it must be recalled, had demonstrated true grit in his career, charging onward after distributor interference on *Snowpiercer* and anti-streaming static over *Okja*.

Why should Bong's historic Oscar

win of Best Picture (and more) matter? Generally, we steer clear of awards chatter, recently likened to the flu by Wesley Morris in *The New York Times*. *Film Comment* partly exists to provide another view of cinema, one that involves genuine discovery and not simply marching to the drumbeat of the calendar and foregone expectations. That being said, culturally and economically, the new global prominence of *Parasite* seems to bode well for movie lovers like you, if it means that someone in a position of power will be more likely to support the next Bong who will dazzle us anew.

We also know that we shouldn't slack, since director Bong has been keeping an eye on us: when he visited Film at Lincoln Center in January, he requested 10 copies of the most recent *Film Comment*, declaring to me his longtime fandom for the magazine and, of course, Amy Taubin. We're now proud to roll out our new issue, celebrating the work of another original talent, Kelly Reichardt, whose beautiful new film *First Cow* graces our cover. Inside you'll also read about *Bacurau*, the no-holds-barred Brazilian resistance thriller from Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles (also honored at last year's Cannes), and King Vidor, a

consummate Hollywood filmmaker whose wide span of work captures the challenges and contradictions of America.

There's also Taubin's interview with Garrett Bradley, director of the justified Sundance sensation *Time*, and a conversation with Ruth E. Carter, costume designer extraordinaire and frequent collaborator of Spike Lee—this year's Chaplin Award honoree, who's also discussed within Ina Diane Archer's write-up of *Bamboozled* (new to Criterion Blu-ray). Plus, Sheila O'Malley reviews Eliza Hittman's clear-eyed drama about a teenager seeking an abortion, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*; J. Hober-

man reflects upon the epic 20th-century German family chronicle *Heimat Is a Space in Time*; Molly Haskell looks at the latest from Hirokazu Kore-eda, *The Truth*; Michael Koresky takes the measure of doomsday views of cinema; Manu Yáñez Murillo uncovers the horrors of the Chilean stop-motion film *The Wolf House*; and much more.

All that, and don't forget our weekly discussions and interviews on The Film Comment Podcast. Thank you for joining us on our latest journey through cinema, and as an old childhood TV favorite used to say, keep circulating the tapes! ●



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Subscription Rates: U.S. funds only. U.S.: \$29.95 for six issues, \$49.95 for 12 issues. Canada/Mexico: \$40 for six issues, \$65 for 12 issues. Elsewhere: \$70 for six issues, \$125 for 12 issues.

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Film Comment, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834-9925



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Film Comment (ISSN 00 15-119X) is published bimonthly by Film at Lincoln Center, 70 Lincoln Center Plaza, New York, NY 10023-6595. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. The opinions expressed in *Film Comment* do not represent Film at Lincoln Center policy. Publication is made possible in part by support from the New York State Council on the Arts. This publication is fully protected by domestic and international copyright. Distributed by Comag Marketing Group, New York, NY 10019-5288. Distributors, Sandusky, OH 44870. Printed in the USA. Copyright © 2020 by Film at Lincoln Center, all rights reserved.

CELEBRATING THE CRAFT OF FILM



THE PRE-SHOW

News, views, conversations, and other things to get worked up about



Clockwise from top left: Jack London, *Martin Eden*, *Crime and Punishment*, Mikhail Romm's *Nine Days of One Year*, Alberto Lattuada's *Anna*

INSPIRED / By Pietro Marcello as told to Manu Yáñez Murillo

Public Intellectual

In Pietro Marcello's adaptation of Jack London's *Martin Eden*, a sailor-turned-novelist navigates the mounting chaos of 20th-century Europe

THE MOST IMPORTANT DECISION I MADE WITH MY CO-SCREENWRITER Maurizio Braucci when we decided to adapt Jack London's *Martin Eden* was to bring the story from Oakland to Naples, in the south of Italy. Since it involves an archetype, like *Hamlet* or *Faust*, we felt we could reshape *Martin Eden* to our image. But in Italy we don't have the tradition of Stevenson, Melville, and Conrad, and we don't have the American oceans, so we had to embrace the spirit of Pasolini, Carlo Levi, Ignazio Silone, and the Mediterranean Sea, which is hardly a pool compared to the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. Our Martin Eden is a countryman sailor.

By mingling fiction scenes with archival footage from different eras, I've tried to merge popular cinema with experimental cinema. And by popular I'm referring to a cinema prior to the *Commedia all'italiana*—to movies directed by some lesser-known names of Italian neorealism like Alberto Lattuada, Raffaello Matarazzo, or Renato Castellani. Those filmmakers shared a refined pictorial sensibility: Lattuada was a great connoisseur of art history. And then, with regard to the sense of timelessness I try to evoke in my film, I'd say Aki Kaurismäki made a similar maneuver by setting his beautiful adaptation of *Crime and Punishment* in contemporary times. I've just incorporated the use of archival

material, which in my case is deeply influenced by the work of Soviet filmmaker Mikhail Romm and his study of counterpoint effects through editing.

In my film, the music undergoes a transformation similar to the one experienced by Martin Eden. We begin hearing popular songs, but then the music becomes more mystical, like in the case of a piece by Russian composer Oleg Karavaychuk—my favorite from the whole soundtrack—which I took from Ilya Averbakh's *Mono-logue*. That's one of my favorite films. It was shown in the Cannes Film Festival in 1973, but has been mostly forgotten, like so many other great Russian films.

I treasure as foundations of my cinematic practice the ideas of filmmakers who have theorized about cinema. In his *Notes on the Cinematographer*, Bresson rejected any sort of model or heritage in order to create. In *My Method*, Rossellini celebrated the role of the unpredictable, of chance, as a way to give life to what's written on the page. In his book *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky claimed that cinema can become a fully artistic expression by fusing with poetry. These notions are my daily bread, mostly when I'm editing, which is the most exciting, adrenaline-rushing part of my work.

CLOSER LOOK: *Martin Eden* opens April 17.



REASON TO BE CHEERFUL

Spike Lee has signed onto his next project: a film version of the critically acclaimed Broadway show *David Byrne's American Utopia*. The theatrical concert brings the former Talking Heads frontman's new album to the

stage with a band of 11 international musicians. It's the latest addition to Lee's busy 2020 slate: the writer-director is wrapping postproduction on *Da 5 Bloods*, about four black Vietnam veterans seeking redemption, and in April he will be honored with Film

at Lincoln Center's Chaplin Award, immediately to be followed by head-of-jury duty at Cannes.

FOOTLOOSE

Greta Gerwig is puttin' on the ritz in her next movie. The *Little Women* director, who demon-

“The future of cinema.” —*New York* magazine

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What the Ross Brothers nail is the sense of home and belonging, and really the emotional freedom and safety, that The Roaring 20s provides for its patrons—which anyone blessed with a reliable local can immediately relate to.



RELEASE ME / By Nicolas Rapold

Up All Night

The Ross Brothers' *Bloody Nose, Empty Pockets* turns a bar's final night into a happy-sad (but mostly happy) pageant of home away from home

THE MOVIES ARE GRACED WITH MANY FINE scenes and moments in bars, but how many films grab a stool and stay, start to finish, in one sozzled setting? Enter *Bloody Nose, Empty Pockets*, or should I say: enter The Roaring 20s—the dive bar where Bill and Turner Ross's site-specific documentary takes place. Except, it's a little more complicated than just one specific site... but we'll get to that. For starters, know that the Ross brothers have filmed a delightful and suitably bittersweet look at a bar's final night before shutting up shop.

Cozy and dim, The Roaring 20s is bedecked with knickknacks and a TV permanently running a black-and-white movie, and our habitués enter one by one (with the occasional pair), young and old alike. Compressing many hours of shooting through many months of editing, the Ross Brothers have fashioned a smooth, leisurely long night of chatting, carousing, and soul-baring, as the regulars visit the usual stations of the barfly experience, saying their hellos and goodbyes, their tall tales and laments. There's a very former actor who seems to partly sleep at the bar, in one of the rumpled seats opposite the counter. There's a kind of hippieish grinning version of Donald Sutherland who trades heart-to-hearts with a brash and eventually weepy woman, who in turn strikes up a connection with a military veteran. And there's a handful of young folk, enjoying the scene with a pleasing minimum of irony.

A bar hang is at once a rugged and a delicate thing, at least to portray, and it's notable that some of its most memorable manifestations have occurred in series television (*Cheers* has acquired a number of critical champions, as has *Horace and Pete*, each naturally building out the theater-of-life double existence granted by bars). But what the Ross Brothers nail is the sense of home and belonging, and really the emotional freedom and safety, that The Roaring 20s provides for its patrons—which anyone blessed with a reliable local can immediately relate to. And in a lively bit of marginalia, there's also a running strain of antics outside, courtesy of the son of the second bartender (Shay Walker, also to be seen in Benh Zeitlin's *Wendy*) of this final day.

And now we come to the magical ingredients in the Ross Brothers' creation: namely, that they brought together these barflies and performers from a number of different places and backgrounds, filming their spontaneous interactions; and that the interior of The Roaring 20s belongs in fact to a bar in New Orleans (while the exteriors incorporate street shots from the outskirts of Las Vegas). It is a level of construction that is shared by more documentaries than readily admit as much, but the human comedy brought forth by *Bloody Nose* feels no less true for knowing this. And, as the filmmakers told me of their movie, "That's the only way we thought we could make it."

strated her dancing chops in *Frances Ha*, revealed recently that she's working on a musical. "One thing I feel that the world is really missing right now is tap dancing," she said. The filmmaker—who's co-writing a movie about Barbie with Noah Baumbach—will be returning to stage acting this year with an off-Broadway production of Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

POKER FACE

Paul Schrader is set to follow up *First Reformed* with a new feature that revolves around



"the World Series of Poker and Abu Ghraib." Currently titled *The Card Counter*, the film stars Oscar Isaac as a former soldier who tries to reform (if you will) a revenge-seeking young man amid a series of high-stakes poker games. Tye Sheridan, Willem Dafoe, and Tiffany Haddish have also been cast in the film. Schrader has been spotted in Mississippi, reportedly to start a film shoot.

IN BRIEF

Terence Davies's *Benediction* centers on well-connected poet Siegfried Sassoon, a World War I hero who later became a vehement pacifist. The film will also recount his closeted postwar life, when being gay was still a criminal offense in Britain. And Singaporean filmmaker Yeo Siew Hua (*A Land Imagined*) has begun production on his next film, *Stranger Eyes*, about a cop who stalks a con man only to realize that he himself is being tailed.



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“Part of what I wanted to do was to show Fox Rich as a mother—to show the sacrifices a mother makes, and to show also these private moments that she took for herself that many women feel like they don’t have the right to take.”



PEEVISH

Sells Like Indie Spirit

A typical visit to the Sundance Film Festival elicits a number of commonplace observations. There’s the perennial sound and fury of effortful branding in Park City. And, especially in the age of The Streaming Giants, there are extremely flexible definitions of “independent film” despite what’s hawked in promotional materials. (Everything seems summed up in the cringe-inducing “LEGIT” stickers offered to local sponsors and, just in case you missed them, advertised in festival trailers.) As for the movies, there’s a persistent sense of “calling card” adequacy to many of them, as if they were made to demonstrate proficiency more than excellence. On the positive side, you have adventurous movies like *Zola* and *Time*, but it’s possible to wonder whether an awful lot of time and money are concentrated on selling independence at a single cultural event when there’s an entire ecosystem of movies and movie love out there that could also use the attention and resources. Save some independence for the rest of us!

DIRECTIONS / By Amy Taubin

Profile in Courage

Garrett Bradley’s surpassingly graceful *Time* spans decades in relating one woman’s struggle to free her husband while raising their children

GARRETT BRADLEY’S *TIME* IS A FIRST-PERSON documentary, though the first-person storyteller is not Bradley but rather Fox Rich—a Louisiana mother of six who for 21 years worked ceaselessly to have her husband Robert released from prison, where he was serving a 60-year sentence without parole. Bradley built her film out of Fox’s videotapes, transforming movie diaries into an intimate and epic film, where past and present flow together like memory, all time bound up in a single purpose—to reunite a family so they can love one another in freedom. I spoke with the filmmaker at Sundance.

Could you explain how you found the amazing hero of *Time*?

I cast my first feature, *Below Dreams* [2014], on Craigslist. One of the characters in the film was named Desmond, and the person who played him got arrested. I became very close with him and with his girlfriend Aloné [Watts]. She had never dealt with anything

like this, and she didn’t know anybody to talk to. So I literally did a Google search to find organizations for women, and the first thing that popped up was an organization called Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children. The co-founder and director of the organization, Gina Womack, said: “You need to talk to Fox Rich.” Fox came to trust me from seeing how I worked and from seeing *Alone* [a documentary short about Watts]. And so I see *Alone* and *Time* as sister films. I would like them to always be together.

Had Fox been keeping these videos so that she could show her husband Robert everything that happened to the family while he was incarcerated?

Yes, and I think it was also therapy for her. And I think part of what I wanted to do, at least at the beginning of the film, was to show her as a mother—to show the sacrifices a mother makes, and to show also these private moments that she took for herself that many women feel like they don’t have the right to take. And to show that she never had doubt that he would see the tapes. To me, that was incredible.

How did Robert’s release come about?

They had a lawyer who convinced him not to take the initial plea deal. If he had taken it, he would have served 18 years. So the whole premise of the argument that Fox was working on with new lawyers was that they had a bad lawyer and got a bad deal. In addition to racism and being in Louisiana, I consider that to be part of why the original judge decided to give what was essentially a life sentence—a numerical life sentence. The average person would not have the dedication or the ability to keep working to get Robert out that Fox had. So this was part of the challenge for me and Gabe Rhodes, who cut the film with me: how do we understand how exceptional this woman is, but not to the extent that people feel alienated by that exceptionalism? So that it still feels universal to other women who are going through this? My audience is black women and black families, and so I hope all of them can find entry points into it. This shows you what is required of a person in order to achieve what she did.



What Warrington Hudlin ended up making with *Street Corner Stories* was both a glinting inversion of the campus documentary and a patient, precise film about work.



RESTORATION ROW / By Max Nelson

Store of Knowledge

Warrington Hudlin's slice-of-life New Haven journal yields a poignant (and biting) reply to traditional street vérité

Street Corner Stories

Warrington Hudlin, 1977

Yale Film Study Center

WARRINGTON HUDLIN MADE HIS FIRST FILM IN 1974, when he was a senior at Yale. He wanted to document what he later called the “split-consciousness experience” that shaped how he and other black students and university employees related to an inhospitable and often hostile institution. The result was an anthology of candid, incisive interviews. Hudlin called it *Black at Yale: A Film Diary*.

The Film Study Center at Yale restored that film in 2017. Now the Center has given the same treatment to Hudlin's second New Haven documentary, a bustling 1977 portrait of a convenience store at the corner of Dixwell Avenue and Lake Place. These movies come from an extraordinary decade for African-American nonfiction filmmaking (Hudlin's contemporaries on the East Coast alone included St. Clair Bourne, William Greaves, Madeline Anderson, Kent Garrett, Larry Bullard, and Carolyn Johnson), during which New York and Los Angeles were far from the only centers of activity. If *Street Corner Stories* is in some respects a companion film to *Black at Yale*, it also has a more sprawling, open-ended structure—a different mode of listening.

The film's opening title cards cite Ralph Ellison's account of the blues as a kind of interpretive filter for what follows. But the footage itself has an anarchic, darting energy that frustrates any effort to bundle it into a single argumentative shape. The direct-to-camera interviews that filled *Black at Yale* are replaced here with a hovering point of view that moves between the inside of the store and the sidewalk outside, flitting in and out of conversations.

This is a movie organized by cross talk: banter, jokes, arguments, speeches, offhand observations, energetic interjections. Harrowing stories of police brutality share space with political debates (“I'm not concerned with Kennedy,” one patron, a father of six who has just been illegally denied benefits, tells an older man), family anecdotes, memories of heart attacks. Women are fleeting presences. (“I know it's very hard for a man,” a young woman tells one of the movie's subjects from behind the wheel of her car, “but believe me, it's even worse for a woman.”) Three of the shop's visitors wear Yale uniforms, including that of the campus police.

And yet the university is conspicuous by its pointed absence otherwise. It was as if Hudlin had resolved to see what would happen if the institution stayed off camera and a shop like this—hectic and full of internal tensions—became the movie's center of gravity instead. What he ended up making was both a glinting inversion of the campus documentary and a patient, precise film about work. ●

NEW AND FORTHCOMING RESTORATIONS

Fourteen Super 8 films by Tatjana Ivančić 1970–1976, Austrian Film Museum in collaboration with the Croatian Film Archive

Paulette McDonagh x 2: Those Who Love (1926) and **The Cheaters** (1929), National Film and Sound Archive of Australia

Nationtime—Gary William Greaves, 1972, IndieCollect

Pandora and the Flying Dutchman Albert Lewin, 1951, Cohen Film Collection with the support of OCS

Son of the White Mare Marcell Jan-kovics, 1981, Arbelos in collaboration with the Hungarian Film Archive

CRITICS' CHOICE

Five critics rate and reflect upon 10 films of the moment

	Justin Chang	Manohla Dargis	Ed Gonzalez	Jonathan Romney	Alissa Wilkinson
Bacurau Kleber Mendonça Filho & Juliano Dornelles "Confounding and exhilarating, it plays like a bonkers <i>Black Mirror</i> episode, veering gloriously from action to horror to dystopian sci-fi to gallows comedy."—AW	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★★
Beanpole Kantemir Balagov "Balagov's characters are, like his style, reflective of dueling impulses, at once detached and penetrating."—EG	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
EMMA. Autumn de Wilde "Handsome, clever, and, with its frosted-cupcake aesthetic, almost too rich. Bonus star for bare-assed Mr. Knightley."—JC	★★★★	★★★			★★★★★
I Was at Home, But... Angela Schanelec "Woven around what ostensibly resembles a psychological realist drama are many elements undermining both psychology and realism."—JR	★★★★★	★★	★★	★★★★★	
Martin Eden Pietro Marcello "Jack London, Italian style: a glowing, sprawling repast of a movie, held together by a superb Luca Marinelli."—JC	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★★
Never Rarely Sometimes Always Eliza Hittman "Hittman's bleak, virtuosic drama about a teenager seeking an abortion favors naturalism over polemics and evokes the Romanian New Wave."—AW	★★★★★	★★★			★★★★★
Sorry We Missed You Ken Loach "A richly anecdotal depiction of being down and out, though compromised by a schematic sense of family dynamics."—EG	★★	★★★	★★	★★	★★★★★
The Traitor Marco Bellocchio "Bellocchio's true-crime cine-novel about a Cosa Nostra higher-up who spilled the beans and paid the price is energetic but unruly."—JR	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★	
The Whistlers Corneliu Porumboiu "Could have used even more whistling, but Porumboiu's intricate noir speaks the language of genre with thrilling fluency."—JC	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★
The Wild Goose Lake Diao Yinan "Byzantine plotting, a romantic sensibility, and altogether electric motorbike action make for a heady ride."—JR	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	

★★★★★ = Excellent ★★★★★ = Very good ★★★★ = Good ★★★ = Of interest ★★ = Mediocre 💣 = Bomb

Participants: Justin Chang of the *Los Angeles Times*, Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times*, Ed Gonzalez of *Slant Magazine*, Jonathan Romney of *Film Comment*, and Alissa Wilkinson of *Vox*



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*Dick Johnson
Is Dead*

We the Living

Death becomes a creative force in three Sundance films that dance at its edge

BY ERIC HYNES

THERE'S A MOMENT EARLY IN *DICK JOHNSON IS DEAD*, the new film by Kirsten Johnson, that flaunts a particularly cinematic power. At its Sundance premiere in January, it jolted some people seated behind me into paroxysms of shock. Johnson has prepared her audience, via voiceover, for what promises to be an exploration of the impending death of her father—even though he's actually alive and on screen, and complicit in her emotional and creative process(ing). Then we see Dick Johnson walking down the street and an air conditioner falling, swift as a seamless edit, onto his head. Even as the elder Johnson is beatifically splayed on the pavement, clinically shot from above while blood-red spreads on the sidewalk like a Giallo halo, I heard a whisper from the row behind: "Is that real?" The grammar and style of the sequence make such an inquiry something of a stretch—even before Johnson calls "cut" and lifts her father from the frame—but it does establish an uncertainty around veracity that will linger, an uncertainty inseparable from the one separating life and death.

In film, people are always appearing and disappearing, getting killed off and revived. Sometimes the narrative marks a character's end; other times they just never appear again, ghosts of our unconsciousness. Films also reanimate the actually dead, defying the natural order to ensure that Jimmy Stewart, Toshiro Mifune,

and Lillian Gish remain with us indefinitely. All of this also applies to documentaries, albeit with greater consequence, which is always implicit and sometimes directly invoked and exploited. Johnson takes possession of these implications for her film, both as a way of processing her own emotions and as a way of helping us to understand and appreciate our own arsenals of coping.

Johnson dots her film with these florid death scenes—see Dick crash a car, see Dick get whacked by a two-by-four, see Dick fall down the stairs—which serve to cinematically kill her father, but also, of course, to resurrect him in turn. The deaths' fictionality means that they can be controlled, that they exist within the sphere of life, which is how we encounter and process film narratives in general. As a documentary, *Dick Johnson Is Dead* allows us to reflect on this, to watch ourselves as we exult in death without consequence, to own these deaths as playthings for the defiantly alive, though all under the specter of eventual actual death—for Dick, and for all of us. It's in the film's non-dioramic elements, the observational and candid moments, that life is most urgently asserted. Yes, time is short. Yes, Dick's Alzheimer's advances over the course of the film. And also, yes, these images can outlast us all. After the screening, Johnson talked about how Dick loves the film, as it transports him back to people and places he can't see anymore; and also how with each viewing he has no memory of having seen it before. Present, then gone. Present, then gone again.

COURTESY OF NETFLIX

The film's mutual curiosity gives *Some Kind of Heaven* its vivifying spirit and transforms what might have been familiarly charming and smirkily knowing into something more troubling, elusive, and enduring.

THE VANTAGE OF *DICK JOHNSON IS DEAD* BELONGS TO AN adoring adult daughter who's struggling with the inevitable loss of her sole remaining parent. In *Some Kind of Heaven* and *The Mole Agent*, two other documentaries that premiered at Sundance (in the Next and World Cinema Documentary sections, respectively), younger filmmakers offer a more objective view of people living through their twilight years. With *Some Kind of Heaven*, first-time feature director Lance Oppenheim alights upon The Villages, a massive, self-contained, utopic/dystopic retirement community in South Florida. As documentary film locations go, The Villages is obscenely rich in terms of character and color, which Oppenheim explores from the outset via his locked-down tripod's deadpan gazes at old folks in vast antiseptic suburban locales, doing everything from tai chi and cheerleading to golf cart synchronization. The line being walked is between ogling and observation, which is softer than but analogous to that separating death and life—it's the difference between deadening and enlivening what's being captured.

Relievingly, and somewhat surprisingly, the film does wind up honoring its four main subjects, who are perhaps less representative of the masses from which they emerge than indicative of which people Oppenheim and his crew related and connected to—people they couldn't treat as Others. For though these are people navigating their seventh or eighth decade on earth, each seems unfinished and frankly unmoored, actively wrestling with the moment and struggling, in their various ways, to connect with others.

One doesn't need to dwell on or make too much of the age gap between Oppenheim and his subjects (he turned 24 on the day of the film's premiere), but I'm intrigued by a young filmmaker identifying with persons at the other end of the life cycle, and the older subjects in turn respecting and trusting someone like Oppenheim with the less-than-cute fogley matters of loneliness, financial insecurity, marital discord, and unceasingly disorienting change. I hazard to think that the film's mutual curiosity gives *Some Kind of Heaven* its vivifying spirit, that transforms what might have been familiarly charming and smirkily knowing into something more troubling, elusive, and enduring. There are sequences here that seem nearly as constructed as Dick Johnson's death scenes,

but thankfully they don't serve to simplify or reassure, playing instead as collaborative efforts to dramatize moments we might otherwise avert.

The conceit of *The Mole Agent*, by Chilean filmmaker Maite Alberdi, presents an 83-year-old man named Sergio who was hired by a private investigator to infiltrate an old-age home in order to check on how a client is being treated by the staff. That the elderly female tenant is being treated just fine is hardly a shocking reveal, and neither is the developing sense that the premise, while at first lightly entertaining, is extraneous to what really matters here. (Sergio is outfitted with spy glasses to record what he sees, even though the film crew is also present throughout, resulting in bafflingly redundant crosscuts between the two sources within the same space.) The deadening/enlivening line that Alberdi walks here is something like that between surface twee and bone-deep pathos, and as with *Some Kind of Heaven*, it's elevated through the buy-in of its subjects. A quickly developing friendship with a female suitor who's looking for sustained partnership culminates in a scene that's hard to watch but impossible to shake, lingering not because it affirms some truism about the perils of growing old and dying alone, but because it's irreducible evidence of two people with diverging pasts and motivations converging on this moment together. We don't know where the next scene will take us; we never know when a cut will signal the end of a relationship, or of the film, or of a life.

Dealing with subjects of an advanced age, some suffering from advanced illness, these are films that are haunted by potential finality. But they're also inversely oxygenated by a shared sense of appreciation for what's been recorded and afforded by the camera, by the potential of film to not just attend to matters of life and death but also create from it. There's really no way to reconcile ourselves to any of this, which means we should never run out of reasons for being mindful of all of it. The lines between young and old, real and imagined, hilarious and tragic, death and life, are ridiculously thin. In cinema we can see them properly, and meaningfully, collapsed. ●

Eric Hynes is a journalist and critic, and curator of film at Museum of the Moving Image in New York.



Some Kind of Heaven



The Mole Agent



Control Center

In *Loulou*, Isabelle Huppert showed her courageous talent for both mystery and candor early on

BY JULIEN ALLEN

SABELLE HUPPERT POSSESSES A GIFT THAT VERY FEW—AND usually very great—screen actors have: a perfect poker face. We can only appreciate this attribute in context, because on a lesser performer it could seem like expressionlessness—an indicator of a lack of substance, or worse, a lack of interest. In Huppert's case, where our appreciation of her intelligence and profundity is instantaneous, we always know she is thinking *something*, but what that is, is known only to her. She could be simply holding back, keeping the mystery alive for the audience; she could be internalizing the character's feelings because the scene demands it; or most likely, she could be refusing to base her reactions on the demands of a camera, instead opting to react to her character's circumstances exactly how (and when) she chooses. It is this expression of supreme confidence and commitment to her own idiosyncratic approach that propels Huppert and permits her to communicate unusual things in an unusual way.

An early sighting of this feature of Huppert's acting occurs in the 1974 Bertrand Blier film *Going Places*, where she plays a teenage girl who loses her virginity to Gerard Depardieu's character, gazing impassively at his burly, carnal figure as it looms over her. Yet the apotheosis of Huppert's fiercely humanistic, defiantly dignified

acting style is in Maurice Pialat's 1980 film, *Loulou*. Huppert's character, Nelly, is flung into a world that she should find instantly rebarbative, not to say terrifying—a world filled with macho posturing, brazen aimlessness, and violence. Yet it is a life she herself chooses—shacking up with another of Depardieu's uninhibited yobs, Loulou—in preference to the comfortable, Haussmann apartment-dwelling married life with which she begins the film. In the end, the two worlds that are presented are not actually so far apart from one another: the biggest distinction between them is Nelly herself, how she endures the first and prospers in the second. Throughout, Huppert is buffeted by men, with their power and foibles and numerous faults, and before long each of the principal male characters becomes, in their way, predictable.

But Huppert's character never does. With minimal ornamentation, her performance exudes a disarming, contradictory combination of mystery and candor. Incapable of cliché—when Huppert inhabits a bourgeois character, as she is often called upon to do, there is no satire, only discovery and empathy—she keeps us guessing, surprises us with her choices, never reverts to recognizable types, which might let us off the hook. When Nelly's brother, a rich banker, visits Loulou and Nelly's tiny studio flat and proposes that

***Loulou* features sex, but while Depardieu's charisma is out there for all to see, the strongest eroticism comes from Huppert's secrecy and from her subtle but palpable expressions of joy and desire in Depardieu's presence.**

he buy them a café to run, Huppert looks at him impassively, then without a flicker of emotion, by her silence in spite of her brother addressing *her*, she simply passes the baton to Depardieu to finish the scene. Almost any actor in her position would have disclosed something, even the slightest scintilla of excitement, regret, or distaste. Her decision to deliver nothing at this point makes Nelly infinitely more plausible and fascinating. Beyond merely refusing to play her brother's game (seeing through his politely disguised objection to the match she has made), Nelly is overthrowing the expected order of the given situation. To react one way (gratitude) or another (anger) would be to concede ground to those in her life who would pollute or control her relationship without understanding it. In her knowledge that *Loulou* cannot satisfy her brother and in openly ceding the authority to him regardless, she kills her brother's patronizing approach at its source.

Nothing with Huppert feels fake, because, in her words (from her own special "Autoportraits" edition of *Cahiers du cinéma* from 1994), she doesn't play characters—she plays "people." Rather than evaluate or construct a character in any traditional sense, she looks at the words on the page and searches for some aspect of herself that might fit what has been written, and then she plays it like that. In other words, she will not take on a role unless a part of herself relates to it or can be allowed to relate to it. This goes for Nelly as much as for her parricidal character in Chabrol's *Violette Nozière* (1978), and for the impish, murderous Jeanne from his *La Cérémonie* (1995).

WHAT HUPPERT DOES IN *LOULOU*—ACCESSING HER own personal truth—corresponds to what Pialat demanded from every actor he worked with. On a Pialat set, actors who were used to different treatment have described being bullied, physically and emotionally, as part of the creative process. Stars such as Marlène Jobert and Nathalie Baye were frequently reduced to tears; Depardieu (whose primatological frame conceals a fragile ego) was distraught by being told how inadequate he was. Jean Yanne went on strike in the first week of shooting Pialat's *We Won't Grow Old Together* (1972), agreeing only to lifelessly read the script and refusing to act it out. (He still won the best actor prize at Cannes.) Submitting actors to a discombobulating ordeal very often fed Pialat's quest for ontological truth. In his films you can often see performers adrift in their own process, blindly but courageously moving this way and that, uncertain of their absolute purpose, some of them lost—the effect brings its own realism. Huppert, though, never once looks lost or confused in *Loulou*; her own fortitude is palpable throughout. Nelly is deliciously stoic when surrounded by danger. Her reaction to being beaten by her husband (Guy Marchand) in a nightclub toilet is to laugh—which, as it later emerged, was Huppert's own natural reaction to the scene.

What Huppert's willfulness produces is a trenchant realism of

the rarest kind. It is not "naturalistic acting," which is clearly distinguishable, but a tethering by Huppert of every role to her own personality, such that each is reflexively credible in its simplicity and directness. When Nelly reconciles with her husband and he reacts furiously to her emotionless lovemaking, she consoles him with the reply: "Didn't you understand that I wanted you, but like that, without moving?" Few actors could make such an implausible line so utterly trustworthy (this despite our not even knowing whether the character herself is being honest), yet our identification with Huppert's truthfulness is so complete by that stage that we could believe anything she says. *Loulou* features sex, but while Depardieu's charisma is out there for all to see, the strongest eroticism comes from Huppert's secrecy and from her subtle but palpable expressions of joy and desire in Depardieu's presence.



Other directors have more recently sought to exploit these qualities, but have mistakenly added their own layer of paint. Pialat always illuminated Huppert's face (even at night), yet Haneke in *The Piano Teacher* (2001) frequently puts her in darkness. This is misjudged, because the darkness comes from *her* and if she is not lit, we see none of it. Haneke also makes her famous serenity

crack: a cheap thrill in the moment (her face and body language betray much in Benoît Magimel's audition scene), but a denial of the actor's rare and unique ability to safeguard her emotions. Verhoeven in *Elle* (2016) gets closer by handing the reins of the film to Huppert, freeing her to indulge her own excesses, but sometimes even he cannot resist sensation where enigma might have prevailed. Mia Hansen-Løve, by having Huppert's older philosophy professor (pedagogy again) consort with a younger crowd of students in *Things to Come* (2016), captures something more thrillingly *Loulou*-esque in her silent, reactionless contemplation of their conversations.

In the end, Huppert's craft is a form of therapy, wherein the process (which she says she adores) is vastly more important than the result (which she claims not to, making her perhaps more emotionally suited to theater, where the audience engagement is direct and the result is not recorded). She left *Loulou* before it was finished, to Pialat's dismay, because she had (as Pialat later put it) a date with Michael Cimino to "go roller-skating in Montana" for *Heaven's Gate* (1980). Then she added insult to his injury by "doing a Godard" on her return, with *Every Man for Himself* (1980). Huppert's subsequent itinerary contains a captivating mix of risk and caution: a willingness to explore emotions which so many would shy away from, but a refusal to completely open up herself to the audience until the time is right. She is angry only twice in *Loulou*, and both times the audience is struck by the distance her emotions have traveled to reach the surface. She sells her feelings dearly, but when they emerge, they engulf the screen. ●

Julien Allen is a film writer based in London, writing for the last 10 years almost exclusively for Reverse Shot.



Eyes in the Darkness

The Quay Brothers bring uncanny life to the inanimate with their recent literary adaptations in Rotterdam

BY JONATHAN ROMNEY

SINCE THE LATE 1970S, LONDON-BASED ANIMATORS THE QUAY BROTHERS, Stephen and Timothy, have been constructing and exploring dreamworlds of their own. Or perhaps not entirely their own, since their singular animations stem from and alchemically transform elements from modern culture—literary, artistic, musical. They have made films inspired by the animation of Jan Švankmajer and the music of Stravinsky, Leoš Janáček, and Karlheinz Stockhausen; and have adapted (that being a very flexible term) writings by Robert Walser (1996 live-action feature *Institute Benjamenta*) and Polish writer Bruno Schulz. But such source material serves above all as a seed, to be tended and lavishly mutated in the crepuscular hothouse of the Brothers' imagination.

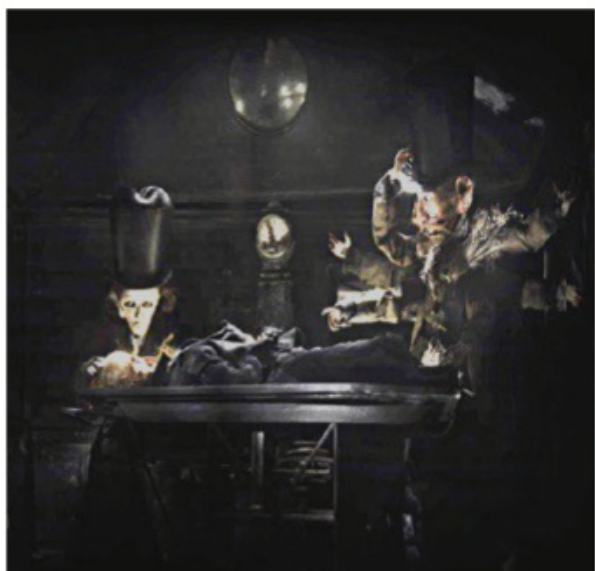
This year's Rotterdam Film Festival contained two magisterially haunting new Quay works. One was the 21-minute, 35mm animation *The Doll's Breath*, produced by their longstanding admirer Christopher Nolan. The other was an installation at the TENT exhibition space, *Dream Pools and Collecting Holes*, presenting footage from and objects related to *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, a feature they have already partly shot, pending further finance. Intended to comprise 70 percent animation and 30 percent live action, *Sanatorium* is also based on a Bruno Schulz work (previously

adapted in 1973 by Wojciech Has)—but entirely unrelated, the Quays insist, to their previous Schulz-inspired *Street of Crocodiles* (1986).

Taking the plunge into these new pieces, you enter a world of the absolutely alien and yet unnervingly familiar—as good a working definition of the “uncanny” as any. Both feature the puppets that are the Quays' trademark. *The Doll's Breath* is adapted from “Las Hortensias,” a story by Uruguayan writer Felisberto Hernández (1902-1964), about a couple whose relationship is disrupted by the man's obsession with female mannequins arranged in strange *tableaux vivants*. Not that you can easily glean this narrative from the Quays' characteristically oblique film, which also involves a strange figure in a bird mask—an homage to Max Ernst's bird-headed character Loplop. Instead the story is displaced by more elusive factors, notably the way that puppets' hands come free and flutter in the air, little delicate stirrings of light, staccato shifts of camera position—all set to an unnervingly intense score by French composer Michèle Bokanowski (spouse and collaborator of French animator Patrick Bokanowski).

As for the installation, in rooms plunged into sepulchral darkness, its first space features projections of *Sanatorium* footage showing the top-hatted protagonist's journey on a fin de siècle train. A number of vitrines contain bell jars under which, dimly visible, are such objects as a staircase leading nowhere and what resembles a miniature streetlight. There are also antique-style stereoscopic viewing devices through which we can see assorted mysterious still images in 3D, including a figure on an operating table, light pouring out of its skull, and a bearded, fiery-eyed man with six arms.

In the next room, more *Sanatorium* footage plays on a large screen, while a model of the sanatorium itself falls apart in midair, suspended over a leaf-lined surface like a reflecting pool or a stretch of river. The installation is a mesmerizing experience in itself, but also a tantalizing advertisement for a film that, whenever they get to complete it, promises to yield oneiric depths you almost shudder to imagine. I spoke with the twins in Rotterdam; as they tend to finish each other's sentences and interweave their comments, I've run their words together for convenience.



Top: *The Doll's Breath*. Above: *Dream Pools and Collecting Holes* installation

Source material serves above all as a seed, to be tended and lavishly mutated in the crepuscular hothouse of the Quay Brothers' imagination.

Who was Felisberto Hernández, and what does it mean to say that *The Doll's Breath* is "based on" his story "Las Hortensias"? The film feels more like a loose musical variation on a theme in which you can't detect the original melody. He was considered the first Latin American magic-realist writer. García Marquez said that if it hadn't been for Felisberto, he would have never become the writer he became. Calvino was a great admirer and Cortázar paid homage to him, but he got lost along the way.

It's about finding variations on themes in his work, so it wasn't just "Las Hortensias"—some of his other stories drifted in. The themes are there, but you're doing cinema, you have to pull it into a cinematic realm, where the visual and sound are really to the fore, and the text retreats. But we always think the embodiment is there.

Michèle Bokanowski's music in the film has a very unsettling propulsive force. Michèle does all the music for Patrick Bokanowski's films, but she does it after he makes them. Her sound universe is much closer to musique concrète. She slid us a CD at the Alchemy festival in Hawick which was a composition she'd made in 2002, *L'Etoile absinthe*.

So reversing her usual process, you took her music and built everything around it? The film is 21 minutes, which is the precise length of her music. We added a few sound effects, but we never once lowered the music.

Like your earlier work, the film is shot on 35mm. You've also filmed digitally, but in the CGI era, there's something heroic, even quixotic, about shooting on film and doing the stop-motion work that you do. In the age of the pixel, you're devoted to materiality, to stuff.

We choose the less sophisticated way. With CGI there's no limit, there's nothing you can't do in terms of fantasy. But within the laws of physically manipulating puppets and objects, your options are much more reduced. Because of that, you're looking for a chance to go beyond the materiality of the things you're working with. Also, the materiality of Felisberto's universe is not CGI, it's genuine material. It's matter in fermentation. It doesn't need the assistance of CGI to authenticate it.

Let's talk about the installation, which features elements of your work in progress, *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*.

The Bruno Schulz story involves a train journey to the sanatorium in the land of the dead, where the protagonist Jozef goes to visit his father. The puppet with the six arms is Dr. Gotard, who runs the Sanatorium—a highly dubious character who plays with time. When Jozef arrives and asks, "Is my father still alive?", Dr. Gotard responds, "Here your father's death, the death that has already struck him in your country, has not occurred yet."

The installation's peep shows are unnerving—the experience of looking into these viewers feels at once private, privileged, and perverse.

We were so impressed by these stereoscopic images from the 1900s that we saw at the V&A [London's Victoria & Albert Museum]. The images were seemingly banal, but we were totally fascinated by the detail of the anonymous foot of a girl stepping over a threshold—we were fixated on the sheer anonymity of the gesture, but also its beauty. We also liked the way the three-dimensional [quality] renders scenes in theatrical planes, rather than in the fluidity of depth we normally view things in. It ferociously isolates things—the planes themselves become almost invisible walls. Within these viewers, the miniature-ness is powerfully magnified—it becomes utterly unique and physical.

One of the most striking images in the *Sanatorium* material is a glimpse of the Gotard figure with a gleaning eye that seems to look at us with great intent. How do you make eyes come alive in your films? Sometimes your puppets' eyes are just inert objects, while at other times they seem sentient—a trick you apparently play by training the light in a certain way.

The eye almost becomes liquid just for a second. You sense that the light is moving *inside* the eyeball—it brings a great deal of mystery to the character. The scenario we've written for *Sanatorium* starts with an optical device that holds a dead retina, which liquefies on a certain day—which is the day that Bruno Schulz was killed by the Nazis. It holds the last seven images that he ever saw. ●

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Wild Style

Costume designer Ruth E. Carter brings vibrant color and fresh cultural depth to the storytelling of fashion

BY CHRISTINA NEWLAND

IN OVER THREE DECADES AS A COSTUME DESIGNER, Ruth E. Carter has drawn on a rich variety of influences, subcultures, and historical eras to outfit everyone from Angela Bassett in *What's Love Got to Do With It* (1993) to Denzel Washington in *Malcolm X* (1992). Borrowing style tips from hip-hop, Afrofuturism, sneakerhead culture, and the Black Panthers, her costuming is tinged with sociopolitical intent as much as it exhibits joyous self-expression. Take Rosie Perez's fire-engine-red dress in the opening credits of *Do the Right Thing* (1989), symbolizing the febrile and explosive energy of a simmering summer day; the too-tight collared shirts on David Oyelowo in *Selma* (2014) that gave him Martin Luther King Jr.'s neck fold; or the militant stylings of the eccentric *Chi-Raq* (2015).

Carter's deep attention to detail has seen her working with Nike to snag the famous white Jordans of *Do the Right Thing*, or screen-capturing old footage of Tina Turner to mimic the beading on her dresses. Carter finally won her first Academy Award for costuming *Black Panther* (2018), and her eye-popping '70s threads in *Dolemite Is My Name* yielded some of the most wildly fun costuming of the past year. Given her sociohistorical interests and collaborations with African-American filmmakers, Carter's work serves as its own kind of cultural history. There are stories in every stitch.

You've had a long collaboration with Spike Lee. How does each project with him typically begin?

Spike Lee's approach to starting a film is basically like a family dynamic, where he is the patriarch and he's folding you into an early stage of a script that you read. I'd go to his house or we'd meet at a restaurant and he would begin to tell me about his ideas for the script. That happened with *Do the Right Thing*, *Mo' Better Blues* [1990], *Bamboozled* [2000]... He'd describe what he was expecting in broad terms. For *Do the Right Thing*, I wanted to involve Nike and be really bold with colors. The day in the story was the hottest day of the year: people should be dressing in a fashion that's youthful but, because it's hot, they've got crop tops on and shorts. They want to represent their neighborhood, so there's African style infused with lots of things. That's kind of how the conversation starts, and I take it from there and start working at it.

I've always been really interested in the use of color in a psychologically obvious way, like Joan Crawford's attire in *Johnny Guitar*. What's the importance of color for you in your work?

I always use a lot of color in my work and it's always in pursuit of creating a color balance. With *Black Panther*, Nakia and Okoye [played by Lupita Nyong'o and Danai Gurira] are wearing the black liberation colors: the red, black, and green. We upped the red to honor the Maasai tribe, their vibrant red color, because these ancient African tribes do use color to evoke the spirit world, or in a proud way. Nakia's tribe was the River Tribe, and because it was the river, we used a lot of greens and blues, mostly greens.

The films you've costumed chart a varied cultural history of black American life in the 20th century. How have you decided what projects to take on?

The way it got started was that black filmmakers were reemerging, with *Hollywood Shuffle* [1987] by Robert Townsend, and Spike Lee with *School Daze* [1988]. They began an era of independent filmmakers that researched times past, and I happened to be ripe and ready for it. I'd done my training and I knew how to break down scripts from theater. Once I got picked up by Spike Lee, I was picked up by Robert Townsend [starting with *The Five Heartbeats*, 1991], and I was picked up by Keenen Ivory Wayans [on *I'm Gonna Get You Sucka*, 1988]. I would bounce back and forth between New York and L.A.

There weren't many girls of color in costume design. I don't think there were any. I can't really even name another one. I knew of other black costume designers in theater, but I didn't have any mentors in film. That's what created such a huge catalog of black films for me, and once I started on that track, when Steven Spielberg and Debbie Allen were looking for designers for *Amistad* [1997], I had the credits and the credibility. These were offered to me, and I happened to be in the place [where] I felt most comfortable and passionate. Once I got on it, the challenge of learning those eras was exciting to me. With *Amistad*, I took classes at UCLA for art history. I'm always trying to enrich my education with something outside of costume design.

How do you work with actors? What happens when an actor says something about a costume doesn't feel right?

With the actors, we have a collaboration. A lot of actors come in and they go, "Okay, tell me what I'm doing." Sometimes actors don't know quite yet what their character should be wearing. If we're not

“There weren’t many girls of color in costume design [when I started] . . . That’s what created such a huge catalog of black films for me, and once I started on that track, when Steven Spielberg and Debbie Allen were looking for designers for *Amistad*, I had the credit and the credibility.”



Amistad



Black Panther



Do the Right Thing



Dolemite Is My Name



School Daze



Selma

doing something sort of historically accurate, if we’re not recreating a person’s life and it’s a character-driven story, they want to see the research. I usually have boards in the fitting room. They may have one or two ideas, but they don’t have every idea for every change in the movie. So we start talking about the journey of the character, the story and how we can outfit [them] each time that we see them. Sometimes the actors want a big statement, and sometimes they want it to be a very subtle one. I have a rack of clothes in the middle [of the room] and we begin to try things on. I start learning about their body types, what kinds of things they can wear well to achieve our goal, and what kinds of things don’t work.

It’s a step-by-step process, and those details are examined every time the actor comes into the fitting room. You might be corseting underneath and nobody realizes it. You might be enhancing the shoulders because some people don’t have strong shoulders. I’ve taken things and turned them inside out and upside down, put things on their heads, and all of a sudden it’s like, hey, this kind of works!

What was your relationship with clothing and style when you were growing up, and where did that interest spring from?

You know, when you’re poor, you make dressing a creative endeavor because you can’t just go out and buy anything that you want. You try to get it from creating it, and I was that girl. I remember going to my mother’s closet and looking at some old dresses that she had and modifying them, cutting them up, making different things out of them. I was that kid who would open up their jeans to make skirts, put all kinds of interesting patches on it. I remember building a blazer from a pattern cut from things found on clothes that were about to be discarded. I also came up around the time of Madonna and the mismatch [trend]. I was the girl who wore two different earrings, cut my T-shirts open so my shoulders could hang out. I was that kind of person. I liked the idea of being creative with clothing. ●

Christina Newland is a writer on film, culture, and boxing, with bylines in *Sight & Sound*, *The Guardian*, and others.



Step Right Up!

George Romero's empathetic *The Amusement Park* confronts the horrors of the world through the eyes of the elderly

BY MAITLAND MCDONAGH

THERE'S NO SHORTAGE OF MOVIES SOLD ON THE premise that viewers want to have the bejesus scared out of them. George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and ensuing zombie cycle are classic examples. Romero's *The Amusement Park*—completed in 1973, and recently rediscovered, restored, and screened at the Museum of Modern Art—is another one. Which is quite an accomplishment for an hour-long public service film about being nice to the elderly. Commissioned by the Lutheran Service Society of Western Pennsylvania and the Pitcairn-Crabbe Foundation (a charitable organization dedicated to supporting religious education and community-oriented projects), it was never released, reportedly because the producers were horrified by the results.

The backers might have been swayed by the appeal of using a local filmmaker. Though born and raised in the Bronx, Romero had moved to Pittsburgh to attend Carnegie Mellon University and liked it enough to stay. He founded his first production company, The Latent Image, in 1962 to make commercials and shorts, and built up a core group of local actors and crew members to whom he regularly turned. But they probably missed the memo that the genial filmmaker's first feature helped fuel the fires of national breast-beating about movies that *go too far*. (Roger Ebert's widely syndicated 1969 review of *Night of the Living Dead* was primarily about seeing it at a matinee, where it left a full house of unaccompanied children traumatized “with tears in their eyes.”) Perhaps the producers just liked the young man who'd chosen to put down roots in his adopted home rather than decamp to godless Hollywood.

With *The Amusement Park*, just a few years later, Romero delivered a movie that's both grimly entertaining and impressively on message. That message is summarized in its preface: older Americans are

becoming increasingly marginalized, made to feel useless, a burden to their children and society at large. That introduction is delivered by a neatly dressed older gentleman, actor Lincoln Maazel (father of acclaimed classical conductor Lorin Maazel), who has a bit of the older Orson Welles about him. As the film opens, Maazel stands on a path in West View Park, an amusement venue outside Pittsburgh. The setting is gloomy—the sky grey, the ground puddled. Maazel's raincoat is not entirely a fashion statement. “On my next birthday, I will be 71 years of age,” he says, smoothly segueing into the observation that he's been fortunate to have the luxury of working in a profession he loves and making a living. Indeed, though he appeared in only one other film—Romero's *Martin* (1977)—and made a single television appearance, Maazel worked steadily in theater and nightclubs starting in the 1920s; he died at 106.

In this introduction, Maazel credits the owners of West View Park for offering the location free of charge, and the poignantly thanks many older people who worked without pay as actors/extras: “For some of the elderly players, [this was] the only enjoyable time they have had in recent years.” You need a heart of stone not to feel that one, and it's the setup for Maazel's parting shot: “Remember as you watch the film: one day, you will be old.” It's hard not to hear an echo of the inscription in Rome's beautifully bizarre Capuchin Crypt: “What you are now, we used to be; what we are now, you will be.”

What follows is a curious, existential setup: two men, both played by Maazel and dressed in white suits and shoes, meet in a stark, white room that easily could have been the stage set for a production of Sartre's *No Exit*. One Maazel is dapper and confident. The other—bloodied and battered—warns against leaving the white room, which opens onto the amusement park via a freestanding portal door that no one outside seems to notice. “You won't like it... there's

***The Amusement Park* is sharp social commentary rooted in brutal reality, a clear cousin to Romero's *Living Dead* movies despite the fact that it was a work-for-hire project.**



nothing outside.” Nothing good, anyway: what awaits the affable gentleman is a brutal education, conferred through an extended, picaresque series of encounters amid the hustle and bustle and run-down environs of the amusement park.

It's not a fun visit. Maazel the innocent is denounced as a molester when he tries to share a snack with some children; bullied by bikers for being in their way (a foreshadowing, perhaps, of the bikers in *Dawn of the Dead*, who have no use for idiots trying to maintain the values of a world that existed before zombies ate up its niceties); castigated by younger people who demand to know why he doesn't watch where he's going, when they're the ones barreling along like blinkered horses under the whip. He's even ignored by police when he tries to give a statement about a minor accident on a car ride, caused by an arrogant young man who vehemently insists that the fault lies with a blameless older woman. “If there's anything stupider than a woman driver it's an *old* woman driver,” the offender sneers. “Everybody over 65 should be made to ride the bus.”

IN KEEPING WITH ROMERO'S PRAGMATIC NONFICTION ROOTS, *The Amusement Park* is shot matter-of-factly but with touches of efficient flair by frequent collaborator Bill Hinzman (*Night of the Living Dead*'s iconic cemetery zombie): POV shots from a roller-coaster car, tight medium shots that reduce carefree young parkgoers to jostling limbs and headless torsos, a glimpse of a man in a monster mask tucked in the background of a ride. Much of the film is shot outdoors in what looks like natural light; only the portal door that connects the white room to the amusement park and a scene involving a fortune-teller appear to use special effects. It's not quite guerrilla filmmaking—Romero and his crew had the cooperation of West View Park's management and some scenes were clearly filmed during off-hours—but it's a triumph of determination, on-the-ground adaptability, and commitment to getting the job done and done well.

The Amusement Park is also kin to a book, *Flesh, Metal & Glass*—the vintage driver's-education screed from 1974 heavy on photographs of dead people who didn't bother to put on their seat belts and came to gruesome ends. Romero's film is both more artful and less instructive—contrary to what generations of motorists seem to think, it's not all that hard to clean up your driving act. But for people who see the elderly as a largely undifferentiated mass of problems, a

huge shift in perspective is required, and attitude adjustment requires internal motivation. In fact, seeing them at all is an issue: the crowd of young people with balloons and snacks ebbs and flows around the older people, with no one noticing Maazel, the white woman with a cane, or the senior in a wheelchair. They're invisible, except to the fellow buying their belongings so they will have ticket fare for the park's attractions—and he clearly delights in offering them far less than their possessions (watches, jewelry, clocks) are worth.

Part of what makes *The Amusement Park* so affecting is the fact that in its compassion for the elderly, it's still swimming against the current today. Mainstream movies are on notice about glamorizing or endorsing casual racism, abuse of women and girls, homophobia, and drunk/drugged driving. But making fun of clueless old people remains a standard comedy trope, and excluding the elderly is par for the course (except for hip aunties and wise grandpas who prop up young characters confused about life and romance). Yes, of course you love your grandparents, but they're still old and (we assume) they either don't understand or don't much care for many of the ways in which the world has changed since they were in the prime of their lives, and they don't hesitate to tell you so. The biting casualness with which a ride operator humiliates the smartly dressed man who failed a vision test that his wife passed is excruciating.

The Amusement Park is sharp social commentary rooted in brutal reality, a clear cousin to Romero's *Living Dead* movies despite the fact that it was a work-for-hire project. The horror auteur's zombie films are strikingly amoral and nonjudgmental: nice young people die and no-nonsense old people live; opportunists thrive while less ruthless ones don't. It's not just a matter of who gets the rules of a scary new world and adapts; sometimes it's sheer luck. *The Amusement Park*'s introduction is a plea for understanding and support for the elderly, but its nightmarish narrative suggests that consciously or not, Romero was working out the moral parameters of the grim realm of zombies that became his legacy.

There's no bright future on the horizon of this film or the *Living Dead* series—just a nastier, shorter, and more brutish version of the one with which we're all familiar. Sleep on that, and hope for sweet dreams. ●

Maitland McDonagh is the author of four books, including *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento*.

CURRENTS

New and important work plucked from festivals and elsewhere



THIS IS NOT A BURIAL, IT'S A RESURRECTION

LEMOHANG JEREMIAH MOSESE

CRYPTIC AND SINGULAR IN SHAPE and rigorously specific to its setting in the highlands of Lesotho, Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese's third feature tells the story of an 80-year-old woman, Mantoa (Mary Twala Mhlongo), who is informed that her village is about to be flooded for the construction of a dam, forcing its residents to resettle in the city. But Mantoa is resolute in her desire to be buried alongside her ancestors, even as her neighbors pack up their belongings and dig up their dead to take them along. Mosese's story is based on the realities of the apartheid-era Lesotho Highlands Water Project, but the film unfolds like a surrealist fable: an oneiric opening sequence in a smoke-filled bar, featuring a lesiba-playing raconteur, gives way to arch, myth-infused dialogue and an unearthly electronic soundtrack. The director excels at composition, turning each frame into a resplendently beautiful tableau of textures and color. His close-ups of his heroine—reminiscent of Dreyer's Joan of Arc—emphasize the rugged terrain of her skin and the fierce, unwavering grief in her eyes, turning her face into both rage and poetry, landscape and polemic.—*Devika Girish*

far-flung adventures, as well as their hopes and fears as Léon's foray into the pharmaceutical industry takes them across Europe to the U.S. and, eventually, to Mexico, where Vivian falls into a passionate love affair with an unseen suitor. Accompanied only by the occasional non-diegetic sound effect, Vivian's memories come to vivid life through the sly combination of evocative prose and richly textured imagery. In its bold conflation of fact and fiction, the film functions at once as a beguiling document of a certain mid-century bourgeois milieu and as a provocative meditation on desire, femininity, and the slippery nature of storytelling.—*Jordan Cronk*

NASIR

ARUN KARTHICK

ARUN KARTHICK's second feature opens at the crack of dawn. The camera holds long and still on our protagonist, who lays asleep on a floor mat, pink-blue sunlight slanting over his lithe frame, as the *azaan*—the Islamic call to prayer—is broadcast from a local mosque. This gentle synergy of light, sound, and faith permeates *Nasir*, which chronicles the life of a working-class Muslim man in southern India. Nasir (Koumarane Valavane) works at a textile shop and shares



his tiny home with his loving wife, cancer-stricken mother, and autistic adoptive son. Karthick captures Nasir's religiosity not just as a set of accoutrements or rituals, but as it really is: a way of life and being. Shooting in the 4:3 ratio with a Super 16mm lens, he imbues every moment of Nasir's day with beguiling, sensuous spirituality. Hindu nationalism brews around Nasir in ubiquitous political speeches and overheard conversations, but it remains on his periphery; he goes around writing poetry about his wife and gets along with everyone—Muslim neighbors, Hindu coworkers, and even his casually Islamophobic boss. If there's something slightly rose-tinted about this picture, it's all part of the movie's slow-emerging gut-punch, which reinforces the banality of evil and shatters the myths of karma.—*Devika Girish*



MY MEXICAN BRETZEL

NURIA GIMÉNEZ

FUELED BY QUESTIONS of authorship and authenticity, Nuria Giménez's first feature, *My Mexican Bretzel*, fashions a narrative from fragments of a past both real and imagined. Comprised entirely of 16mm archival footage shot by the director's grandparents in the middle half of the 20th century, the film creatively repurposes Giménez's family history into a fictional account of a wounded-WWII-pilot-turned-entrepreneur named Léon Barrett and his wife Vivian, whose jet-setting lifestyle took them to many of the world's most picturesque locales. In subtitles framed as excerpts from Vivian's diary, she recounts the couple's lavish lives and

OFFERING

JUAN MÓNACO CAGNI

JUAN MÓNACO CAGNI is a young filmmaker with an old soul. *Offering*, the 21-year-old Argentine's first feature, is, like many debuts, awash in visible influences. But unlike so many others, Cagni seems to have internalized the spirit, and not simply the style, of his forebears. Set in the Argentine pampas and shot in the 4:3 aspect ratio (with the rounded corners of the frame exposed), *Offering* conjures memories of both



Terrence Malick and Lisandro Alonso in its depiction of two women at various stages of their lives whose fates seem entwined at a metaphysical level. As preteen girls, Andrea and Miranda (one blonde, one brunette), are seen living on a farm with Andrea's grandfather, exploring fields and half-demolished warehouses; as young adults, they meet again in these same places, drifting between seaside pastures and the surrounding industrial landscape. Andrea, wearing a backpack, appears to be passing through or embarking on a new life. Little is said. Instead, like the film, the two communicate through feeling, intuition, and an unconscious rapport with the natural world. Nimble cross-cutting across temporal and geographic boundaries, Cagni opens a space to contemplate the nature of time and the beauty of our shared existence.—*Jordan Cronk*

WHITE LIE

YONAH LEWIS & CALVIN THOMAS

AFTER THE BERGMAN-ESQUE chamber horror *The Oxbow Cure* and the ridiculously loopy art-school ensemble comedy *Spice It Up*, the latest feature from Yonah Lewis and Calvin Thomas is surely the Toronto-based writer-director-producers' sleekest, most accessible work by far. *White Lie* follows a university dance student (Kacey Rohl) who feigns cancer, raises funds for treatments, and spends much of the film desperately working to maintain her ruse. The result is a paragon of tension-ratcheting classicism, with help from the editing and score by co-producer Lev Lewis. Yet what



makes it such an exhilarating genre exercise is that its carefully calibrated plot unfolds entirely in medias res: perhaps sensing that the weakest points in modern thrillers are their inciting incidents and tidy resolutions, the directors have made a movie that's all middle, and hence, relentlessly anxiety-inducing. Lacking both origin story and moment of comeuppance, it's also tricky

in the way it petitions sympathy for its antiheroine. Effectively capturing the postindustrial chill of a Hamilton, Ontario, winter on 35mm, the film makes fine use of Lewis's eerily spare score of piano, drums, strings, and guitar squeals, and features superb supporting performances from Martin Donovan, Sharon Lewis, and Amber Anderson.—*José Teodoro*



THE EARTH IS BLUE AS AN ORANGE

IRYNA TSILYK

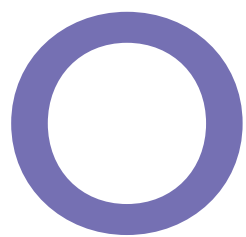
IWALKED INTO *The Earth Is Blue as an Orange*, a lovely nonfiction sketchbook of a family in war-torn Ukraine, after walking out of a fiction feature that briskly confirmed its cruddy visual sense and grating penchant for repetition. Newly sat, I watched as Ukrainian director Iryna Tsilyk displayed an effortlessly elegant lyrical sense, that most fundamental of talents for finding an image that sings a story in seconds, as here when a teenage girl clipped her long, braided hair, and, in a moment, seemed to cut herself free from some part of childhood. The teen, Mira, who is studying to be a cinematographer, is part of a close-knit creative clan we see as largely housebound during the periodic Russian shelling of their city, but based on the art projects, clutter, and cats populating their home, maybe Mom and her charges would be pattering about and making things anyway. Tsilyk's feature debut rides with the tensions and anxieties of the family as they cope with the infuriating attacks, while Mira records reenactments of past Ukrainian experiences of war (using a trapdoor shelter in their kitchen, for example, or roping in a local tank patrol), and films her siblings' testimonials about trauma—which we feel through the emotion in their voices, but which they do not let define their young lives.—*Nicolas Rapold*



Righteous Fury

A star who would not be denied, Kirk Douglas kept the drive alive whether playing brave, bad, or beautiful

BY STEVEN MEARS



IN A 1988 *TONIGHT SHOW* BROADCAST, JOHNNY Carson asked Kirk Douglas what the actor felt was his best quality, not as an artist but as a man. Douglas, then 71 but looking decades younger, answered with his characteristic blend of soul-searching, candor, and unpredictability:

"I think that anger, in a sense, has been a lot of the fuel that's helped me in whatever I've done," he reflected. "Anger has always been a big part of my life, and it's always with me, and I think it always will be." When the slightly bemused host observed that although many people wouldn't consider that an asset, it'd probably boosted the star more than it had held him back, Douglas heartily concurred.

Hollywood's last angry man found peace on February 5 at age 103. Each of his fans will remember him differently, but for me he'll remain eternally Van Gogh in Vincente Minnelli's *Lust for Life* (1956), yearning to be everything to everyone and sublimate his fury into art, stabbing at the canvas in an act of exorcism as much as creation. This is an apt analogy for Douglas's approach to his craft—blindingly vivid and textured, like the Dutch artist's paintings, his performances conceal so little that they can alienate, but the raw emotion he brought to the screen is as vast and as roiling as *The Starry Night*.

Surely no other actor of his cohort bore a screen presence so

defined by fulminating wrath. His close friend (and frequent co-star) Burt Lancaster was ebullient, though able to slip into pensive melancholy faster than you could say "Come back, little Sheba." Robert Mitchum was wry but soulful; Robert Ryan haunted and solitary. Only George C. Scott could match his fearsome temper, but he belonged to a slightly younger peer group. Douglas, never one to shrink from due credit, noted to Dick Cavett that as producer he gave Scott one of his first Hollywood jobs, in *The List of Adrian Messenger*, before admonishing his junior colleague for refusing industry prizes. Douglas never won a competitive Oscar himself, which should extinguish any last ember of faith in the Academy Awards as a barometer of merit.

I witnessed his anger firsthand—a very mild strain of it—after asking for too many photos at a book signing as an overzealous teenager. It wasn't the chummy encounter I'd dreamed of when I devoured his juicy memoir *The Ragman's Son* over a hundred high school lunches, but I'm philosophical about it now: if I was going to play a scene with Kirk Douglas, I'd want it to be with the proto-raging bull of his pioneering boxing picture *Champion*, not the lighthearted lummoX of his ill-fitting foray into farce, *My Dear Secretary*. He may have fought more than just "the good fight," but you don't get to be Spartacus by picking your battles.

Blindingly vivid and textured, like Van Gogh's paintings, Kirk Douglas's performances conceal so little that they can alienate, but the raw emotion he brought to the screen is as vast and as roiling as *The Starry Night*.

ABOUT THAT BOOK TITLE: HE WAS BORN ISSUR DANIELOVITCH in Amsterdam, New York, to a father who, per Douglas, "had been a horse trader in Russia. [He] got himself a horse and a small wagon, and became a ragman, buying old rags, pieces of metal, and junk for pennies, nickels, and dimes . . . Even on Eagle Street, in the poorest section of town, where all the families were struggling, the ragman was on the lowest rung on the ladder. And I was the ragman's son." His youth was one of abject poverty: the only son out of seven children born to a Yiddish-speaking household, he was called Izzy Demsky and forced to try his hand at more than 40 different jobs to help support his family while still an adolescent. This was doubtless the source of his ire, but he also acknowledged that it sparked his ambition, surmising that his own sons, raised in material comfort, grew up without his advantage of having nothing handed to him on a silver platter.

Like John Garfield, who traced a similar arc of firstborn son of immigrants to drama student to New York stage actor to

a compulsion to win the respect of his detractors even if it comes alongside the enmity of his friends.

Principles and futility (or one could say the futility of principles) inform Douglas's favorite—and arguably greatest—role, as Jack Burns in 1962's *Lonely Are the Brave*. A wayfaring ranch hand, Burns decries the cordoning off of the frontier with fences ("and the signs they got on them: no hunting, no hiking, no admission, no trespassing, private property, closed area, start moving, go away, get lost, drop dead!"). Driven by anachronistic values that compel him to get arrested for the sake of a friend, Burns breaks out of jail and eludes captivity from the police who employ the modern methods and technologies he shuns. "I love the theme," Douglas confessed in his autobiography, "that if you try to be an individual, society will crush you."

That doubles as a pithy summation of the McCarthy Era, and film historians will forever debate the scope of his role in ending it, but there's no disputing the fact that as producer of *Spartacus* (financed by Douglas's own company, Bryna Productions), he



Opposite page: From the set of *Lust for Life*. This page from left: *Champion*, *Ace in the Hole*, *Lonely Are the Brave*

Hollywood luminary, Douglas began his film career not with a dozen walk-on parts as soldier #3 but with a movie-stealing supporting role, in Lewis Milestone's *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946). It would have been easy to play the self-loathing alcoholic who blackmails Barbara Stanwyck into marriage as a villain, but Douglas mined sympathy from the man's tortured awareness of his own inadequacy. "I always worked on the theory that, when you play a weak character, find a moment when he's strong, and if you're playing a strong character, find a moment when he's weak," he once claimed—a tactic that accounts for the psychological shading evident in almost every performance he gave. His gladiator-turned-slave-leader *Spartacus* was driven by pride as well as valor, while his 21st-precinct-Ahab in *Detective Story* (1951) held fast to his ethics, even if they left no room for contingency.

Noble qualities are harder to isolate in his ruthless reporter sensationalizing (and prolonging) the rescue of a man trapped in a cave in Billy Wilder's lacerating *Ace in the Hole* (1951), or his manipulative producer recalled with scorn by all who knew him in Minnelli's *Rashomon*-in-Tinseltown drama *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952). ("Virtue is not photogenic," Douglas taught his son Michael—a credo that's rewarded them both handsomely.) But what you find in these roles is a malignant drive to succeed,

took a massive career risk in allowing blacklisted writer Dalton Trumbo screen credit after Trumbo spent a decade hiding behind pseudonyms and fronts. Douglas rightly considered this one of his proudest accomplishments. To that list he could add proclaiming his Jewish heritage, often and without shame, from his corner of the studio-era WASPs' nest. As early as 1953, he played a Holocaust survivor in the first Hollywood film shot in the newly established state of Israel, *The Juggler*.

Perhaps most inspiringly, five years after surviving a 1991 helicopter crash that claimed two lives, the indomitable septuagenarian recovered from a debilitating stroke, headlining three more features and several TV appearances before retiring at age 92 to become, according to *The Telegraph*, the world's oldest celebrity blogger. His speech was slurred—which made him kiddingly assert that silent films would have to return for him to act again—but he refused to let his physical adversity cause him shame or remove him from public life. Never, not even when bucking the blacklist with a film in which he literally dies on the cross, did Kirk Douglas exhibit greater star quality than when he used his platform to destigmatize afflictions: once again he found strength in weakness. His anger may have molded him, but his courage sustained him. ●

COIN OF THE REALM

IN KELLY REICHARDT'S *FIRST COW*, FRIENDSHIP MEETS COMMERCE IN A POIGNANT PORTRAIT OF TWO OUTSIDERS ON THE NEWLY SETTLED AMERICAN FRONTIER

BY CLINTON KRUTE



KELLY REICHARDT'S DECEPTIVELY MODEST EPIC *First Cow* opens with a wide, static shot of a barge, heavy with consumer goods, pushing down the Columbia River. As the ship moves across the screen, the contrast between the rust, paint, and metal, and the surrounding wilderness, a network of leafless, winter branches skirting the wide water, becomes more and more pronounced. The endlessly complex ecosystem is, for the strangely inhuman vessel, a commercial shipping route, nothing more nor less. Like the story that follows, this shot is deceptively straightforward, gesturing toward one of the themes—nature vs. society, with the human being somewhere in-between—that the filmmaker has been worrying since her 1994 debut, *River of Grass*, itself set in the liminal landscape of the Florida Everglades. With *First Cow*, Reichardt has managed to weave together the various concerns—social, philosophical, economic, and cinematic—that have haunted her films to date, producing a work of remarkable beauty and startling complexity.

First Cow tells the story of two men living on the margins of frontier-era Oregon—the very limit of American civilization—who become first friends and then business partners. Following a bravura opening scene—featuring a young woman (Alia Shawkat) and her dog, a nod to 2008's *Wendy and Lucy*—Reichardt rewinds from the present day to the early 19th century. As the camera floats through the dense brush of the Pacific rainforest, a man dressed in the tattered rags of a trapper gently plucks chanterelles from the underbrush. It's a bucolic scene, with soft harp music drifting on the soundtrack, the forest portrayed as a magical, innocent place. The

man, a cook named Otis “Cookie” Figowitz (John Magaro), is completely at ease in this green world, at one point carefully righting an overturned newt, setting the creature back on its way. Cookie, as we come to learn, is interested not in merely exploiting nature for its “comestibles” (as one character puts it later) but also in existing as one small part of the ecosystem. His integration—down to his decomposing clothes—in that world seems complete, until he suddenly hears a twig snap underfoot nearby and runs in a panic back to camp, where he rejoins a crew of rough-looking trappers.

Later that night, foraging again, the wandering cook suddenly finds himself face-to-face with a naked man, shivering in the ferns. Cookie, child of nature, immediately feeds and shelters the man, a Chinese immigrant named King Lu (Orion Lee) who is on the run after a violent act of self-defense. After sleeping in Cookie's tent, hidden from his pursuers, King disappears back into the forest. This act of kindness on Cookie's part is returned later in the film, when the two are reunited at a remote mud-caked trading post. King invites his new friend back to his small shack for a drink, and in a beautiful scene punctuated by Cookie brightening up the tiny place with an impromptu flower arrangement, the two immediately settle into a domestic routine. With no questions asked, the two become a platonic (but maybe not?) couple, spending their days darning socks, fishing, trapping squirrels, and chatting about their plans for the future. When the Chief Factor, the head of the local trading company (played as a somehow sympathetic stuffed shirt by Toby Jones), acquires the first cow in the region, the entrepreneurial King coerces Cookie into a risky scheme to bake and sell cakes using stolen milk.

Reichardt and longtime co-writer Jonathan Raymond (whose 2004 novel *The Half-Life* provides the source material for *First Cow*)

CLOSER LOOK: *First Cow* opens March 6.

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As we know, history is written by the winners, and Reichardt's extraordinary film tells a sensitive and clear-eyed story about the collision of that history, writ large, with the experiences—personal and collective—of those left out of the official tally.

manage to pack each scene with allegorical significance while still somehow maintaining a lightness of touch and a sense of humor. Raymond's novel is far more sweeping in scope, jumping back and forth between the 1820s and a story set in the 1980s. Magaro's performance is comparably layered: though he seems at first to be a naïf and a pushover, possibly even not all there, the character slowly reveals depths of awareness and feeling. He is a gentle but dedicated artist, collecting berries and shelling nuts for his baking project, as King, an inveterate hustler, reels off assorted business schemes. King explains: "It's the getting started that's the puzzle. No way for a poor man to start. You need capital . . . or a crime." He is not only a schemer but also a great talker: he's able to cut deals in multiple tongues, at one point making potlatch with an indigenous man using a mishmash of languages. Where Cookie's art is based on flour, sugar, and milk, King is a dealmaker, fluently translating words into cash and services. As Wallace Stevens wrote, "Money is a kind of poetry."

DP Christopher Blauvelt, who has worked with Reichardt since 2010's *Meek's Cutoff*, shoots the natural world in a way that fully integrates the characters into the setting. The camerawork—Blauvelt frequently frames shots through banks of fern and masses of branches, from low angles—reminded me of Lee Friedlander's deep-focus black-and-white photos of forest landscapes and trees, infinitely intricate galaxies of twigs and boughs. In these shots, Cookie and King Lu become a part of the forest, dwelling within the landscape, as they move through dense, pathless woods and meadows. Like the newt that Cookie rescues, or the owl that watches over the pair as they implement their scheme, the men are as at ease with the wilderness as they are with each other. Their friendship, the society that these two men of wildly different racial and cultural backgrounds form so naturally, is almost Whitmanesque, and certainly Thoreauvian: "Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" In a touch that could come directly from *Walden* (whose opening chapter is titled "Economy"), they "bank" their earnings from their baked goods in the hollow of a tree near their one-room cabin.

Midway through the film, King Lu declares: "History isn't here yet. We got here early. Maybe this time we can be ready for it when it gets here." Of course, as we know, history is written by the winners, and Reichardt's extraordinary film tells a sensitive and clear-eyed story about the collision of that history, writ large, with the experiences—personal and collective—of those left out of the official tally. The film's nuanced portrayal of indigenous people speaks to this as well: in one very funny scene at the Chief Factor's house, a local chief explains at length (through a translator) how surprised he is that white men don't eat more beaver tail, the most delicious part of the animal, leaving them to rot instead—and in so doing, brushes aside an opportunity to criticize the colonial trappers for their wanton destruction. Instead of the expected righteous indignation, the chief is, like the Chief Factor, an epicurean, lamenting the white man's lack of good taste. The indigenous people are, like Cookie and King, attempting to navigate a rapidly changing world, their leaders no less susceptible to human foibles.

This notion of history as something external, something that happens to us, rather than something made or directed by humans, is central to the film's almost allegorical, and certainly polemical, worldview. *First Cow*, like many of the filmmaker's features (with the

notable exception of *River of Grass*), is set in the Pacific Northwest—this time in the early 19th century, in and around Portland, Oregon, only recently prodded into being by the bustling foreign market for beaver hats. In the film, the city is still just a fort on the frontier of civilization, a hub for fur trappers and gold miners seeking fortune, surrounded by a few cobbled-together huts peopled by a collection of grimy characters worthy of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*—including, in a nod to Altman's western, the late René Auberjonois as an old kook with a pet crow, and a haggard-looking Stephen Malkmus as a wob-bly fiddler sawing away at Portland legend Michael Hurley's "Hog of the Forsaken." The society described by Reichardt is busy being born, and is somewhere between the pastoral and the capitalist. Cookie and King Lu's small, thriving (and theft-based) baking business—an attempt to take the only road offered by this burgeoning capitalist society—is predictably crushed like a bug when the two inconvenience the Chief Factor by transgressing the only recently developed code of property rights.

FIRST COW OPENS WITH AN EPIGRAPH FROM CLOSET dialectician William Blake (another 19th-century egalitarian), from *Proverbs of Hell*, in part a meditation on the forces unleashed by the French Revolution of 1789: "The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship." Less than 70 years later, and not long after the events of *First Cow*, another revolutionary writer, Karl Marx, expressed a related thought in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*: "The farther we go back into history, the more the individual and, therefore, the producing individual seems to depend on and belong to a larger whole: at first it is, quite naturally, the family and the clan, which is but an enlarged family; later on, it is the community growing up in its different forms out of the clash and the amalgamation of clans. It is only in the 18th century, in 'civil society,' that the different forms of social union confront the individual as a mere means to his private ends, as an external necessity." This "civil society"—in particular the ruthless form of early capitalism represented by the shells, buttons, and company scrip circulating throughout the film—conspires to domesticate and control production.

In the same essay, Marx writes that "Man is in the most literal sense of the word a *zoon politikon*, not only a social animal, but an animal which can develop into an individual only in society." Cookie and King Lu, whose personal and economic partnership has allowed them to briefly come into their own, are ultimately brought to heel by their inability—or unwillingness—to play by the rules of this brutal new system. An image near the end of the film seems to sum up their fate: the cow, once free to roam the meadow, is now tightly fenced in and guarded after the theft is discovered. To Cookie, the cow is a friend and partner, a being to be empathized with, as he gently caresses her and whispers reassurances about the quality of her milk. For the Chief Factor, she is merely property, to be both exploited and zealously guarded from exploitation by others. For one, success is collective, and for the other, the world is a zero-sum game. With typically understated, formal grace, Reichardt weaves together the disparate themes of her filmography into this critique of the root-and-branch rot of unfettered capitalism. That it's delivered in the form of a profoundly humane and moving story of friendship, ringing with the simple truth of folktale, makes that critique all the more powerful. ●





THE SOCIAL ANIMAL

KELLY REICHARDT TALKS THROUGH THE GROWING PAINS AND NATURAL WONDERS OF THE OLD, YOUNG WEST IN *FIRST COW*

BY HADEN GUEST

Although still busy with her teaching duties at Bard, Kelly Reichardt made time to discuss her latest film on a grey morning in early December. We met outside the Walter Reade Theater in New York.

You open *First Cow* with a wonderful quote by William Blake: “The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship.” Friendship has remained a major theme of your work since the very beginning. Strangers often become fleetingly intimate companions, while seemingly close friends and loved ones drift toward estrangement.

Sometimes the ultimate friend is a dog or other animal. And yes, sometimes it’s a stranger. Maybe the main question that appears throughout all the movies has to do with a certain idea of community and what we owe each other as neighbors, or Americans, or in a larger sense, humans sharing a planet. Actually, we never get that large—these films are more on the scale of: you might own the car, but I own the parking lot, so I can kick you off the property, or, if I choose, give you a spot to rest in.

My films have been shaped by the happy luck of a network of friendships. One of the most important friendships has been with Jonathan Raymond [author of the novel *The Half-Life*, which *First Cow* is based on], who is specifically interested in the dynamics of small communities and the politics that run through them. We spend a lot of time obsessing over the minutiae of relationships in a work space or at the ceramics studio or local gym. The early ’90s indie film scene wasn’t all that welcoming to women filmmakers, so after *River of Grass* I went back to shooting Super 8 and making films with a couple of friends. I was able to shoot *Old Joy* on 16mm, and little by little began building working relationships that included Jon, producers Neil Kopp and Anish Savjani, and eventually cinematographer Christopher Blauvelt and assistant director Chris Carroll.

David Doernberg, the production designer on *Meek’s Cutoff*, used to tell me, “You treat every film like you’re curating a dinner party.” He’d say, “That’s not your job!” But really it was my job because I couldn’t work well around all the macho guys-with-gear energy that happens on a lot of film sets. And I most especially needed a good vibe with the person at the camera. Friction at the camera is just horrible. Finding Blauvelt was huge. He sets a great tone for the whole crew that really frees me up. “People that you make things with” is one kind of community.

A lot of these films are about scarcity, and that’s been so true for their production. *First Cow* was a great ride because it was about

friendship from the beginning. That’s a pleasant theme to dive into. We also had enough of a budget where we didn’t feel like we were stretching ourselves beyond a safe place. We didn’t shoot in the coldest months, and we were allowed things like five-day shooting weeks. That was amazing. I had time to reflect during the shoot, something I hadn’t had before.

Richard Hell once interviewed me and he tried his best to get deep into the films—the more esoteric themes—but I always came back to talking about production. Which I realize is boring. After our interview, Richard said, “Man, you are so nuts-and-bolts.” It’s true. I’m not great at talking about the interior of the films. My other disclaimer is that I’m making fictional stories, so in the event that I get any of the history wrong, I’m totally off the hook.

The Blake quote poetically brings together animal, insect, and human. In your films we find characters who have an affinity with animals that marks them as somehow different. I think, for example, about the policeman in *River of Grass* who adopts dogs left orphaned at the crime scenes.

That’s inspired by my dad, who was a detective and would bring pets home from the crime scene. With *Old Joy*, my dog Lucy ended up in the film because she could never be left alone and I didn’t really have anywhere to leave her. I wrote her into the script, but I wasn’t sure, she could be kind of wild. But Lucy totally got it. She was so great and she really helped the performances, because there was this live being that needed to be responded to and engaged with. Then she was written into *Wendy and Lucy*, which was a less fun role for her, so I just thought, “I’m not doing this anymore.” She’s retired.

With *Certain Women*, we were searching for a cattle ranch like in Maile Meloy’s story. We passed this ranch that was all beige. It was a horse ranch owned by a woman who ran it herself with this terrific dog, Rowdy, who followed her around while she worked. We were working with untrained animals, so instead of the animals adapting to us, we had to adapt to the horses, and that was a long process. We worked with a small, stripped-down crew, moving in super-slow-motion, as silently as possible, signaling each other, directing with slight nods of the head.

The animals really do rule the day. I remember reading an interview with Michelle Williams [about *Meek’s Cutoff*] in which she said that as long as the oxen got the take right, I was happy. She had a point, but come on, I was dealing with oxen. With *First Cow*, we worked with a mix of trained and untrained animals.

"I do like the idea of how short time can seem, how young America is. When you think of how quickly the beaver were wiped out by the beaver trade, then your next thought is how quickly the Chinook were wiped out, or maybe that's your first thought."

Like the owl?

Dimitri, the owl, was trained, but it didn't matter because there were eagles about. The owl was supposed to fly over to the trainer on cue, but he stayed up there in the tree looking out for the eagles. Instinct overrode showbiz. The owl aside, the downside of trained animals is that they bypass the actor and only look to the trainer, which defeats the point. They don't do anything that you're not expecting, they're just waiting for a reward, so there's no surprise of a dog rolling in the mud or whatever, which is a huge disappointment. In *First Cow*, I got tired of the trained dogs and started calling my friends, asking them to bring around their dogs. Evie, the cow, however, needed to be trained to travel on a barge. John Magaro [who plays Cookie] did have to handle the cow. The way to make the scene work was for John to befriend and talk to Evie. Get her to trust him. But Cookie needed to do the same thing in order to get the milk, so it was all good character-building stuff for John.

I hope the films do have qualities beyond what I can speak about—the qualities in the novel which Jon Raymond and I had been discussing on and off for a decade. Anytime we were in between projects, we'd go back to *The Half-Life*.

Because it was the first of his books you'd read.

It was his first novel and the first thing I read of Jon's. *The Half-Life* spanned four decades and two continents, and it just seemed out of my reach because my budgets are usually very small. So we would contemplate it, hit a wall, and move onto something more doable. After *Certain Women*, which was based on three short stories by Maile Meloy, I'd been working on a project with the writer Patrick deWitt. Pat's story was set in a European shantytown in a make-believe time that might have been the early 1800s. When that project didn't come together, Jon and I returned to mulling over *The Half-Life*. I had been steeped in Soutine, Courbet, and [Winslow] Homer images, small hutches and makeshift towns—images that could be transferred over to *The Half-Life*.

The big break for our adaptation was the idea of stealing milk, as opposed to the beaver oil business in the novel. It must've been Jon's idea, because the seeds of good ideas come from him, and then I'm the more practical build-arounder. Once the cow came in, we started to figure things out. The other thing Jon solved was that he combined two characters from the novel, one American and one Chinese, into the composite character of King Lu.

The cow and Cookie are also almost fused into one character—there's a sense of him orienting himself toward hearth and home in resonance with the cow's maternal milk. King Lu, meanwhile, is perched in the tree, more related to the "wise" owl. There are ways in which the two men are of the land and attached to the soil, to which they return at the end. You seem to be speaking about a particular power and potential of nature to transform and teach.

For sure. With all of nature there can be this fear and it can seem powerful and frightening but super fragile at the same time. *First Cow* begins with Cookie foraging in a pristine landscape, with the owl in his tree, everything in its natural order. He eventually arrives at the fort, the trees are gone, and it's all business. Cookie enters this new world of the beaver trade that's without any boundaries and so shortsighted, full of real hubris. Toby Jones's character, The Chief

Factor, says, "The beaver are forever," which of course they weren't.

Originally, I had images of these Native American costumes, of men dressed up like trees. I wanted to do a chase scene where, for some reason, Cookie and King Lu would have to disguise themselves as trees and hide in the woods.

An important change from *The Half-Life* is that the modern-day story, of Trixie Volterra and Tina Plank and the hippie commune, is stripped and condensed in a way into the prologue. Could you talk about the opening scene of the young woman and her dog finding the skeletons? I noticed she has a scarf similar to Cookie's.

Alia Shawkat, who plays the girl in the opening, has a little Cookie in her. There is supposed to be this sort of continuity. The film opens with her in the present, out walking her dog on Sauvie Island (originally Wapato Island). A giant barge makes its way down the Columbia River. The Columbia had been a major trading highway for the Chinook and other indigenous people living along the river. In *First Cow* our trading fort is set on the Lower Columbia. King Lu and an indigenous man speak the local Chinook Wawa trade jargon when haggling over a canoe ride up the Columbia, and it's on a small ferry that our cow arrives.

To me, the continuity is suggested by the little visual things but also by the river—a continuity from the little ferry with the cow to the large barge. I do like the idea of how short time can seem, how young America is. When you think of how quickly the beavers were wiped out by the beaver trade, then your next thought is how quickly the Chinook were wiped out, or maybe that's your first thought.

I've always admired your refusal of the kind of sublime often associated with landscape in American cinema. Many have compared your films to westerns, but there is an important difference here in the very practical point of view of what you have called your "humble frame." But you're also looking at the facts, the history written on the landscape by trade and civilization.

You just have to look at what a day of shooting with three wagons does to the landscape and realize that the trail west was 10 miles wide of people spreading out: just imagine what that did to the landscape, killing everything underfoot. When we were filming *Meek's Cutoff*, we kept finding pieces of broken wagon from the original trail! Nothing is "untouched" anymore.

The photo images of the West that have most inspired me are from artists like Stephen Shore and Robert Adams, whose photographs focus on the evolving American landscape, the human footprint on nature. Or to borrow a phrase from Manny Farber—the "surface funk." When we were working on *Meek's Cutoff*, I used to pass this house on most days. It was in the middle of nowhere, all desert, but immediately surrounding the house were many, many old refrigerators, washing machines, junked cars, lawnmowers, seatless chairs—a kind of organized chaos in this fenced-in yard. Outside the fence were the owner's animals. What was the first thing set out in that yard? Is there a plan in the works, or has the accumulation of stuff just gone off the rails? There are versions of this yard off highways all over America. It makes me wonder about the larger surface funk—like the strip malls and corporate hotels and drive-thrus. I wonder how that all ran amok. Was it just, like, one Arby's near a nail salon, and then a phone

“Power is really smoke and mirrors, and there’s always the gun, which is the most powerful. There’s King Lu’s ingenuity and Cookie’s knowledge and craft, but ultimately, it’s about the guns, whether in the hands of the soldiers or the misguided kid who tracks them down.”

store turned up, and then more and more junk piled up and spread across the country?

Can we talk about the fort town, and how you came to understand this place that existed before photography? It is a multicultural, wide-open site of commerce that seems in many ways so very American.

It’s the very beginnings of a town. The great René Auberjonois plays the town crank, who is already annoyed by the way the town is getting too crowded when the third house is being built. When we were researching *Meek’s Cutoff*, we had so many images to work off of. That film was set in 1845. *First Cow* was 1820, before photography, so the research was much harder. We did get some English surveyor drawings to work from. We mostly relied on what we read and considered the materials they had access to. We also had an amazing researcher helping us from London. Today there are still some standing forts in the area, because many became military forts. The fort we shot at had a beautiful lawn exactly where the bar is [in the film], but they were very open to us coming with tons of mud and taking away their lawn.

We were using The Hudson Bay Company and John McLoughlin, the Chief Factor of Fort Vancouver, as a kind of model. While researching this film, I learned there was no one moment of corporations taking over America. They were there from the word “go.” The Chief Factor, played by Toby Jones, is like the CEO from Firestone, sent to another continent to lay down stakes, make use of the natural resources, and be the head person. The town builds out from the fort, where all the work is. Aside from some trappers, people weren’t making the trek across the country on foot at this point. People were coming via ships, they would come from London, Canton, The Sandwich Islands (what is now Hawaii), Russia, Spain, and France. Even if you were coming from Boston, you would sail south around Cape Horn, the southern tip of South America, and come back up.

Whatever background actors we brought to the fort to play the townspeople had to be there for the entire week. We had sailors who were just passing through, trappers selling their pelts, company men—and the local tribes who were there all along and coming to the fort to trade. There was this community of actors, dogs, crew, all spending the week together on location in Elkton, Oregon, with nothing around but the fort. At night after shooting, everyone’s in their outfits hanging around, eating oily cakes, and drinking wrap beers. Sean Fong was the maker of the oily cakes. And it was like in *Old Joy*, where Will Oldham and Daniel London didn’t know each other, but then they were in the car together, camping and building a friendship because they’re making a film together. That’s what happens when you’re on location.

There’s real humor in the film, especially when this town in nowhere, Oregon, during the 1820s starts to resemble present-day Brooklyn, or Portland, with everyone lining up for fashionable baked goods, the oily cakes with cinnamon shavings on top. Yeah, it’s funny, the hype around the oily cakes. It’s like, the other day my friends and I were walking down Prince Street, where there’s always a line for this pizza place. It was freezing outside, but there was a long, long line. The good word spreads quickly about the oily cakes—there is nothing else like these cakes that offers a taste of home. There’s no agreed-upon currency at this

point. The Chinook use dentalia shells, blue buttons are a thing, there’s the company scrip, and some people bring silver coins from elsewhere. As King Lu says, “I once saw a man pay five ingots for a broken fork.” Whatever you need or desire is what has value. And Cookie’s oily cakes are very desirable.

King Lu’s line came from a hilarious but revealing conversation in the van one day, with a bunch of art department people imagining the possible values of buttons and other objects. You don’t really know what value these currencies, this bag of tricks, would have had if they were taken to, say San Francisco. Would they add up to the same amount? The company scrip only had value there because the people with power said so. It had no intrinsic value of its own.

The currency we make up also speaks about who’s at the bottom and the top of the race, sex, and class ladder. Why would the Chinese character be below the dark-skinned Indian, the “Prominent Man,” as we called Gary Farmer? And where would the Lily Gladstone character, who marries the white man, be versus the Prominent Man’s young bride, the wife he chose to bring to brunch? Power is really smoke and mirrors, and there’s always the gun, which is the most powerful. There’s King Lu’s ingenuity and Cookie’s knowledge and craft, but ultimately, it’s about the guns, whether in the hands of the soldiers or the misguided kid who tracks them down.

It would be good to talk more about King Lu’s character.

King Lu is an opportunist who has had to hustle his whole life, jumping on ships and leaving places where he didn’t have any opportunity. He attaches himself to Cookie. It becomes a real friendship, but in the beginning it’s another opportunity. King Lu knows he can’t achieve what he wants to achieve on his own, and that he really needs a connection to a white person. When we were getting started on the script, Jon Raymond liked to think of King Lu as the Asian David Crosby.

The Chief Factor’s house is marked as a separate realm by the film’s most elaborate and expressive camera movements—first a kind of 360-degree pirouette during the conversation about Parisian fashion; and then a gentle back-and-forth in that beautiful, quiet scene of the manservant putting out the candles. The mobile camera seems to embody the sophistication of this inside world of wealth, high culture, and vivid colors, so different from the world outside.

Yes, that’s the idea. When I was describing to Chris Blauvelt this cradle-like shot with the candles that moves back and forth, he said, “Are you sure? That’s a very sexy shot for you.” Ha, ha. Which is true! But it’s exactly what you’re talking about. There would probably be a grandfather clock in their house. We used the sound of a clock and this camera motion that works with the tick-tock. It’s a calm rocking-boat motion, but it’s working with the scene outside the house, so it’s also tense. The colors in the house come from the Frederic Remington painting *Coming to the Call*. The night sequence in the house gives us time with the servant, where he can just be himself; he’s not on display. He plays his rudimentary wood game, looking like a teenager hanging over his iPhone.

The introduction of how time’s going to be used in the film comes with the opening barge shot. We are going into an era where time worked differently. It’s 1820, here’s what you’re in for. I recently saw the 1973 David Hockney film *A Bigger Splash*, and I felt this real pain

of missing *that* kind of time. It's not just about being young, but about how time worked before any of the gadgets, how an afternoon of hanging out really was just that. You were really just in the room you're in and disconnected from anything outside in the larger world.

This points back to Peter Hutton and "slow cinema," and film's ability to gauge the expansiveness of time. There has long been an impulse to use cinematic narrative to accelerate and move time efficiently forward, but you talk about wanting to inhabit your films through quiet moments that evoke a living time. It's not like Warhol's *Empire* or anything like that. I think it's funny my films are considered slow cinema in some mainstream circles. I guess it's all relative. I just shot a 400-foot roll of film, and there were nine shots. That's uncut, raw footage, about a minute a shot. What's so slow about that? I don't mind being on the side of slowing things down. To slow time is a political movement. It seems to me that it's only commerce that's pushing us so fast, so we can be sold more stuff more quickly. So I'm completely happy to be put within the slow cinema camp. I just think that people who truly make slow cinema, the James Benning of the world, might find it a bit annoying.

Peter Hutton's whole thing was about giving people a frame to check things out in, seeing instead of actively showing. He used to call his films "reels." He'd invite people over to his place: "You want to come over and watch some reels?" And a shot was usually as long as a reel. He said digital threw him off because how would he know when the shot was over? I hope I mentioned that the

opening shot of *First Cow* is an homage to Peter. Let people see. You have the choice to show them things or to let them see.

Your short titles also seem pared down to an absolute: *First Cow*. There's a kind of economy to it, a sense that everything's been weighed and has a reason for being there. Your films have a strength because there's no waste.

It seems I'm always making films about people that have nothing to spare. The economy of how things are shot is an aesthetic choice, but it's also practical. From the scriptwriting phase, I'm thinking about what's possible—writing for what I think I'll have access to, but also considering what would King Lu, for example, have access to. Did he come upon his hutch and move in? Was it half-built? What would he have brought to it? So the scarcity of the characters plays into the choices about how to frame something, when and how to move the camera.

As you mentioned, the shots in the Chief Factor's house were fun for me because I don't usually have cause to have elaborate shots. We shoot in a lot of incredibly beautiful places, but I always have a rule that there are no beauty shots. The shots have to work on the merit of what's happening in the scene. There's no beauty for its own sake. I was revisiting the Hudson River School paintings when I was first prepping *First Cow*. In those paintings, the beauty of the landscape and the light is all wrapped up in this feeling of God's presence, I think. It's not an easy, carefree beauty. ●

Haden Guest is Director of the Harvard Film Archive.

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forever.



Criterion Collection Edition #1026: **Me and You and Everyone We Know**



RISE UP!

KLEBER MENDONÇA FILHO AND JULIANO DORNELLES'S BRAZILIAN EPIC *BACURAU* SETS THE WORLD ON FIRE WITH AN INVIGORATING AND AUDACIOUS STORY OF RESISTANCE THAT FEEDS OFF OF PULP AND POLITICS
BY ELA BITTENCOURT

CLOSER LOOK:
Bacurau opens
March 6.



Given the far right's backlash against human rights, the filmmakers' inclusion of precisely those populations that are under attack—blacks, women, LGBTQ communities, other minorities—is a gesture as much of courage as it is of hope.

IN BACURAU, A REMOTE, ISOLATED TOWN IS ATTACKED BY A small group of armed, drone-assisted outsiders. The *sertão*, or backcountry, where the action unfolds, has often featured in Brazil's popular culture and arts as a forbidding, uncharted, and parched territory. It is the country's Wild West—a vast landscape marked by violent conquest and the resistance of the indigenous people and the black *quilombos* (communities historically created by runaway slaves).

Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles's new film won the Jury Prize last year at Cannes, where it gave me one of my two most hair-raising moments during the festival's screenings. Each happened when the social drama—in all its relatively recognizable, containable parameters—metamorphosed into fearsome, all-out genre action. One instance occurred in Bong Joon Ho's juggernaut *Parasite*, when the struggling poor family assaults those even less fortunate. The other came in *Bacurau*, when the people of the convivial, quasi-utopian town—where tolerance and free love rule, and the goodly townsfolk gather to commemorate their deceased black matriarch, Carmelita—suddenly find out that they're under attack. Immediately they dust off their cache of guns, and as they mercilessly defend themselves, carnage erupts.

One might call the sequence a carnival of blood, as the spectacle staged by Mendonça and Dornelles feels so highly performative, enhanced by the use of widescreen. Like Bong, the filmmaking duo presents us with protagonists whose humbleness in no way signals the ferociousness of their counterattack. But once horror is unleashed and *Bacurau* gears up, from complex exposé to full-throttled bloodlust western, it sure felt as if the images were shocking my nervous system. Yet equally rapid, almost uncannily so, is the villagers' will to move on. *Bacurau* is a place that's marked by violence, and yet its core ethos remains: to live and let live.

Who are these warriors of *Bacurau*? Among the town's memorable characters is Domingas (Sonia Braga), the brazen local surgeon and reckless drunk and bigmouth—a remarkable role for Braga, whose past performances have often traded on sensuality, but who this time is more shrew than muse. Though much more temperate, Domingas's soul sister is Carmelita's granddaughter Teresa (Bárbara Colen, who played the younger version of Braga's protagonist, Clara, in Mendonça's second feature, 2016's *Aquarius*). Her fortuitous return from the city is mirrored by a similar regress made by her occasional lover, Acácio (previously known as Pacote, a deadly contract killer)—a detail that suggests that the town has an eternal hold on all of its inhabitants. Acácio is just one of many characters who prove as striking as they are elusive—the same could be said about the outlandish yet intensely likable queer bandit, Lunga (Silvero Pereira). All, however, are quickly absorbed into the communal hive of *Bacurau*. Like the capoeira dance, *Bacurau*'s logic, its very pulse, revolves around collective action, on and off the battlefield.

In a nice reflexive touch, the town of *Bacurau* has its own museum, which reflects a long history of bloody conflicts; the latest combatants are thrill-seeking safari customers, who hunt humans rather than game. They are led by a cynical German-American profiteer (played with zeal by Udo Kier), whose colonialist rapaciousness and cool, exploitative logic make him a close kinsman of Conrad's Kurtz. The *Bacurau*ans fire back with gusto. In one memorable scene, an elderly black farmer blows out the brains of a white aggressor—a quick-footed defense whose B-film gore

tends to elicit gasps of awe. The dramatic crescendo echoes the ending of Mendonça's first fiction feature, *Neighboring Sounds*, in which a gunshot caps a series of oppressive actions that run across generations: a white patriarch in Recife is confronted by his security man, whose roots in the backlands and trauma from the violence unleashed on his family make for an unforgettable, vengeful finale. Similarly, though *Bacurau* takes place in a near future, it is very much about the past, on screen and off.

In its historical reckoning, *Bacurau* shares some DNA with Cinema Novo and with Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo's "poverty porn" manifesto that, along with Glauber Rocha's earlier aesthetics of hunger, has shaped critical discourse on Latin American cinema for the past few decades. Thematically, *Bacurau* is a corrective to certain ethnographic films that, up to the recent past, have too often framed non-western subjects as passive or "simple." But stylistically, it's closest to Ospina's *Pure Blood* (1982)—an evisceration



From left: directors Juliano Dornelles and Kleber Mendonça Filho

of the contemporary colonial mindset that, like *Bacurau*, pays a delicious, backhanded homage to Hollywood.

In this sense, *Bacurau*—like the American westerns of Ford and Hawks—brims with moral complexities *because* of its embrace of genre, not in spite of it. To see its protagonists exalted in widescreen—a sweeping canvas of diverse faces, bodies, skin colors, and textures—is to *feel* the innate strength but also the inherent contradictions of the backcountry. These contradictions stem from the fact that, on the one hand, the hinterlands are enshrined in the national ethos as the quintessence of Brazilianness, yet on the other, they continue to be neglected and forgotten—until a crisis, such as the rampant burning of forests, or the murders of tribe or *quilombo* leaders and violent land-grabs of indigenous reserves by white farmers, force them into the spotlight. Given the far right's backlash against human rights, the filmmakers' inclusion of precisely those populations that are under attack—blacks, women, LGBTQ communities, other minorities—is a gesture as much of courage as it is of hope.

The two filmmakers come to *Bacurau* after working together for the past 15 years: Dornelles was the production designer for both *Neighboring Sounds* and their richly crafted middle-class melodrama *Aquarius*; he also worked on Mendonça's shorts, including *Cold Tropics* (2009) and *Electrodoméstica* ("Electro-cleaning-lady," 2005).

“It begins and you think, ‘Is it a rural drama?’ Then the film slowly shape-shifts into an action or a B or a sci-fi movie, then into hardcore horror or suspense. It’s a bit like walking in a garden and finding a piece of string, and then realizing that it’s much longer than you anticipated.”

Together, they combine a love for classical storytelling, a prodigious lifelong cinephilia, and a strong penchant for genre, all of which sustained them over the monthslong collaborative screenwriting process. The latest result, *Bacurau*, is a milestone—a vigorous and angry film, like no other in the history of Brazilian and world cinema.

I spoke at length with Mendonça and Dornelles in Cannes, and seven months later, I followed up with each director separately over the phone to discuss the film’s reception and how their experiences as Latin Americans, Brazilians, and ardent genre buffs shaped their blistering portrait of a community at war.

Let’s talk about the big picture first: your choice of widescreen for this story. It’s a format that is not so common and is also challenging to stage.

KLEBER MENDONÇA FILHO: Staging is probably the biggest challenge you have as a filmmaker. It’s one of the reasons I love musicals. How to keep the frame alive with movement and brimming with energy is something that most viewers take for granted. And, of course, you can turn any film into a musical without music—that’s the whole idea for a film like *Bacurau*, which is about a community. Before we went on location, I was afraid that we might not find the human element that could come from 15 to 25 people appearing in the same frame. But then we worked with the outcasts in the communities: the crazy ones, poets, musicians, actors or aspiring actors, painters, sometimes just the people that others called crazy or “funny in the head”—and they’re amazing! In the film, when you look and see their faces, they’re completely into the scene. This really helps when you move the camera and zoom in, or come in from the side and use a crane.

The irony is that many people tell us that *Bacurau* is fast-paced, and others say it’s incredibly slow and boring. [Laughs] You really never can win!

The film is full of paradoxes. You shot it in the infamous dry lands of Brazil, and yet they look so green on screen.

JULIANO DORNELLES: We were very fortunate to come to the *sertão* when we did. From a practical standpoint, the rains made our work complicated—we lost three days of filming. But it allowed us to show the region from a different angle: green, splendid, full of life.

KMF: These paradoxes lie at the heart of our film. Bacurau is green yet dry; it’s poor but full of dignity. Its people don’t go hungry, but they are disrespected. The population is extremely pacific, yet it guards its secrets. I believe that I make straightforward films, but perhaps the way we filmed *Bacurau* specifically creates certain tensions. The constant shock of paradoxes elicited many different reactions from the audience—some perplexed, others a bit tense or questioning. With the foreigners, for example, it seems that viewers end up negotiating to what degree they can deal with violence, how and which moral lines are crossed—murdering a child or a spouse, or questions of who can be called “a Nazi.”

There’s also the question of who’s white and who’s not.

KMF: Even more specifically: who is white in Brazilian society. The Brazilian *sertão* is actually extremely white. For many, even for many Brazilians living in the South, it’s surprising to learn just how white the Northeast hinterlands are. We were ready to film in a mostly

white town, but during our scouting came across a *quilombo*. The two communities did not mix. From then on, the unstated but crucial idea was that Bacurau is a “remixed” *quilombo*: a historical place of resistance, but with some white, indigenous, trans, and other inhabitants. Carmelita, the matriarch who passes away in the film, is the matriarch of the *quilombo*—though we never use this word.

JD: That’s why we included that the town of Bacurau has a historical museum—a museum that plays such a key role in the community, because it preserves the history of *cangaço*, of rebellions.

KMF: This is also why the capoeira scene, which wasn’t originally in our screenplay but came directly from our actors, is so important. I wasn’t a fan of that scene at first, but after revisiting John Carpenter’s *Night*, I thought that perhaps if we joined the capoeira with the sounds of feet and hands beating to the rhythm, and then the music from *Night*, we would have a scene of preparing for war. Even if we don’t explicitly call it that and let it figure in as a dance.

That sequence actually starts in a whorehouse—with the rhythm in a sex scene, then with the pimp clapping his hands, and then the capoeira and war.

KMF: All these rhythms and musicality are interconnected. You could say that it’s in this sequence that the film goes wild. As a number of people mentioned to us in Cannes, after this moment you truly can’t imagine what’s going to happen next. It’s great that we could enter this territory of strangeness through the music.

Speaking of strangeness—or estrangement—I wonder if that’s yet another reason for your embracing widescreen.

KMF: Cinema always relies a lot on technology. Nowadays, when I turn on the television to watch Netflix, there’s a strong possibility that all the films will look similar. The same thing happens when you go back to the late 1970s and watch *Superman* or *Heaven’s Gate*. They have a certain style that comes from the ’70s and from technology, like the negatives of that era and the choice of lenses.

As a filmmaker, I like to find something that gives me the pleasure of looking at a film, and that doesn’t look like everything else. With *Neighboring Sounds* I loved the idea of making a movie in kitchens and in common places, but in 35mm Techniscope, which goes against the kitchen-sink hyperrealist style. So you make a Brazilian kitchen-sink [drama] and treat it like it’s a Brian De Palma thriller from the 1980s. This probably sounds pretentious, but it does offer me a challenge. The same with *Aquarius*—a one-character drama, but with the widescreen [look] from Italy or from the early ’70s in the United States. With *Bacurau*, we really let go and embraced genre. In fact, just the other day, someone wrote on Letterboxd that *Aquarius* is a great thriller—and I always thought of it as a thriller. I so often read that it’s a political family drama, a film about a woman—and it is—but it’s also a suspense thriller. Now with *Bacurau*, the genre aspect is out in the open.

What was the process of writing this screenplay together?

JD: We had different phases, but our main phase was about eight months of concentrated writing—five times a week, 9 to 5, or sometimes 9 to 7. It was very intense.

KMF: We had deep discussions with our editor, Eduardo Serrano, about how we wanted the beginning to be very deliberate and precise in presenting the community, but also about [subverting] expectations.

“Today, with the range of themes and styles and aesthetics and skin color and geography and social layers, Brazilian cinema is even truer to Brazil than it was 10 years ago. To see it systematically sabotaged, with glee, is something that I never saw coming.”

Because these days, usually, within 45 seconds of a film, you get exactly what it is—and that’s precisely what we didn’t want. So let’s say that you’re watching this Brazilian film. It begins and you think, “Is it a rural drama?” Then it slowly shape-shifts into something that resembles an action or a B or a sci-fi movie, then into hardcore horror or suspense. It’s a bit like walking in a garden and finding a piece of string, and then realizing that it’s much longer than you anticipated.

I wonder about the script’s dark humor. For example, when the older black man blows up a white man’s skull—that graphic scene made some in the audience laugh.

JD: I see this kind of laughter as a release rather than a sign that our viewers find graphic violence funny. We certainly don’t. We show it as quite ugly.

But Lunga the bandit is both seductive and violent.

JD: Cosmopolitanism in banditry is now a real concept. Here we play with the idea of drag; that’s why the character has two versions of the name, masculine and feminine—Lungo/Lunga. Again, in a place like Bacurau, there is no simple way to portray a person.

That scene with the cut-off heads comes across as a pastiche.

JD: In a way, the humor was much more present in the screenplay, but then slowly the film took on a more serious tone. Perhaps that’s why we were so curious to see the film’s reception in Brazil, because for Brazilians our movie is profoundly sad. It is catharsis reached from another angle. That’s what fantastical stories can help achieve.

It seems that your actors—Udo Kier playing the villain, for example—really fed off of that fantastical energy.

KMF: Udo is a great human being. He feeds off getting to know people and making discoveries. It was a similar experience to the feeling I had when Sonia [Braga] came to *Aquarius*. It’s one of those rare opportunities when you step into cinema because you have the access—you can hold hands with somebody who’s been part of your life for many years. It’s a beautiful thing. I’d talk to Sonia for hours over lunch or dinner about things that are part of the history of cinema, and which are also part of her life. And the same thing happened with Udo—Dario Argento, Fassbinder, Gus Van Sant, Lars von Trier. Madonna. At one dinner, we were drinking wine and watching Madonna’s “Deeper and Deeper” music video on the phone, with Udo making a running commentary. And I realized that he appears as much as Madonna or maybe a bit more—and what a great face! We worked really hard to put that face and his dramatic physical presence in the film.

In terms of dialogue, though, I wonder if some Western viewers might find the white characters one-dimensional.

JD: I don’t agree that they’re one-dimensional. As villains, they have their own complexity. At the same time, the film takes the point of view of persons from Bacurau—our point of view, as those from Brazil’s Northeast. When you watch Hollywood films, the villains are often Arabs, or in the action films of the 1980s, they’re the Soviets. We’re working with genre cinema, and our film is about an invasion—so we naturally chose a group that is culturally very different. KMF: One reaction at Alice Tully Hall during the New York Film Festival—a gentleman in the back asked why the Americans were



the “baddies”—made me think: we’ve been watching American cinema for 120 years but it’s still rare to see a non-American film that portrays Americans as the bad guys. We’ve had Carmen Miranda as an exotic woman with fruits on her head. And can you just imagine a Brazilian, in 1938, asking a Fox executive why the Brazilian woman has fruits on her head? [Chuckles] Or a Russian 19-year-old asking an American director why Russians always smoke, kill people, and have no hair? What about the Mexican narcos in American thrillers? Soderbergh is an amazing director, but why are all the Mexican locations yellow and dusty and American ones clean and blue? I think these are all questions of representation, of how the industry has trained viewers to think of representation. So it’s fascinating how *Bacurau* is seen, from Australia to France, Brazil to Argentina.

Could you say more about the reception back home?

JD: In Brazil—where *Bacurau* has been in cinemas now for 20 weeks straight, with over 730,000 viewers so far, which is no small feat—the reception has been very strong, though not always in ways that we anticipated. Some viewers leave the cinema electrified; others are depressed, thinking of our country’s tragedy, and how we’ve gotten there. But there’s something else: in Brazil, we’ve always watched genre films, but historically, they were American or Italian, not Brazilian. That was my experience with cinephilia. So in our public’s imaginary, though genre cinema is huge, *Brazilian* genre is still being constructed. Of course, we shouldn’t forget the national example of Zé do Caixão [aka Coffin Joe], but he was the only one. If you mention his name to viewers who don’t work in film, they’ll most likely associate it with “trash cinema,” which is problematic.

What was your own experience of cinephilia living in Recife?

KMF: It’s like that line from *Goodfellas*: “As far back as I can remember...” I always went to the movies. In the ’70s, we had good commercial films and great cinemas. Movie palaces were very popular in Recife. In my teenage years, in England, we went every month to London, to museums and to Leicester Square to watch movies, often in 70mm. The first fascinating non-American film I saw was Herzog’s *Fitzcarraldo*, then Wenders’s *Paris, Texas*. It was the VHS era, so I had access to a lot of films. My cinephilia had three areas: moviegoing, VHS, and television. When I came back to Brazil in 1986, you could see a new Cronenberg at a 1000-seat

commercial cinema in downtown Recife. *The Fly* was one of the greatest films I've seen in my life, and it just happened to have been released there; the same with Carpenter, Verhoeven, and De Palma. That's what made me want to make films.

Now Cinema São Luis is Recife's only surviving movie palace, but we're very lucky, because in the 10 years since it ceased to be a commercial theater, it has become a very special place for culture and cinema. *Bacurau* has been the second-ranked movie in Brazil and 25,000 people went to see it at São Luis alone. Gabriel Mascaro's *Divine Love* also did incredibly well there. It's amazing to see people line up around the block to see movies. It doesn't happen in many other places around the world—maybe at The Castro in San Francisco, which is another very happy experience in communal filmgoing.

I'm actually working on an essay film about the landscape around the São Luis. The city is like an animal that keeps shedding its skin and then a new skin comes in—it's like a werewolf that changes into different animals over time. As you grow older, you begin to see the different layers of the city, because you've lived long enough to remember them at different stages. It's a very personal film, about how I look at my city and its downtown area, which I really love.

Juliano, you are also working on a new project?

JD: Yes, I'm in the editing stage, but also waiting on some financing issues to get resolved. The new film is a bit like being in a long-distance relationship in an age with no internet or video chat. Your feelings change over time, and you must rediscover if you're still in love. That's how I feel: I need to digest it a bit more.

What energizes you about contemporary Brazilian cinema, despite the country's current political and human rights crisis?

KMF: Depending on when you ask me that question, I'd be very sad, because we're really seeing a destruction of something that was built very slowly and democratically. When I made *Neighboring Sounds*, my script was chosen because it was the first year that quotas were applied to funding first features. And historically, all the funding had been concentrated in the Southeast. So I was given a new tool that then led to my second film. But that was 11 years ago.

Today, we have a whole new group of young people making films, and with the range of themes and styles and aesthetics and skin color and geography and social layers, Brazilian cinema is even truer to Brazil than it was 10 years ago. To see it systematically sabotaged, with glee, is something that I never saw coming. But the good thing—depending on the time of day you ask me—is that there's an opportunity to develop something out of frustration and anger, which is basically what I've been doing, because Brazil has always been not only a crazy place but also full of contradictions. Over the last year, I've been given the drug called *Bacurau*, to navigate this horrible, bizarre terrain. It has made me strong, in terms of developing two or three ideas that I think are true, not just in Brazil but around the world. ●

Ela Bittencourt works as a critic and curator in the U.S. and Brazil and consults for a number of international film festivals. She also runs the film site Lyssaria.

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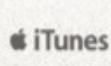
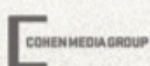
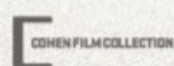
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LIKE THE BUSTLING COUNTRY HE PORTRAYED, KING VIDOR'S WORK SPEAKS FROM THE HEART AND PUTS ITS FAITH IN THE FORCE OF WILL, FOR GOOD OR FOR ILL

THE STRAIGHT STORY

BY NICK PINKERTON

KING WALLIS VIDOR'S PRIMER-CUM-WORKING-AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *On Film Making*, his second book, appeared in 1972—a great year for world cinema, if an inauspicious one for the American Republic, then fast approaching an ignoble end to its second century of existence. Five White House operatives connected to Richard M. Nixon, reelected in a landslide in November, were arrested for burglarizing the offices of the Democratic National Committee in Washington's Watergate Hotel. In the Easter Offensive, the People's Army of Vietnam crossed into the South Vietnamese DMZ, while Haiphong Harbor was bombarded with U.S. mines, and photographer Nick Ut captured the image of Phan Thi Kim Phuc, a nude 9-year-old girl running down a dirt road, displaying her napalm burns. Jane Fonda, visiting North Vietnam, was snapped sitting on a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun.

Vidor was then nearing 80, born into the optimism that was the birthright of that last generation of electrified Victorians who lived in the sweet spot between devastating American wars, carrying with him a lived memory of stuffy middle-class parlors and horse-and-buggy rides through his hometown of Galveston, Texas—one of a very few “Golden Age” Hollywood auteurs to have been born in the Southlands. He had not directed a fiction feature film since the Spain-shot 1959 Technirama spectacular *Solomon and Sheba*, the production of which was marred by the death of its star, Tyrone Power, of fulminant angina pectoris, at age 44, en route to a hospital in Madrid. But Vidor's semiretirement was not idle. He occupied himself with 16mm filmmaking endeavors, using a Beaulieu purchased in Paris, having completed a 25-minute short, *Truth and Illusion: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1964). He was more and more often in Europe, a feted guest of film festivals, and *On Film Making* shows him, unusual among his contemporaries, as aware of and receptive to currents in the European “art film”: Antonioni and Fellini and the French New Wave. The book as a whole is a somewhat dry read, though there's one moment where Vidor gets his dander up, discussing the reception by European audiences of what might be perceived as criticisms of American life in American films.

“For quite some time, I have been aware that one of the principal sources of subject matter for the screen has been found in the errors and abuses of American life,” Vidor writes, but he worries that a “European audience” may take such depictions as a condemnation of the American experiment as a whole. “Often,” he continues, “I have felt like rising up at the finish of one of these films and addressing the audience somewhat in this manner, ‘The film you have just seen is not typical of life in the U.S. as it is today. If you want to see how things are in America, you will have to make the journey

there and see for yourself and not form an opinion from many of our films.”

By the time this article sees publication, audiences at the 70th Berlin International Film Festival will have had the opportunity to view a retrospective of Vidor’s films consisting of more than 50 movies, a body of work in which “the errors and abuses of American life,” and much more just plain American life besides, play a central role. Of the present state of the Republic I need say no more, but it will be worth seeing how Vidor—Romantic, sensualist, cussed individualist—plays in the present day. At the moment of *On Film Making*’s publication, he was riding high, soon the subject of a special edition of *Positif*, and a study spanning two issues of *Film Comment* by the dean of English criticism, Raymond Durgnat—a study that Durgnat, with Scott Simmon, would eventually expand into a book, significantly titled *King Vidor, American*. It would not be surprising if Vidor, cited as a key reference point by the Italian neorealists, still fares better abroad than at home; we never judge any face as harshly as that in the mirror.

Vidor is no more or less American than Howard Hawks or Oscar Micheaux, but if Durgnat and Simmons’s title seems appropriate, it is because Vidor’s films are so often explicitly concerned with American textures and myths and pathologies. They are American movies with all of the democratic breadth and force and will-to-power and crucibles of survival-of-the-fittest struggle that that designation implies. If there is some confusion as to how to place Vidor, this perhaps stems from the fact that this same man should be the force behind both *Our Daily Bread* (1934) and *The Fountainhead* (1949). The former, made independently with Vidor’s own money after his MGM boss Irving Thalberg turned it down, concerns an urban couple who, reduced to desperate precarity by the Great Depression, start anew on a parcel of farmland, which they turn into a commune to attract the vagabond dispossessed, setting up on 160 acres a cashless society where services are exchanged instead of money. Its most famous scene, the concerted group effort to dig an irrigation ditch that will save a parched and dying harvest, is perhaps the nearest thing to Dovzhenko that you will find in an American film of the 1930s. *The Fountainhead* is an adaptation of the doorstep-sized 1943 novel by the writer Ayn Rand, and a paean to the indomitable individual—in this case the iconoclastic architect Howard Roark, played in the film by Übermensch Gary Cooper, who speaks in clipped, stentorian commandments.

Our Daily Bread’s most famous scene, the concerted group effort to dig an irrigation ditch that will save a parched and dying harvest, is perhaps the nearest thing to Dovzhenko that you will find in an American film of the 1930s.

Rand, whose appearance is approximated by Cooper’s co-star Patricia Neal, wrote the script herself, having previously done shift work as a screenwriter for Hal B. Wallis. She was enough of a Hollywood insider to be invited to sit before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, delivering a damning indictment of Gregory Ratoff’s

1944 *Song of Russia*, a studio effort to improve Soviet-American relations during the uneasy wartime alliance.

Rand, like Ratoff, was a naturalized American—they were both born in Russia, as Alisa Zinovyevna Rosenbaum and Grigory Vasilyevich, respectively—and had embraced laissez-faire capitalism with the zeal of a convert. Vidor sported a Hungarian surname courtesy of a grandfather who had fled the failed Revolution of 1848, and had grown up as hyperbolically American as only a Texan can be—it is not for nothing that John Bainbridge titled his study of the Texan people *The Super-Americans*. Indeed he was American even in his religion, as a follower of Christian Science, a faith born out of New England and the metaphysical mind of Mary Baker Eddy. Vidor’s films show the stamp of Soviet and the German influences—Eisenstein projected *The General Line* for Vidor at his home in 1930,



Our Daily Bread



The Fountainhead

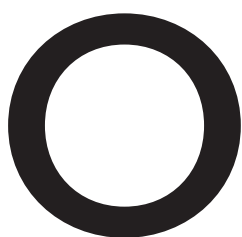
The Crowd



and the forced perspective of the stairwell ascended by a boy on receiving news of his father's death in 1928's *The Crowd* is unmistakably an Expressionist flourish. But Vidor sought to articulate particularly American images, and this won him the admiration of Andrew Wyeth, whom Vidor at the end of his life would visit at the painter's home in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, making a 16mm film of the occasion. As much as his fellow Southerner D.W. Griffith, whom Vidor revered, he endeavored to make the Great American Film, the equivalent to the Great American Novel, that elusive goal conceived of by the writer John William De Forest in an 1868 article in *The Nation*, which would bring "a national breadth to the picture, truthful outlining of character, natural speaking, and plenty of strong feeling," altogether offering "the picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence."

Vidor never tackled De Forest's major subjects of study, Hawthorne or Harriet Beecher Stowe, and he turned down David O. Selznick's offer of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, only late in his career taking a crack at the Great Russian Novel, a three-and-a-half-hour adaptation of Count Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1956) starring Hanoi Jane's father. His filmography, nevertheless, exemplifies De Forest's "national breadth": Vidor made films about the subduing of the American wilderness and the American Indian (1940's *Northwest Passage*); films about the American effort in the field in World War I (1925's *The Big Parade*) and at home during World War II (1944's *An American Romance*); films about the caste hierarchy that quietly governs life and love and sex relations in the United States (1937's *Stella Dallas*, yes, but most of them, really); films about big cities and small towns, and the oppressive

public policing of morality in both—the former in 1928's *The Crowd* and 1931's *Street Scene*, the latter in *Stella Dallas* and *Japanese War Bride* and *Ruby Gentry* (both 1952).



ONE MIGHT LOOK AT super-American Vidor as a bellwether for changing attitudes in his country—the intimate of documentarian Pare

Lorentz in the 1930s becomes the interpreter of Objectivism at the outset of the 1950s, as the seeds of modern conservatism were being sown. In *Our Daily Bread*, the commune survives only through an act of martyrdom, as a wanted fugitive arranges to have himself turned in to the police so that the reward money might keep the farm alive. The selflessness of Barbara Stanwyck's lowborn Stella Dallas, disappearing from her beloved daughter's life so as not to be a hindrance to her advancement in society, inspires awe from her replacement in the mother role: "I didn't know anyone could be so unselfish." From here we arrive at the courtroom climax of *The Fountainhead*, and Roark proclaiming that "The world is perishing from an orgy of self-sacrifice."

But Vidor was no frail reed being bent hither and thither by larger social shifts. The designs for living described in *Our Daily Bread* and *The Fountainhead* are different, but in each film individual force of will is essential, be it that of Roark or of the commune leader played by Tom Keene, who conceives of the cooperative and who is elected by his fellows as the "Big Boss" needed to lead it—no utopian egalitarian community, this. Throughout Vidor's cinema, he is found describing the pressures of the individual relationship to the group. The more-or-less successful communal endeavors, constructive

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in *Our Daily Bread* and destructive in *Northwest Passage*, are outweighed by compromises and catastrophes, these inflicted in later films especially on women of ambition. There is John Gilbert's character being carried along to enlistment by a wave of enthusiasm in *The Big Parade*, the office drone's struggle for distinction in *The Crowd*, and a litany of petulant peanut galleries who bear judgment on any breach of accepted decorum: the gossip-hound neighbors in *Street Scene*, the country club snobs in *Stella Dallas*, the lowest-common-denominator tabloid journalists in *The Fountainhead*, the racist Salinas neighbors in *Japanese War Bride*, and the treacherous townsfolk of *Ruby Gentry*. Better than Tom Sawyer, Vidor might have been suited to Huck Finn's *Adventures*, and to Colonel Sherburn's firm stand against the mobocracy.

All of this makes Vidor sound like a filmmaker of ideas, which he is, but his genius is to give his ideas a corporeal solidity. Of Vidor, Durgnat and Simmons write: "His films make every ideology (from sin-killing to Ayn Rand) physical, and that's why they can look so coarse to cerebral-liberal critics." Vidor's ideology—or ideologies—are impossible to address without also discussing his erotics: the firm, frank, direct sensuality of his films. He could be fine with comedy, as evinced by his late silents with Marion Davies, but had no insinuating ironic twinkle, like Ernst Lubitsch, who put him on the Civil War romance *So Red the Rose* (1935) at Paramount. Where Lubitsch had a touch, Vidor, to borrow a key image from *The Fountainhead*, more often brought a jackhammer. Hence the controversy surrounding the delirious *Duel in the Sun*, a horniness-harried western melodrama born of a production tussle between Vidor and Selznick, which would become the stuff of legend—pruned by censor's shears, branded as "Lust in the Dust" by wags, denounced from the pulpit.

IN VIDOR, THE PROXIMITY BETWEEN sex and religious experience, so evident in the orgasmic swoon of Bernini's sculpture *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, is abundantly apparent. In 1929's *Hallelujah*, Vidor's first talkie, shot with an all-black cast on locations in Tennessee and Arkansas, the two commingle in a double seduction, as first born-again preacher Zeke Johnson (Daniel L. Haynes) wins the immortal soul of bad girl Chick (Nina Mae McKinney), and then Chick wins the body of Zeke, overcome by desire on embracing her at an outdoor baptism that gives way to heaving sighs and heavy petting. *Ruby Gentry*, too, features a Southern setting, the fictional North Carolina coastal town of

Street Scene



In *The Big Parade*, Vidor doesn't linger on carnage, but rather lends it a casualness that is all the more unsettling: as the camera tracks back with lead John Gilbert's face held in close-up, we see fellow soldiers, out of focus, crumbling to the earth behind him, like marionettes with their strings cut.

Braddock, and fire-breathing puritanism—here the barking, castigating brother of Jennifer Jones's Ruby, himself the retributive force who in the film's swamp-set climax puts a fatal gutshot into Ruby's pined-after lover, Boake Tackman (Charlton Heston). Ruby returns fire, taking a life for a life, then lowers herself into the pool where Boake's body lies to cradle his corpse, and the eerie image of the lovers broaches the surreal, suggesting Jack Nance and the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall sinking together into the milky depths of an adulterous bed in David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977).

Because Bible-thumpers stalk his films, from the eponymous preacher-among-the-cowpokes in *The Sky Pilot* (1921) to Walter Huston's Jubal Crabbe, the self-appointed "Sinkiller" in *Duel in the Sun*, Vidor has sometimes been branded as a puritan—but how could such a self-consciously American artist ignore the puritan spirit entirely?

Vidor, well-known as a womanizer until the end of his days, doesn't condemn lust, but he does take it as deadly serious, an elemental force capable of unleashing destruction, as it does for the frustrated women of his melodramas, like Jennifer Jones's Pearl Chavez in *Duel in the Sun* or Bette Davis's Rosa Moline, a Midwestern Mme. Bovary, in *Beyond the Forest* (1949). In *Ruby Gentry*, the irrigation scene from *Our Daily Bread* replays as calamity, as an embittered Ruby, sexually humiliated by Boake, maliciously floods the swampland that he'd painstakingly reclaimed as fertile fields.

Vidor had a gift for scenes of crisis and, thinking as he did in terms of man and the mass, would return periodically to the cinematic epic, a market the Americans had nearly cornered by mid-century. As a child, he had survived the Great Galveston Hurricane of 1900, the deadliest natural disaster in U.S. history, and when someone was needed to shoot the Kansas sequences in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), otherwise principally directed by Victor Fleming, the job fell to Vidor, who presumably knew something about cyclones. He had begun his professional life as an independent working out of the Lone Star State, making his first film, now lost—the 1913 *Hurricane in Galveston*—before he lit out for the West. And it would be the depiction of another cataclysm, this one man-made, in *The Big Parade*, that launched Vidor into the first rank of filmmakers. There is a passage in the film which surpasses the whole of Sam Mendes's *1917*, the staging of a military engagement evidently inspired by the Battle of Argonne Forest, which follows the implacably advancing American doughboys. Vidor doesn't linger on carnage, but rather lends

it a casualness that is all the more unsettling: as the camera tracks back with lead John Gilbert's face held in close-up, we see fellow soldiers, out of focus, crumbling to the earth behind him, like marionettes with their strings cut.

Vidor's filmography abounds with such grace notes, vignettes within often teeming compositions that recall us to the human scale: the chocolate cake being ruined by kicked-up sand at the Coney Island picnic in *The Crowd*, or the crane shot in *Street Scene* that pulls back from the young, bullied Jewish intellectual seated on the tenement stoop at end of day, head in hands, as a thin voice in the distance croons "I can't give you anything but love..." It is of such details, perhaps, that Andrew Sarris was thinking when he wrote, in an appreciative if tempered assessment of Vidor in his *The American Cinema*, that he "created more great moments and fewer great films than any director of his rank."

Unlike the main body of the French critics from whom he adapted his own *politiques des auteurs*, Sarris retained a certain commitment to the prospect of cinema as wholly realized, harmonious, sustained artwork. To those of us for whom the fragment is the quintessence of the medium, however, this is little demerit. Vidor's filmmaking values intuition and emotion over harmony, and his films are often most memorable for their discordant passages and jagged edges—like the moment when the unhinged ranger in *Northwest Passage* is discovered secretly snacking on the severed head of an Abenaki Indian, shrieking at Spencer Tracy: "I'll cut your head off and eat it, too!" It needs to be said, nevertheless, that there are certain Vidor films without even

moments to recommend them. Unlike that of the peripatetic Hawks, his exact contemporary, Vidor's self-determination was often compromised by willful collaborators and stymying employers: Goldwyn, Selznick, and the tawdry sentimentalist Louis B. Mayer at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, whose bowdlerization of *An American Romance* was one of Vidor's great disappointments.

Perhaps partly in reaction, Vidor, like the subjects of *Our Daily Bread*, made his own experiments with communal enterprises among fellow filmmakers, and he was the first head of the organization that would become the Directors Guild of America. He wriggled out from under Mayer's thumb at the end of his seven-year contract, and the movies he made after the war had a renewed vitality, the very vigor for which Vidor would sometimes be ridiculed, yet which stands as his essence. *The Fountainhead* has one of the most absurd, exhilarating, go-for-broke endings in mid-century American pictures this side of Dorothy Malone stroking the oil derrick in Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind*—a barreling POV from an ascending elevator that rockets toward Cooper's all-conquering groin. It's a reworking of the famous shot scaling the face of a Manhattan office building in *The Crowd*, passing through an open window to single out our hero amidst a sea of desks, though here the gesture is one of triumph rather than supplication. While *The Fountainhead* verges on the parodic, there is little evidence to suggest that Vidor viewed it as such. Though an autodidact intellectual in his way, Vidor, a courtly fellow with the mien of a bank manager, lacked Sirk's ability to foresee the desires of his interlocutors, and to repackage his melodramas for grad-school Marxists with tape recorders.

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Ruby Gentry

Vidor's art, instead, is one of a candor so blunt that it's almost disorienting. "I heartily recommend that . . . you let your film voice speak with clarity and definition," he writes in *On Film Making*. "Don't hide behind a curtain of abstraction." Vidor's insistence on a firm-footed, concrete authorial perspective connects to his lifelong engagement with Christian Science and the metaphysics of Miss Eddy, quoted alongside Lao Tzu and Plato in his *Truth and Illusion*, in which a voiceover states: "The world is formed by each one of us in his own mind." Artistic authorship, then, becomes an extension of the responsibility of perceptual authorship that each of us perform every day in creating the world, an act of creation that will be externalized by Vidor's monomaniacally driven, world-building protagonists.

VIDOR'S OWN TITANIC EFFORTS ended with *Solomon and Sheba*, which cursed and effectively ended his career. His last wholly satisfying feature was released in 1955: a Technicolor western, *Man Without a Star*, featuring Kirk Douglas as Texas cowboy Dempsey Rae, newly arrived in a Wyoming cattle town. He has been moving slowly north, trying to keep ahead of the barbed wire that has gradually begun sectioning off the once wide-open West.

Like Dempsey, Vidor could be found waxing nostalgic for the days before the fences went up along with the budgets—the independent-operator days, when you could make a movie with a cast and crew that would fit in a sedan and on its backboard. This never shaded into pessimism about the future of cinema, however, and in his optimism, too, Vidor was indefatigably of his time and his country. *The Crowd*, which in some regards anticipates Griffith's magnificent *The Struggle* a few years later, is among Vidor's most downbeat films: a character study of a quintessential American dreamer, John Sims (James Murray), born on the Fourth of July in 1900, at the outset of the American century, raised to great expectations, but imbued with none of the stick-to-itiveness that might fulfill them. Driven to the verge of suicide by circumstances, Sims steps back from the ledge, but his future is by no means assured. The film ends with him reconciled with his wife, the couple out with their daughter, and all of them rocking with laughter at a vaudeville show, the camera pulling back to establish them as but three faces in the comforting anonymity of a vast audience. Exhibitors were given the option of a less ambivalent happy ending, shot at Mayer's insistence,

The Big Parade



Though an autodidact intellectual in his way, Vidor, a courtly fellow with the mien of a bank manager, lacked Sirk's ability to foresee the desires of his interlocutors, and to repackage his melodramas for grad-school Marxists with tape recorders.

but in most cases it was the vaudeville show that remained.

But Vidor could not leave the Sims family there. The central couple in *Our Daily Bread* are again a John and Mary Sims—childless and played by two different actors, yes, but the same kind of people, the kind who struggle to get by, who duck the rent collector and hock what little they've got to the deli man so that they can bring home an anemic chicken. Vidor had wanted to bring back Murray, but the actor, born in the Bronx to Irish immigrants, had in short order become a disastrous drunk, a bloated Bowery bum, and a few years after rejecting Vidor's offer of employment, he drowned in the Hudson at age 35. (*The Big Parade*'s Gilbert died the same year, 1936, drinking himself to death.) Murray had taken a tumble from Pier 46 while clowning for some bystanders, and that was that—in life, there are no alternate happy endings provided by the studio. "The crowd thought it was part of his performance," Vidor later wrote, imagining the scene of Murray's death, "and they laughed."

A child of the *Ragged Dick* days, Vidor made many a film populated by willful self-made men who exemplified the boot-

straps ideal. He might have been regarded as such a man himself, and knew many others, clashing with them in his working life—men like Mayer, the product of a Russian shtetl turned American jingoist who would claim that his birthday, like that of John Sims, fell on the Fourth of July. But Murray, like the Sims family, like Gilbert, would haunt Vidor, and toward the end of his life Vidor was working to find financing for a project about his first "John Sims," a screenplay of his own titled *The Actor*.

While fretting in print about how American films depicting American life in an unflattering light might be received abroad, Vidor brooded over this memory of Murray's fatal failure and a crowd's uncomprehending laughter, and traveled to convene with another determinedly American talent, Andrew Wyeth. At his studio near the scene of George Washington's defeat at the 1777 Battle of Brandywine, the artist discussed with Vidor the inspiration provided him by *The Big Parade*—particularly the image of a hillside near that movie's end, which worked its way into his painting, *Winter 1946*, in which a boy, alone, runs down a desiccated hill flecked with the barest remnants of a snowfall. The men had never met, and were in some ways artistic personalities at odds—the florid Texan and the flinty Easterner—but there was all the same an affinity. Both believed in the national cult of individualism, while their crisp, forceful, sometimes sentimental art suggested a deep understanding of one side effect of that cult: a loneliness that could be seen as a burden, or as a badge of honor. ●

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THEATER OF WAR

FRAUGHT WITH DOOMED LOVE AND SWIRLING INTRIGUE, LOU YE'S *SATURDAY FICTION* DROPS US ONTO THE STAGE OF WORLD WAR II SHANGHAI IN THE DIRECTOR'S LATEST UNSETTLING FORAY INTO CHINESE HISTORY

BY WANG MUYAN

WITH *SATURDAY FICTION*, DIRECTOR LOU YE returns to a motif that has long preoccupied him: how the individual's fate is intertwined with that of the nation. The city of Shanghai on the eve of the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack is Lou's setting for a story of romance and espionage, both centered on a famous actress, Jean Yu (Gong Li), who is in the middle of rehearsals for a play. The scenario finds China at the turning point of World War II, but with Lou at the helm, it's also a tense yet tender exploration of history and truth.

Li's character negotiates the considerable drama of her double lives during wartime, from romantic attachments to dangerous entanglements with foreign agents. (Mark Chao plays Tan Na, the director of the play Li features in, and Pascal Greggory plays her foster father, Frédéric Hubert.) Lou's desire to portray fully the experiences of women is longstanding, and his early works, *Weekend Lover* (1995) and *Suzhou River* (2000), have extremely individualistic outlooks on their characters. But with the Tiananmen Square-set



drama *Summer Palace* (2006), and now again with *Saturday Fiction*, characters have come to represent human fate in the abstract. Meanwhile, his career of depicting actual events has been accompanied by run-ins with the country's censors, leading Lou to be tagged "king of banned films" by Chinese movie fans.

Shot in black and white, *Saturday Fiction* looks intoxicating, but philosophically it falls within what might be called Lou's "aesthetics of ugliness." Lou objects to beautifying any event or figure, and his picture of wartime Shanghai freely depicts the city as an unglamorous



place seething with inglorious humanity, endless cycles of despairing love, and old memories too bitter to recall. Here and in the rest of his work, life is pushed forward by a tremendous and ineffable negative force; man finds his true nature in embarrassing failure. Lou's cinema is precise in its emotions and feel for the human condition, but couched in a harsh realism depicted through rough-and-ready technique.

To this end, Lou has established a methodology. The script is a tool instead of the final word when filming. Actors are given max-

imum freedom, moving around wherever they want and even conversing at will. As in cinema vérité, the camera is handheld and approaches freely from any angle to capture said performers, who, exhausted from retakes, have stopped performing in a traditional sense and begun to exist in the moment. Editing decisions are driven by emotion more than narrative (even in a complicated plot such as that of this one).

Saturday Fiction, Lou's 11th feature, premiered last year in Venice and screened in the New York Film Festival, but lacks U.S.

"I did not care much about the actual historical moment [of *Saturday Fiction*]. I tend to think that a historical film is about the present instead. A film about the 1930s or 1940s made in 2019 relates only to the 1930s or 1940s represented in 2019."

distribution. His 12th is likely to be an adaptation of André Malraux's cursed *Man's Fate*, or *La Condition humaine*, the unfulfilled dream of such directors as Sergei Eisenstein, Fred Zinnemann, Costa-Gavras, and Michael Cimino. And so, as we await *Man's Fate*, fate awaits Lou. This interview was conducted at the end of 2019 in Lou's hometown of Shanghai, where he shot his latest.

What part of the story of *Saturday Fiction* interested you in the first place?

Hong Ying's novel *The Death of Shanghai* forms the contours of the film. The book offers a rather limited perspective about one week before Pearl Harbor, which is a good starting point for me. The original text, which also involves many female perspectives, plays out against a literary backdrop that attracted me. The scriptwriter Ma Yingli worked *Shanghai* by Riichi Yokomitsu, one of the New Sensationists [a pioneering modernist movement in Chinese literature], into the story. I think it is consistent with Hong Ying's novel. They are complementary texts. The story revolves around the rehearsals of a play, which also befits a film, technically.

Your early features focused more on the individualism of their protagonists; later you shifted to a broader consideration of human fate. How did this change in perspective occur?

At first, I could not present the social backdrop or history in an omniscient or a relatively macroscopic way. *Purple Butterfly* [2003] deals with a historical story from a personal perspective—which became a black hole for me. It also had something to do with my experiences: the production of *Suzhou River* got us into trouble [because of permit disputes] and was banned, so I tried to extricate *Purple Butterfly* from all of that through its historical backdrop. But it was like a nightmare, and I found myself faced with a darker trap. Why? Trouble in "history," like that in reality, is unavoidable. We cannot be freed or liberated by touching upon historical episodes and avoiding the reality of them. It would be self-deceiving. In fact, ambiguity about history can be even riskier. I dealt with history in the first place to escape from something, but I failed or was bad at the attempt. *Summer Palace* is about an event that I witnessed, so it was easier for me.

I don't think we *can* recount history from a macroscopic perspective, or in an impartial way.

It is impossible, especially for cinema, as a medium of expression. History is history. Cinema has its limitations: for one, the past cannot be reconstructed on a realistic basis. And views on history are inevitably subjective. Therefore, I was quite relaxed with *Saturday Fiction*. I did not care much about the actual historical moment. I tend to think that a historical film is about the present instead. A film about the 1930s or 1940s made in 2019 relates only to the 1930s or 1940s represented in 2019.



Director Lou Ye



Did you choose actors and actresses because they were similar in spirit to people from the Republic of China era, the 1940s?

Yes, but that's only a start.

You are not after strict authenticity.

I am not. For example, my first requirement for costuming is that it should not be anachronistic. At the same time, the people wearing them should not be regarded as lunatics in the streets of today's Shanghai. The costume designer thought this was a paradox, but it turned out to be feasible after we did a survey in the street. Why did I have such requirements? Probably because I think *Saturday Fiction* is essentially a film of today. Why not embrace that? You could also say that it would be a lie if we did it another way.

How do you now view the paradox you voiced several years ago: namely, that the camera does not lie because it records the real? But "the real" has its limitations, and it is confined to the frame of the camera.

The idea still works for me. That is why I am not bold enough to broaden my perspective. I think that is deceptive, and I am still cautious with that. For example, *Saturday Fiction* takes place in several spaces, over six days, and shows the perspective of an individual, which makes me feel at ease. To be more radical, I am increasingly denying the epic. I think the so-called grand narrative or epic narrative seems more and more unreliable.

But *Saturday Fiction* is an "epic" about Jean.

It is an epic of the individual, and I agree with that. The camera can focus on every figure and every detail, but it is unable to overlook the global landscape of 1941. It is impossible. Given the camera's capability to observe from a short distance and the instantaneity of fleeting moments, the camera can actually create a vague yet overall impression of what happened six days before Pearl Harbor in 1941 by recording the specific acts of the figures in that era. The impression is based on details but not the macroscopic perspective of the camera. The vague impression is like what you feel after watching a dozen movies shot in 1941.

The script of *Saturday Fiction* was freely revised throughout production. What was the process?

“The automated camera crane and autofocus, for example, are dreadful ideas to me. Every director is different, and I loathe the mechanical and the anti-human sort of thing . . . Perfect images are awful because they are missing part of human nature.”



There was a completed script as the basis, to which modifications were made, even during filming. Sometimes there was no time to notify actors and actresses of the modifications in writing. Other times we would follow the shooting script strictly. Both ways worked for us. The scriptwriter [Ma Yingli] would often be present on set during shooting—as was the case with *Spring Fever*, for example, when Mei Feng, the scriptwriter and my old partner, often visited the set. The script could be modified even during the editing. I think scriptwriting is a process, in which the evolution of the film is reflected.

It is a tool instead of something you should totally depend on.

It should not be a [final] result, or else the film might be problematic. Any scenarios with great demands on technique and skill should still be properly worked out before shooting, such as the assassination scene in *Saturday Fiction*. Otherwise, I just let Gong Li and Pascal Greggory and others act in their own way. But this film ends up quite consistent with the original script for many reasons, including the limitations of its six-day structure.

Why do you like to use the handheld camera?

Essentially, film is a way of recording, and handheld shooting is the simplest and quickest way of recording, like a cell phone. You would notice, if you were on my set, that many images and scenes are captured rather than planned out, so there are shaky shots. But these captured the moments are the most essential.

I hope that mechanical devices do not interfere with the camera operators or make their work feel less human. The automated camera crane and autofocus, for example, are dreadful ideas to me. Every director is different, and I loathe the mechanical and the anti-human sort of thing. I have my yardstick of human nature. To me, the mistake or imperfection in the film is actually a measure and an aesthetic acknowledgment: perfect images are awful because they are missing part of human nature.

What's your framework for capturing images?

You just place actors and actresses in context, and let the plot go on as planned. Where the camera is situated is actually not very important for me. We should not drive or change the plot according to the requirements of the camera. [I say] “no” to that. Everything should

develop according to its own logic. The camera only serves to record.

It reminds me of something the French director Maurice Pialat said. The general idea is that cinema is a regrettable form of art, because all the best things happen before you shout “action” and after you shout “cut!”

Yes, I would say that, and I like how it is put. I have always said to actors that it is too late no matter what you want to do on set. Your work should actually be done before and after shooting. You just need to “live” when shooting. Likewise, shooting has no “start” or “stop” for me. Actors think it's strange and they have to get used to this way of working. I can start shooting anytime on set—I want to capture everything before the “start” and after the “stop.”

You do many takes, don't you?

The state of an actor is ever-changing, so the shot should be repeated for me to get the most satisfactory take.

Let's return to your filmography. You are viewed as a Sixth Generation director, but you are very different from your counterparts, not to mention the Fifth Generation. You have made many “Films of the South,” in terms of geography and filmmaking. It is obvious in *Saturday Fiction*.

Or you could say that some of my films have shifted their attention from the North to the South, such as *Purple Butterfly* and *Summer Palace*. But I don't feel it that strongly. Probably because I was brought up in Shanghai, the South may have left a mark on my memory. Life there may have had an effect on my mode of thinking or language.

You are called a “king of banned films” by movie fans in China.

What do you think of that?

I don't have a say in that, and I cannot decide for others. [Laughs] I am also called a Sixth Generation director, but actually—well, I will not comment on that. My films have been rejected by censors two or three times, and I don't know why. I think I just did what I had to do, and anybody else would do the same in such cases. I don't know. The problem has not been solved, and there are still troubles... although *Saturday Fiction* has gone quite well so far.

Then how do you deal with this state of affairs?

I still try to follow my own way. I tell my staff to forget about the censorship, make the movie first, and then try to settle the matter with the censors. I can only ensure that the creation of the movie goes well. The troubles will come later. That's the risk. Every movie has its own challenges. Some were not hard, like *Blind Massage* [2014] and *Mystery* [2012]. But when it came to *The Shadow Play* [2018], it was very tricky. It could hardly be released at the time. It is obviously an issue for Chinese directors that cannot be solved within the scope of cinema. It is connected to the overall situation. The door is still shut on *Summer Palace*. I have made compromises—in *The Shadow Play*, for example.

You've said, “One can understand the world if he understands love.” Does that also apply to *Saturday Fiction*?

Love may only be a simple word we use for the relationships between people, and between people and the world. ●

Wang Muyan is a critic based in Paris.



IN LIVING MEMORY

MADE BY A NATIVE OF THE NO-LONGER-EXTANT GERMAN Democratic Republic, Thomas Heise's historical memoir-cum-three-generational family history begins somewhere in the Black Forest with an invocation of a Brothers Grimm *Kindermärchen*—a slow tilt up a wooden post to a faux rustic sign reading “According to Legend, Here Stood the Grandmother’s House.” Life-sized wooden cutouts of fairy-tale creatures lurk among the trees. Once upon a time...

If *Heimat Is a Space in Time* were a fiction film like *A Hidden Life* or *Jojo Rabbit* (to name two recent features glossing over the worst episode of Germany’s recent past), it would be an avant-garde masterpiece—a narrative interweaving multiple voices, including that of the state, eschewing transitions, and alternately doubling back on itself or jumping unexpectedly into the future. As it is, Heise’s scrupulous, sometimes recondite 218-minute collection of documents, diaries, letters, and landscapes is a powerful work of material thought excavated and assembled, under a suitably gnarly Heideggerian rubric, by a man whose grandfather, Wilhelm Heise, helped found the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany), and whose father, Wolfgang Heise, was the leading dissident philosopher in the old GDR.

Twentieth-century German history may be the filmmaker’s birth-right, but in defiance of family tradition, Thomas Heise dropped out of school and sought manual labor before working his way toward cinema via radio and theater. The documentaries that he has been making for nearly four decades are at once raw and cerebral—there

CLOSER LOOK: *Heimat Is a Space in Time* opens at the Anthology Film Archives in New York on March 13.

are definite points of contact with intellectual (West) German filmmakers Alexander Kluge and Harun Farocki. They are also deeply personal. Most of the early ones were banned, and even the later films are largely unknown and unavailable outside of Germany.

Heimat (screened at the New York Film Festival last year) is elliptical yet detailed, generous even while withholding, distanced but compelling, heady to the max and just as emotionally absorbing. The movie is divided into five chapters, during which the voice of the filmmaker alone is heard reading, without annotation, the documents he has salvaged. His measured tone and unhurried delivery have a hypnotic neutrality, matched by the crisp austerity of the black-and-white images.

The first part of the film, focusing mainly on the aftermath of World War I and the war that followed, concerns the courtship, marriage, and persecution of Heise’s paternal grandparents, Wilhelm Heise and Edith Hirschhorn. He is a Communist schoolteacher whose career is derailed by the Nazis; she is a Viennese Jew. This section also introduces their son Wolfgang by way of letters written to his parents from a forced labor camp for *mischlings* (mixed-heritage persons such as himself). Physical suffering is compounded by intellectual deprivation: “We can’t see the flow of history,” he tells them.

More remote than his parents, Wolfgang will be often referred to but not heard from again for hours. (In the movie’s sole instance of direct recording, he discusses an incomplete piece by Bertolt Brecht with his former student, the dramatist and theater director Heiner Müller.) The subject of the movie’s second section is not Wolfgang, but his future wife and the filmmaker’s mother, Rosemarie “Rosi” Barke. Her diaries describe the war’s terrible end and chaotic aftermath, as well as several postwar



THOMAS HEISE'S ACHING ARCHIVAL ESSAY *HEIMAT IS A SPACE IN TIME* LISTENS TO THE VOICES OF A FAMILY ACROSS THE 20TH-CENTURY CYCLES OF DESTRUCTION AND REBUILDING | **BY J. HOBERMAN**

romantic involvements—including one with a boy named Udo, whose antipathy toward Communism was nearly as strong as her belief in the new worker's state. The section ends with Rosi meeting and marrying Wolfgang, a fellow Communist, and giving birth to two sons, the younger of which is Thomas.

Even though Wolfgang is the protagonist of the movie's third section, he is seen largely through Rosi's letters to him. From her correspondence we can deduce that he loses his job at the prestigious Humboldt University, is censured if not expelled from the Party for his defense of the Marxist dissident Robert Havemann, and, fleeing Berlin to the North Sea to recover from this trauma, suffers some sort of nervous breakdown. The novelist Christa Wolf makes a cameo appearance (in a letter written to Rosi), as do Wolfgang's two most celebrated students, Müller and the nonconformist singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann.

Although not directly acknowledged as such, Müller will become something of a mentor and a model for Thomas, who introduces himself in the fourth section, reading a homework assignment he wrote at age 15. Already introspective, he confesses to disliking his brother. Although the bulk of this chapter is concerned with the miserable aspects of Thomas's military service in the 1970s, recounted in letters to his mother, it also alludes to his rebellious adolescent behavior and reaches a sort of negative crescendo with the inclusion of Stasi surveillance reports filed by diligent neighbors on his parents. If the filmmaker suffers from a psychic disturbance, his society is afflicted all the more so.

Heimat returns to Rosi for the final days of the GDR; Thomas is also present, working on projects with Müller, including *Despoiled Shore Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts*, first

staged in the early '80s. (Fractured even by the standards of the playwright's previous work, it transposes a pulverized update of Euripides to a gruesome East Germany, with a side trip to Hollywood.) There is also an incident of arrest, confinement, and interrogation, which may be a consequence of the filmmaker's activities, even if it also feels like an extension of Müller's theater.

AS AN ARTIST, HEISE HAS ADOPTED SOMETHING of Müller's discontinuous, yet associative, use of the found and fragmentary. *Material* (2009), which might be considered Heise's breakthrough film, anticipates *Heimat* in being a 166-minute montage of outtakes—mainly from earlier GDR projects, including footage of Müller's production *Germania Death in Berlin*, mass demonstrations in Alexanderplatz, and the demolition of the former East Berlin's closed Palace of the Republic—all presented in achronological order, with a discordant score by Charles Ives. *Heimat*, which recycles material Heise previously used in his 2002 *Fatherland*, suggests a kindred deconstruction, in this case of the Ken Burns template for document-driven historical documentary.

Nothing is seamless. "I act as if everything already took place some 2,000 years ago, where no one knows anything about the broader context of the time anymore," Heise told an interviewer during the 2019 Berlin Film Festival, where *Heimat* had its premiere. "These fragments are the only thing available and can be used to make some sort of picture, although there are many, many gaps between them." Characters surface and disappear. We never know if Wilhelm survived the war (he did), or how Edith managed to avoid deportation—only that Rosi met her when Wolfgang



Heimat Is a Space in Time is elliptical yet detailed, generous even while withholding, distanced but compelling, heady to the max and just as emotionally absorbing.

brought her home in 1954 and was struck by her good cheer.

Heise's strategies include sound-image juxtapositions, as when an ominous airplane buzz is heard over a bucolic forest scene, and the use of contemporary footage to complement a period description. Wilhelm's recollection of meeting Edith's siblings at a spa in the 1920s is accompanied by images of contemporary young people, carefree and socializing at an Alpine ski lodge; Edith's postwar resume is read over shots of Vienna seen through a rain-streaked tram window.

Even more poetic, not to mention weird: Rosi's description of her transactional relationship with an amorous Yugoslavian trade representative is counterpointed by a static image of a drab echt East German apartment façade, with a large decorative snowman incongruously peering out of a first-floor window. Letters referring to Wolfgang's removal are juxtaposed with empty corridors and classrooms, and culminate in a shot of a highway so mangled that it suggests the aftermath of an earthquake.

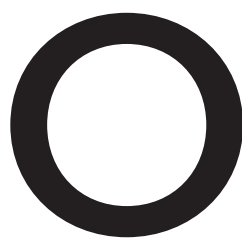
Not entirely sui generis, *Heimat* has affinities with Samy Szlingerbaum's austere restaging of his mother's displaced-person voiceover recollections in *Brussels Transit* (1980), as well as with James Benning's frequent use of sound to contextualize landscape (or vice versa), and with Sergei Loznitsa's neutral deployment of found footage. The closest analogue is the Paraguayan film artist Paz Encina's 2016 *Memory Exercises*—part landscape study, part historical excavation for which she mined Paraguay's so-called Archives of Terror, a trove of dossiers, surveillance photographs, and audiotapes uncovered after the fall of the Stroessner dictatorship.

Heimat's most cited sequence arrives at the end of the first chapter. Alphabetical deportation lists of Viennese Jews scroll on screen as the filmmaker reads increasingly anxious letters sent to Edith in Berlin from her family in Vienna with the outbreak of war. (Amazing that these desperate messages were delivered and that

Edith manages to preserve them.)

The deportation sequence lasts nearly half an hour. It not only recounts, but in some small but real way it reproduces, the "fear and dread" experienced by Jews waiting to see if their names will appear on the list for these eastbound transports—organized, as viewers of Claude Lanzmann's *The Last of the Unjust* may remember, by that film's subject, Benjamin Murelstein. The sequence ends with the names of Edith's relations scrolling on screen, then plunges into onscreen nothingness. This is followed by an audio shock cut to an inane cheerful ditty in which the popular film star Marika Röck advises her audience to "look straight ahead" because "everything has its reason."

The song "Mach Dir Nichts Daraus [Don't Worry About It]" is from the 1944 musical spectacle and would-be morale booster *The Woman of My Dreams*, soon after cited by Wolfgang in a letter where he expresses his relief that an air raid has spared him from having to see the movie; it is reprised again in *Heimat*'s fourth section, when Thomas is describing the idiocy of his military service, the song having become something of a German national anthem. "Don't Worry About It" heralds a shift in *Heimat*'s imagery. The remaining three sections will visualize Germany as a dead land of piled-up detritus, despoiled woodlands, and derelict barracks in which the main human presence is signaled by scrawled graffiti. A wounded, abandoned planet, the GDR is animated mainly by trains that pass by the camera, an inevitable metaphor for the progress of history.



OVERWHELMING EMPTINESS IS ILLUMINATED only by human consciousness. (Bewitched, bothered, and *Bewusstsein*.) Not the least and maybe the most remarkable thing about *Heimat* is the quality of the writing on display. Wilhelm's homework assignment from 1912 is



A wounded, abandoned planet, the GDR is animated mainly by trains that pass by the camera, an inevitable metaphor for the progress of history.

a precocious, prophetic essay that defines war as a mass slaughter waged to benefit the ruling class, yet one that unavoidably and even understandably results in full-blood patriotism. The imprisoned Wolfgang's letters home, written with a copy of Friedrich Hölderlin's poems at hand, are unusually thoughtful given the extremity of his situation. But the most descriptive and introspective writer is Rosi. Her diaries and letters, possibly unsent but saved, are the heart of the movie.

In January 1945, at age 18, Rosi reports on a ski vacation shadowed by distant bombs and flares of light—a prelude to the firebombing of her native Dresden. Having survived, where tens of thousands did not, she emerges from a basement shelter to see the city burning and, amid the sound of strangled cries for help beneath still falling buildings, rides her bicycle to the center, looking for relatives: “The railway viaduct on Goethestrasse had collapsed. I squeezed through the debris carrying the bike. Everything within me froze in repulsion as I stood there in front of the first cadaver. A young girl of about 11. Her right arm was nothing more than a charred stump. Her face had remained intact, as though coated in lime powder. Her eyes were shut and her mouth half-open in a childlike smile. I remounted the bike.” Throughout Heise's reading, the camera pans over a wintry, sparsely forested landscape, indelibly scarred by Rosi's words.

Three years later, Rosi has embarked on her tortuous epistolary romance with Udo as well as several other affairs—something, one suspects, that her son may have discovered only after her death. She is obviously a Communist true believer, just as Udo adamantly is not; the diary selections give evidence of her politicized readings. She criticizes *For Whom the Bell Tolls* for its romanticism while praising a Soviet equivalent, *And Quiet Flows the Don*. However, when Wolfgang brings her to the Heise family home, she is thrilled to find the place full of books.

Although it is not made evident in the movie, Rosi would become a significant figure in GDR literary culture, as a translator and editor of East German editions of Sergei Eisenstein and Walter Benjamin. *Heimat's* fifth section begins with a flashback to earlier in the timeline, via the reading of a note she sent to Müller thanking him for lending her a copy of Borges's *Labyrinths*. Apparently it was written in 1966, because it expresses her regret at the suicide of Müller's wife Inge. It also contains the revelation to the viewer, if not to the filmmaker, that Rosi, too, might have contemplated and maybe even attempted suicide.

Toward the middle of the section, Thomas reads a 1991 letter that Rosi received from Christa Wolf, articulating her mixed feelings regarding the dissolution of the GDR and the creation of a U.S.-led New World Order. The camera pans in close-up over a Socialist Realist mural, pausing over the image of an optimistic girl, thus encouraging a connection between this radiantly smiling child and the filmmaker's mother. What follows is a 1993 letter from Rosi to Christa (now in residence at the Getty Research Institute and living in Santa Monica), in which she responds to the discovery that the novelist had for several years been a Stasi informant.

Rosi describes her own roughly contemporaneous experience of being an informer, articulating a cumulative sense of grief and shame, already hinted at, in her mortification at having told the Stasi where, at the height of his troubles, her husband had gone into hiding. (On the screen, the train of history rolls implacably past.)

Heimat Is a Space in Time ends in 2014, a full 25 years after the Berlin Wall fell, with the filmmaker reading his own words. He is in Berlin. Rosi has been moved from her apartment (the repository for much of the film's material) and resettled in a nursing home where she will die, memorialized by her son in a film that might have been called *Here, According to Legend, Stood My Mother's House*. ●



NOT BUYING IT

AS FILMS AND FILM CULTURE FACE BRUTAL AND WITLESS CHANGE,
LOVE OF THE ART FORM CAN BE RADICAL AND SUSTAINING.

MICHAEL KORESKY STANDS HIS GROUND

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOEL MEYEROWITZ
Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery

"History develops; art stands still."—E.M. FORSTER

MOVIE LOVERS SEEM TO HAVE BEEN GRIPPED by fear for the fate of our beloved medium for almost as long as cinema has existed. If we're particularly worried now, here at the beginning of the third decade of the weird 21st century, it's probably because we've devalued, soiled, and decimated art, beauty, and nature at the hands of capital, and one can't completely separate the state of cinema from the fate of the planet. As humans, we have expedited our own extinction via an industrial process that has been generally concurrent with the technological ascent, commercialization, and decline of the movies across the 20th century.

It would appear that the popular art form of the motion picture is in terrible shape. Yet the cloud of inevitability that hangs over the way we talk about movies and their destruction is probably as harmful to their cultural longevity as any rapid shift itself. This is not because I'm naïve enough to think that the threats to that culture aren't alarmingly real, but because the outcomes of those feelings of inevitability can have detrimental effects rather

Capitulation is the response that leads to the over-corporatizing of festivals, the closing down of "niche" or "boutique" services, the conflation of whipped-up online fear-mongering with "discussion," and the shuttering of publications.

than inspiring the proper reaction, which is, of course, resistance. Whether in our political system or the health of the arts, after all, capitulation is the worst response to feelings of helpless eventuality. It's the response that leads to the over-corporatizing of festivals, the closing down of "niche" or "boutique" services, the conflation of whipped-up online fearmongering with "discussion," and the shuttering of publications. There are facts, and there is rhetoric, and often in our fragile industry the two are confused.

Before going any further, here's a short, inexhaustive catalog of what's ailing the movies—or at least the American movie business—as we begin 2020. The studios have become a cohort of entirely risk-averse bottom-liners, resulting in an arsenal of franchise products aimed at the wallets of mostly teen boys, but also their infantilized parents, in a natural progression—or perhaps the endgame—of where the business has been headed since the mid-'70s. This sense of homogenization has been dangerously compounded by the fact that Disney is in the process of all but taking over the industry, its gut-busting portfolio including not only Pixar, Lucasfilm, and Marvel, but also, as of just last year, the studio no longer to be known as 20th Century Fox. At the same time, the streaming revolution has been ever so gradually monopolized by a handful of goliaths—Netflix and Apple, in addition to the Mouse House—desperate for subscribers to help them break even, churning out the kinds of mega-entertainments they hope can compete with (and one day replace) the big-screen experiences we once thrilled to. In related bad news for the health of a culturally and economically diverse society, in November 2019, the United States Justice Department moved to overturn the 1948 Paramount Decree, the court decision that split up the studios' monopolies on

U.S. film exhibition—a landmark in antitrust lawmaking and a bedrock historical point for anyone who took a film studies course over the past half-century. That postwar decision came at a time when television was beginning its march toward cultural domination; that the reverse is happening as we face the very real threat of streaming-service takeover says a lot about a political moment shaped by deregulation and corporate coddling. Understandably, it makes mainstream cinematic culture seem as dubious a prospect as it ever has in our lifetimes.

All that said—and not even taking into account the online arguments that so often make movies, born of nuance and collaboration, seem like prizefighters duking it out—why am I feeling that we're heading into a good, maybe even inspiring moment in the history of the movies? Part of it is that through adversity comes triumph, yes, but more importantly, I think it has to do with the empowerment in recalibrating expectations—in treating the "inevitable" as a challenge rather than a reason to stop fighting. Money men saw the potential in cinema as a mass cultural leveler at least as far back as 1908, when ownership fights between the Edison Manufacturing Company and the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company resulted in the competition-destroying Motion Picture Patents Company. But the battle to recoup the movies as art has been ever thus, and that battle remains stronger than those who wish to prognosticate its demise.

SUSAN SONTAG WROTE IN HER FEBRUARY 25, 1996 *New York Times Magazine* essay "The Decay of Cinema" that "the commercial cinema has settled for a policy of bloated, derivative film-making, a brazen combinatory or recombinatory art, in the hope of reproducing past successes." That's hard to deny, especially 24 years on, as is this: "The reduction of cinema to assaultive images, and the unprincipled manipulation of images (faster and faster cutting) to make them more attention-grabbing, has produced a disincarnated, lightweight cinema that doesn't demand anyone's full attention." It's become a common refrain, one that's only grown louder and more prevalent, among those of us wary and weary of a cinema that often seems like a series of jolts from a joy buzzer. But the belief that rapid cutting and condensed visual storytelling will have some kind of stroboscopic, brain-melting effect on our dear children has a familiar ring to it, and has contributed to a lot of alarmism about Generation Z's alleged lack of attention spans. (The perspicacious and patient students in the New School film studies class I taught this past fall proved such stereotypes to be categorically untrue.)

To decry the evils of a form based on sensation is to deny that it's born of a technology that was itself born of the demands of modernity. Walter Benjamin wrote in 1939, "In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film." The faster, bigger, louder principle that fuels everything from automotive actioners to "boys/girls behaving badly" comedies to children's entertainments featuring CGI critters voiced by Emma Stone or Tony Hale is just the natural outgrowth of the rapid tempo and visual fragmentation that has been steadily expanding since the late 19th century; it's just become more sleek and soulless through corporate commodification.

To bemoan film culture—and augur its demise—only by pointing to its crassest products is to do a disservice to an art form that has always only been as good as its outliers. Yet it's easy

to forget that individualized auteurs were always the outliers in an industry that boasted of them as its exemplars. When Sontag wrote “The Decay of Cinema,” she was coming off of a year that saw the release of such studio-financed films as Clint Eastwood’s *The Bridges of Madison County*, Spike Lee’s *Clockers*, Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless*, Tim Robbins’s *Dead Man Walking*, Carl Franklin’s *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Michael Mann’s *Heat*, Jodie Foster’s *Home for the Holidays*, Oliver Stone’s *Nixon*, David Fincher’s *Seven*, Paul Verhoeven’s *Showgirls*, Kathryn Bigelow’s *Strange Days*, Gus Van Sant’s *To Die For*, Forest Whitaker’s *Waiting to Exhale*, and the first Pixar feature, *Toy Story*. And this isn’t even acknowledging the smaller-budgeted independents picked up and released by mini-majors that year, including Todd Haynes’s *Safe*, Wayne Wang’s *Smoke*, and Jim Jarmusch’s—infamously buried—*Dead Man*. On a personal note, 1995 was the year I first started writing about movies as a semiprofessional biweekly critic—though I was still a high schooler—for the *Chelmsford Independent*, my little town newspaper, which has since gone sadly syndicated. (Foster’s raucous, bravely queer-tinged family farce was my first published review, and thus remains a milestone.) Considering

When Susan Sontag concluded, “If cinema can be resurrected, it will only be through the birth of a new kind of cine-love,” surely she couldn’t have imagined this moment, in which a media giant (Netflix) wields classical auteurism as a kind of brand-building tool.

the core-shaking excitement I felt for a medium that I was only starting to comprehend—years before I’d find out who Tsai Ming-liang, Claire Denis, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul were and my love would be kindled all over again—I would have been incredulous if I had been told that one of our foremost cultural essayists believed that cinema was in its final stages. I imagine younger cinephiles who have thrilled in recent years to *Atlantics*, *Uncut Gems*, *Midsommar*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, *The Souvenir*, *The Human Surge*, or this year’s miraculous Best Picture winner *Parasite* might feel the same way, regardless of where or how they saw them.

Martin Scorsese, whose thrilling, risky Universal production *Casino* was also released in ’95, wrote his own *New York Times* broadside just this past year, occasioned by perfectly reasonable comments he made about Marvel movies not being “cinema.” Sontag’s mourning for the loss of risk-taking, personalized studio productions persists in his essay, though the situation may appear a little more dire today: “In many places around this country and around the world, franchise films are now your primary choice if you want to see something on the big screen. It’s a perilous time in film exhibition, and there are fewer independent theaters than ever. The equation has flipped and streaming has become the primary delivery system.” Couple this thought with the fact that Scorsese was at the same time acknowledging the release of his first film for streaming king Netflix, *The Irishman*—an exquisite, interiorized portrait of mortality and loss that seems designed to feel at every aching moment like the last of a certain kind of movie—and you’ve got a head-spinning moment in our culture, when the delivery system many see as heralding the doom of a traditional art form seems to be the only major studio actively upholding it. When Sontag concluded, “If cinema can be resurrected, it will only be through the birth of a new kind of cine-love,” surely

she couldn’t have imagined this, in which a media giant wields classical auteurism as a kind of brand-building tool.

Sontag’s essay has long read to me, and surely to many movie lovers of my generation, like a travel guide to a kind of Shangri-La, a place we never had and knew we never would have. We never had those overwhelming, transporting movie palaces for our commercial studio products; neither did we experience the advent of the new cinephilia of the ’60s and ’70s that emerged around the international new waves and allegedly made Antonioni, Bergman, and Bertolucci household names. What my generation had was the very clear dichotomy between VHS home-viewing and the experience of going to multiplexes, where we would watch films of generic shape but invigorating variety, in dark theaters with appreciative communal audiences—films shown *on film*. How could we ever have known that even that would soon be fading away? And what would it have mattered? Looking back, I am glad to still have the sense memory of being rapt, disturbed, and delighted in that magical November 1993 by both *The Piano* and *A Perfect World* at the now-demolished Showcase Cinemas in Lawrence, Massachusetts—but I also know that to look back and mourn for some lost paradise is to give in to the idea of cinema as a mere shadow of itself.

Self-congratulatory clip shows and highlight reels set to “As Time Goes By” have always tried to sell us on nostalgia as one of cinema’s primary ingredients, on the idea that its present is only as good as its past. The converse couldn’t be truer. If the long-necessary cultural shake-ups over the past few years around representation on screens and behind the scenes—in terms of race, gender, and queerness—have yet to begin bearing real fruit (cf. the American films and performances acknowledged during this year’s award season), the coalescing of a communal dialogue around these matters indicates the healthiest progression and reorientation of the medium I can recall in my lifetime. The same old clip reels simply won’t do, but neither will feints at diversity for its own sake. Even if American film feels in finer fettle in the wake of *Get Out*, *Little Women*, and *Moonlight*, it must be remembered that Hollywood has never been able to make good on its righteous successes, has never made any promises, and has never been able to capitalize on William Goldman’s “nobody knows anything” admittance to benefit itself or its viewers. *Parasite* won’t beget more movies like *Parasite*, just more movies that *are Parasite*—a remake miniseries is in the works; after all, it’s already been tested. We can’t depend on the studios, especially in their current state; aside from turgid biopics of safely dead political figures, “doing the right thing” just isn’t their style. What we as cinephiles can continue to rely on is the same thing we’ve always had, and which will never go out of fashion: our passion. Our love, our need, our exultant advocacy for films, not products.

WHO’S FINANCING GOOD MOVIES IS ONE thing—and something most of us have no control over—but just as important to note is who’s watching them, who’s talking about them, and who’s safeguarding their legacy. I don’t use the word “safeguard” as a way of sanctifying the gatekeepers of what has traditionally been an exclusionary business, but as a term for ensuring the intellectual health of the culture that’s currently set in place to protect the art. Independent traveling exhibition setups for films of uncommon shape and form, such as Argentine filmmaker Mariano Llinás’s Sociedad de Exhibidores Transhumanes; itinerant showcases like Acropolis Cinema, which runs Locarno



in Los Angeles; and dedicated specialty streaming services like MUBI will prove increasingly invaluable. So will publications like *Film Comment*, which continue, against all perceived odds, to grow a readership and fan base despite their steadfast devotion to art, form, and substance rather than the drummed-up PR narratives and hot-new-thing stories that have taken over much of what's called entertainment journalism. Meanwhile, the larger nonprofit arts institutions—festivals, museums, and devoted organizations like the one that publishes the magazine you're currently holding in your hands—will become even more important for the continuing education and understanding of cinema as the gap grows ever larger between the art and the commercial enterprises that purport to buoy it, but in reality threaten to swallow it up.

To give in to the demands of capital does not reflect an inevitability; it proves a lack of imagination. It's imperative that *these* institutions hold up *these* traditions: of championing challenging cinema, of maintaining independence from the companies that are using that cinema as a belt-notch for niche bona fides, of staving off what they believe to be inexorable tide-turning in an industry in which, after all, nobody knows anything. The cinematic world that true film lovers have long hoped for—one of rich diversity and challenging form—is only actually possible if we think of movies as works of art; as expressions of interior states; as reflections of genuine pain or elation; as redefined, reconfigured interpretations of a world that, ever since film was invented, seems like it has been spinning out of control.

The hard-won appreciation of cinema as something that is as

Looking back, I am glad to still have the sense memory of being rapt, disturbed, and delighted in that magical November 1993 by both *The Piano* and *A Perfect World*, but I also know that to look back and mourn for some lost paradise is to give in to the idea of cinema as a mere shadow of itself.

worthy of consideration as paintings or poetry was always fought from the sidelines; it's the adoration of cinephiles, rather than the whims of the casual weekend moviegoer, that's made its longevity possible. Does that sound snobbish? Good, own that; remember that those who reject the idea of challenging art—or at least forms of expression not entirely reliant on brand management—are both revealing their threatened nature and trying to sell you on something else that was already sold to them. To remind readers of the still-minority opinion of cinema as an art form, Scorsese mentions Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* in the same breath as Bergman's *Persona* and Donen and Kelly's *It's Always Fair Weather*, cleverly and crucially dissolving boundaries and hierarchies, and reiterating that film will only ever be as dynamic as its avant-garde, as healthy as its art-house cinema, as imaginative as its best studio endeavors. After all, at the same time that moviegoers were enjoying *Executive Suite* or crying over *Old Yeller* at the Paramount or the Oriental, curious adventurers were seeking out *Rashomon* at the Brattle,

while devotees at Cinema 16 were being treated to Agnès Varda's *L'Opéra mouffe* or Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour*. The survival of the movies may, finally, depend on considering them as one large entity rather than separate, sectioned-off categories, of "right" and "wrong" types. If we think of the movies as different forms jousting to the death, we already know which side is going to win.

Three years after Sontag proclaimed cinema's imminent demise, a new round of articles claiming a more literal death of film began springing up—most memorably and presciently by Godfrey Cheshire in the *New York Press*—this time wedded to the digital transition that was beginning to take hold in movie production and projection. Things were changing; it was inevitable, yet still abstract. At this time, I was a cinema studies undergrad at NYU, and often serving on crews for my friends' film productions, all of which were still being shot on pricey 16mm or 35mm stock and edited on Steenbeck flatbeds. The thought of reapplying everything that had been taught about shooting on film to digital was barely even a consideration. Yet what I remember first and foremost is the thrill I felt around two events at the break of the millennium: the release of Varda's *The Gleaners and I*, which foregrounded its own lightweight digital equipment and heralded a new diaristic mode of cinema made possible by its portability; and Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (see p. 74), which utilized the smudgy, bleary aesthetic of low-grade video to visualize a persistently racist America as a diseased dystopia. Varda's film was embraced, Lee's was rejected, but both were, to anyone paying attention, clearly

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exciting works whose power came in large part from the way they wielded new technologies. The thrill of this transitional moment still reverberates for me. The form that movies have taken in the 20 years since then already feels radically different. Yet their shape hasn't shifted as significantly as it one day will. Cinema's progression will not be in a straight line, but it *will* be a progression. It's inevitable. It will regenerate as long as there are people—and a planet—to sustain it, and as long as those tasked with its stewardship treat it like it's the precious form it is, rather than a commodity. ●

Michael Koresky is a writer, editor, and filmmaker in Brooklyn. He is cofounder and editor of the online film magazine *Reverse Shot*, a publication of Museum of the Moving Image; a regular contributor to the Criterion Collection and *Film Comment*, where he writes the biweekly column *Queer & Now & Then*; and the author of *Terence Davies* (University of Illinois Press).

FILM COMMENT

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Row 1: *7th Heaven*, *12 Years a Slave*, *All About Eve*, *The French Connection*. Row 2: *Boys Don't Cry*, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *Fight Club*, *Street Angel*. Row 3: *Sunrise*, *The Thin Red Line*, *A Letter to Three Wives*, *Titanic*. Row 4: *Next Stop*, *Greenwich Village*, *Gentleman's Agreement*, *The Tree of Life*, *The Grapes of Wrath*

Death of a Major

Disney's removal of the Fox name can't erase a monumental legacy that spanned a century of cinema

BY MICHAEL SRAGOW

EMPLOYEES AFFECTIONATELY DUBBED THEIR STUDIO'S logo "the monument." Sitting atop an Art Deco skyscraper and spelling out in huge carved letters, on separate platforms, "20th" and "Century" and "Fox," it truly is a monolith. For 85 years, matte artist Emil Kosa Jr.'s majestic graphic, with searchlights slashing through the skyline, joined with house composer Alfred Newman's soaring fanfare to feel stirringly modern, mythic, and mysterious. In 1935, film fans knew that the studio's name resulted from Darryl F. Zanuck's independent 20th Century Pictures (cofounded with Joseph Schenck in 1933) merging with the Fox Film Corporation, founded in 1915 by William Fox, who was deposed in 1930 when creditors who financed his dreams of industry domination turned on him as their loans came due.

On January 17, *Variety* reported that the Walt Disney Company, which had acquired the parent company 21st Century Fox from Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp last March, was "dropping the 'Fox' brand" from its new film assets: "The 20th Century Fox film studio

will become 20th Century Studios, and Fox Searchlight Pictures [the boutique art house company established by Tom Rothman in 1994] will become simply Searchlight Pictures." Fox and Disney did not respond to my requests for an official statement about this change. *Variety's* Adam B. Vary theorized that the "irreverent and provocative" programming of Fox TV (for example, *The Simpsons*), and the "conservative partisanship" and multiple sexual misconduct cases at Fox News "proved to be anathema to Disney's scrupulously maintained family friendly brand."

This decision marks a cardinal loss for a legacy company. At the turn of the millennium, Tom Sherak, then chairman of its Domestic Film Group, dismissed the idea of renaming the studio because "it has a history to it." Sherak said that when the 20th Century Fox logo "goes on the screen, people know it as something."

That "something" was often unique or spectacular and rooted in the independence that William Fox championed from the start. Fox spearheaded the campaign against Thomas Edison's monopolization of movies, clearing the way for the American studio system. He

In one 1940 pep-talk memo, Darryl F. Zanuck told his producers that he wanted “stories that deal with something more than the usual formula output of most studios.” One can’t imagine a memo like that from Disney, the capital of franchising.

embraced the Movietone process of recording sound on film instead of a synchronized disc. He already viewed television as a prospective threat in the mid-1920s, and developed and pushed 70mm Grandeur film before exhibitors were willing to gear up for it. A quarter-century later, Zanuck embraced CinemaScope for the same reason, and it became a household word.

Their achievements loomed large over all the company’s subsequent executives, from Buddy Adler and Richard Zanuck (Darryl’s son) and Alan Ladd, Jr. to Joe Roth, Tom Rothman, and Emma Watts. In one 1940 pep-talk memo, Zanuck told his producers that he wanted “stories that deal with something more than the usual formula output of most studios.” One can’t imagine a memo like that from Disney, the capital of franchising. Fox and Zanuck saw themselves as macro- and micromanagers: not just top-level decision-makers but also hands-on programmers and producers, overseeing studio-defining projects from script and cast to cutting.

The studio’s releases reflect the moviemakers’ gifts and Fox’s own immigrant passions for patriotic tales and stories of hard-won domestic happiness. John Ford took a giant step forward when he made Fox’s *The Iron Horse* (1924), a mammoth, rambunctious romance of America’s westward expansion. As Ford authority Tag Gallagher writes, “Fox’s precepts were also Ford’s at this time: action, folksiness, uplifting sentiments, spiced with humor.” Fox supported Frank Borzage’s unique gifts for creating true-love fables: *7th Heaven* (1927), *Street Angel* (1928), and, best of all, *Lucky Star* (1929). And he gave F.W. Murnau carte blanche to create a masterpiece, *Sunrise* (1927).

Zanuck had top-notch instincts for matching directors to material, like assigning John Ford to *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), and earned Ford’s respect with the care he lavished on films like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), which cemented Fox’s standing as a studio that would take chances on serious subject matter. Zanuck strengthened that reputation with, among others, William Wellman’s anti-lynching western *The Ox-Bow Incident* (a 1943 flop) and Elia Kazan’s attack on genteel anti-Semitism, *Gentleman’s Agreement* (a 1947 hit). Zanuck hired MGM producer-writer Joseph L. Mankiewicz as a director; for Fox he would write and direct the scintillating *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949) and *All About Eve* (1950). Zanuck nurtured Kazan’s career until he achieved real movie mastery in 1950’s *Panic in the Streets*. But the executive’s faith in CinemaScope led to a string of inert spectacles, and made him pass up Kazan’s *On the Waterfront* (1954) because he felt it was too intimate. He left Hollywood for Europe and became an independent producer. When *Cleopatra* (1963) threatened to topple the studio, though, Zanuck returned to assume the role of chairman and installed Richard as production chief.

THE ZANUCKS RECLAIMED THE REINS IN A NOT-SO-BRAVE new world. “It is virtually impossible today for a production chief to put his personal stamp on a picture in the way that Darryl Zanuck did,” wrote John Gregory Dunne in *The Studio* (1969). Production houses stripped of their theater chains and rebounding from television grew dependent on high-rolling independent producers and stars who formed their own companies. Darryl’s own roadshow *The Longest Day* (1962) helped to keep catastrophe at bay; Richard restored Fox briefly to prominence when he pushed through the phenomenally lucrative *The Sound of Music* (1965). But studio filmmaking had grown too cautious and expensive. The pressure was on to repeat past success with a failed attempt at another *Longest Day*, the Pearl Harbor movie *Tora! Tora!*

Tora! (1970), and with a string of costly musical duds including *Doctor Dolittle* (1967), *Star!* (1968), and *Hello, Dolly!* (1969). Richard Zanuck did embrace iconoclastic films from disreputable genres, like Franklin J. Schaffner’s *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and William Friedkin’s *The French Connection* (1971), and below-the-radar explosions of talent like Robert Altman’s *M*A*S*H* (1970). But Darryl fired Richard in 1970, and the board pushed Darryl out within a year.

Independent productions like Elaine May’s *The Heartbreak Kid* (1972) and midsize movies like Lamont Johnson’s *The Last American Hero* (1973) kept the studio alive artistically as the American Movie Renaissance flowered. For a decade or so, it really was a director’s medium, and Fox, like other studios, rose and fell on the partnerships it made with personal filmmakers. Mel Brooks began his long run at Fox with his masterpiece *Young Frankenstein* (1974), and Paul Mazursky started there with *Harry and Tonto* (1974) and his masterpiece, *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (1976).

Studio decision-making increasingly became a group activity, not a one-man show. When Peter Yates made his labor of love, *Breaking Away* (1979), he told me, “It might not have been made... with executives less supportive than [Fox production executive] Gareth Wigan.” Studio chief Alan Ladd Jr. said “yes” to George Lucas’s *Star Wars* (1977), but it was a Lucasfilm production, and in 1979 Ladd and his team (including Wigan) left the lot. Almost 20 years later, Bill Mechanic OK’d James Cameron’s record-breaking *Titanic* (1997), but resigned after advocating for David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999), a cutting-edge box-office disappointment.

In every era, under each successive regime, Fox released some marvelous or groundbreaking movies because a sympathetic production head gave them the go-ahead, whether Robert Rossen’s *The Hustler* (1961), Brian De Palma’s *The Fury* (1978), John Huston’s *Prizzi’s Honor* (1985), Paul Mazursky’s *Enemies: A Love Story* (1989), Ron Shelton’s *White Men Can’t Jump* (1992), Peter Weir’s *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003), or Ridley Scott’s *The Martian* (2015).

After Rothman set up Fox Searchlight, it generated synergy or maybe kismet with its sister company. Philip Kaufman went from *Rising Sun* (1993) at Fox to *Quills* (2000) at Fox Searchlight. Terrence Malick took the same route, with intermediate stops, from *The Thin Red Line* (1998) to *The Tree of Life* (2011) to *A Hidden Life* (2019). Fox Searchlight corralled distinctive filmmakers like Danny Boyle (*28 Days Later*, 2002; *Slumdog Millionaire*, 2008; *127 Hours*, 2010); Alejandro G. Iñárritu (*Birdman*, 2014); Guillermo del Toro (*The Shape of Water*, 2017); Steve McQueen (*Shame*, 2011; *12 Years a Slave*, 2013); Alexander Payne (*Sideways*, 2004; *The Descendants*, 2011); and many others, carving out a sizable marketplace without cheapening their work.

The Disneyfication of the major studio reached its climax when Fox production chief Emma Watts resigned in January, despite the acclaim and popularity of James Mangold’s *Ford v. Ferrari*, the last live-action film to sport the old logo. It remains to be seen what Disney will do to integrate Fox’s spiky Deadpool and eccentric X-Men into its Marvel Universe. The final 20th Century Pictures release, in 1935, was an adaptation of Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild*, starring Clark Gable. The first 20th Century Studios release, which opened February 21, is an adaptation of Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild*, starring Harrison Ford. “Wishing never got anybody anyplace,” Gable says in the first movie, reflecting the underlayer of reality present in many a Fox or Zanuck film. We’ll see if there’s room for some of that grit in the House of Wish Upon a Star. ●



On the Record

Brighter Days

The Park City festival's top selections illuminated unjust realities while spotlighting a genius or two

BY AMY TAUBIN

SUNDANCE 2020 BROUGHT JOHN COOPER'S 11-YEAR run as festival director to a close. I didn't always agree with Cooper's selections, and occasionally I was appalled by his rejections. (He admitted that he didn't get *Honeyland* when he first saw it, and was only saved from embarrassment by his colleagues' support of the now-celebrated doc.) But Cooper always managed to place the festival at the center of important conversations around independent film, so much so that Sundance sometimes seemed more than a refuge or a market, but a platform that could have an effect, however small, on a world now hurtling toward totalitarian capitalism and the sixth mass extinction. This year, 50 percent of the films were directed or co-directed by women, and there were more films that were made by people of color and that placed people of color at the center of the screen than ever before. Cooper is succeeded by filmmaker Tabitha Jackson, who has done a bang-up job as head of the Sundance Institute's documentary program for six years.

Of this year's 128 features, I saw a total of 28, and at least four—Michael Almereyda's *Tesla*, Eliza Hittman's *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, Garrett Bradley's *Time*, and Alexander Nanau's *Collective*—will be on my best-of-the-year lists. The last of those four follows the investigation by Romania's *Gazeta Sporturilor* ("Sports Gazette") into the horrific aftermath of a 2015 fire in a Bucharest dance club that killed 27 immediately and 37 others later. When people who should have recovered from their burns began to die while hospitalized, mass protests erupted. The New Romanian Cinema has produced many strong fiction films that depict, with irony and anger, pervasive

corruption and gangsterism, but *Collective*, a nonfiction work by a brilliant observational documentarian, is as engrossing as a political thriller and as eye-opening as a direct confrontation with damning truths can be. (It opens stateside in May.) A more personal but no less expansive documentary, Bradley's *Time* unfurls nearly 20 years of home-video footage shot by Fox Rich, a mother of six and the wife of a man who was then serving a 60-year sentence in a Louisiana penitentiary. (See my interview with Bradley, p. 10.) The camera point-of-view is almost always Rich's, but through her nonlinear editing and choice of music (a classical piano composition by a now 96-year-old Ethiopian nun, imprisoned by the Italians during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War), Bradley shapes a movie that expresses the resilience, tenacity, and creativity of a particular woman, and also suggests a history of oppression in which family separation has been the most punishing weapon of the powerful.

I missed Jesse Moss and Amanda McBaine's *Boys State*, a Grand Prize-winner and a favorite among my colleagues (Apple and A24 will release it soon), but of the docs I saw, the most exciting discussions were provoked by the aforementioned *Time*; Susanne Regina Meures's *Saudi Runaway*, an intensely personal iPhone video diary secretly recorded by a Saudi woman while attempting to escape an arranged marriage and claim asylum in Germany; Jeff Orlowski's *The Social Dilemma* and Shalini Kantayya's *Coded Bias*, a complementary pair of movies that do terrifying deep-dives into surveillance capitalism; and two episodic television series: Steve James's magnificent *City So Real*, a sprawling, dense portrait of Chicago in crisis, and at the opposite end of the production spectrum, David Shapiro's *Untitled Pizza Movie*, in which a decaying early 1990s video

If Eliza Hittman's film is remarkable for being completely grounded in social conditions and the details of character behavior, Michael Almereyda's *Tesla* is of another order of cinema.

of the filmmaker on a quest for the best pizza in New York becomes a relic of a vanished city and a lost friendship. Also much discussed was Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering's *On the Record*, which follows Drew Dixon, an immensely talented and accomplished hip-hop producer who withdrew from the music industry after years of being sexually harassed and abused by her bosses, first hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, who she alleges raped her in 1995, and then Arista Records head L.A. Reid, who turned down the artists Dixon wanted to produce (newcomers Kanye West and John Legend among them) because she refused his sexual advances. It would be laughable if it wasn't horrendous. Two decades after her "retirement," she went on record for *The New York Times*. Dixon is an impressively thoughtful, articulate woman—a real hero. It's too bad that Dick and Ziering clutter the film with visual clichés, but surely these easily remedied flaws could not have been what Oprah Winfrey had in mind when she withdrew her name from the list of executive producers, claiming artistic differences. It's disheartening when one of the most powerful women in the entertainment business tries to keep a less powerful woman from speaking out against the men who abused her and destroyed her career. But no matter. HBO bought *On the Record*, and there's nothing Oprah can do about that.

AMONG THE FICTION FILMS, THERE WERE THREE THAT I'm sure will survive the trip down the mountain from the dizzying altitude of Park City. *The 40-Year-Old Version*, Radha Blank's ebullient debut feature (she stars, directed, wrote, and co-produced), depicts the artist's transformation from a respectable African-American playwright into an inspired, no-holds-barred rap-poet of the middle-aged female body and soul. Blank is an uneven writer, a serviceable director, and a terrific actor, but her desire to make a film that is hers alone is irresistible. (It's coming to Netflix soon.) I'm not sure why Blank chose to shoot in black-and-white 35mm film, but the 16mm, slightly grainy color stock that Eliza Hittman and her superb cinematographer Hélène Louvart use for *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (see p. 68 for our review) recalls 1970s and '80s woman-directed, quiet exposés of institutionalized misogyny such as Barbara Loden's *Wanda* and Joyce Chopra's *Smooth Talk*. Many decades later, nothing much has changed in rural America. Seventeen-year-old Autumn (Sidney Flanigan, defensively diffident) wants to have an abortion, but because she lives in Pennsylvania where minors must have parental consent, she and her cousin pilfer some cash for bus tickets to New York and make their way to Planned Parenthood. *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* is nonjudgmental, guilt-free, and much more informative than an after-school special. Hittman's pared-down realism, and her laser focus on Autumn and the obstacles she must overcome to end an unwanted pregnancy result in a film that is mesmerizing from start to finish.

If Hittman's film is remarkable for being completely grounded in social conditions and the details of character behavior, Michael Almereyda's *Tesla* is of another order of cinema. To put it much too simply, it is a madcap visionary movie about a half-mad genius, Nikola Tesla, a pioneer of alternating current who also foresaw wireless communication connecting the entire globe. Almereyda stages the movie as a turn-of-the-19th-century vaudeville show (Ethan Hawke's Tesla and Kyle MacLachlan's Edison duke it out with ice cream cones), replete with anachronisms, in which every



From top: *The 40-Year-Old Version*, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, *Tesla*

shot is a ravishment of source lighting. (Blessed be cinematographer Sean Price Williams.) Tesla gave us an illuminated world and destroyed himself in the process. Almereyda's tribute to him is funny, tragic, and above all, radiant. *Tesla* burns up the screen. ●

THE BIG SCREEN

Reviews of notable new films opening in theaters (hopefully near you)



Never Rarely Sometimes Always

BY SHEILA O'MALLEY

Director: Eliza Hittman

Country/Distributor: USA/UK, Focus Features

Opening: March 13

A HIGH SCHOOL TALENT SHOW opens Eliza Hittman's third feature, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*. Autumn (Sidney Flanigan) stands at a microphone, singing a cover of "He's Got the Power," accompanying herself on the guitar. Her energy is grim and the pop lyrics, about a man who makes her do things she doesn't want to do, here sound alarming. It's a stark contrast with the acts that preceded hers, which had a 1950s theme: girls in poodle skirts and boys with slicked hair, doing *Bye*

Bye Birdie-type dance numbers or a doo-wop song. Solemn, contemporary Autumn cuts through the kitschy view of teenage life that's straight out of *Leave It to Beaver* or the black-and-white sections of *Pleasantville*.

I kept thinking back to that sequence over the course of this often brutal film, in which Autumn, 17 and pregnant, journeys to New York City with her cousin Skylar (Talia Ryder) to seek an abortion. Hittman's choice of opening comes to feel more and more pointed as the film unfolds. The bobbysoxer-milkshake version of teenage life wasn't true in the 1950s, either—it was propaganda back then, too—but what powerful and damaging propaganda it was. There could not be a wider gap between its infantilizing vision and Autumn's reality.

Autumn and Skylar come from a small, depressed town in Pennsylvania, a state where parents need to give consent for an abortion. There's no question of Autumn asking hers, and the father of the child is never mentioned. The bus trip to New York is long, and once the two teens are

thrust into Port Authority, lugging a huge suitcase, they're bewildered by the city, trying to figure out mass transit and where they need to go. Unexpected things happen during this secret trip, decisions must be made, and the girls often have to improvise and problem-solve. They barely speak to one another, but they grew up together: language is not really necessary.

In *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, the silences speak volumes. We must read the film through these muted passages, picking up what we can from gestures, glances, behavior. What the girls don't react to is as important as what they do. There's a moment late in the film where Autumn reaches out and links her pinky with Skylar's, and it's filled with poignancy and pain. Some things are beyond words. Cinematographer Hélène Louvart, who also shot Hittman's 2017 film *Beach Rats* (as well as *Happy as Lazzaro* and last year's *Invisible Life*), keeps the camera very close to Autumn's face throughout the film: the real story is there, in what Autumn thinks, feels, experiences. Both Flanigan and

PHOTO COURTESY OF FOCUS FEATURES

Eliza Hittman's interest is sensorial and experiential: it's all about textures and faces, behaviors and silences, how destabilized everything is when you're young and hormonal and inexperienced.

Ryder give eerily naturalistic performances, understanding how the girls camouflage their insecurities.

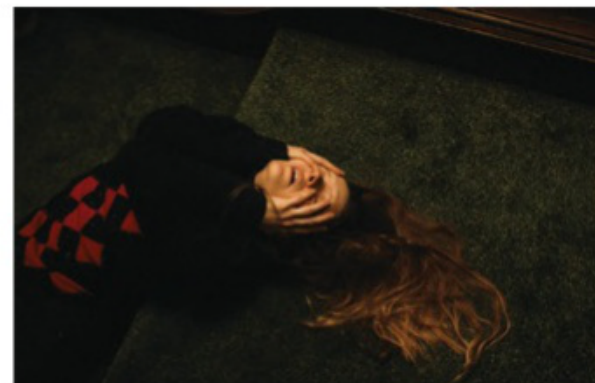
There are some similarities between *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and Cristian Mungiu's searing *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days*, and a similar political urgency ignites both films. Abortion is still legal in this country, although it's being encroached upon every day, and hostility toward women's bodies comes from the highest office in the land. When Autumn goes to a women's health clinic in her small Pennsylvania town, she is given a pregnancy test and then shown a graphic video about abortion.

Portraying Autumn's journey, Flanagan is a serious, almost stoic, presence. Autumn is practiced at maintaining a deadpan demeanor, but underneath it is terror and loneliness, and far beneath that is a pain she can't really allow herself to feel. But when she answers a series of questions asked by the counselor at Planned Parenthood (the title of the film comes from the four possible answers to each question), emotions boil to the surface, ambushing her. This is the first specific glimpse of what this young girl has been through in her short life. Flanagan's tough demeanor has been hiding *that* all along. It's overwhelming.

Hittman's feeling for adolescence is extremely intuitive, and her approach—in

It Felt Like Love (2013), in *Beach Rats*, and now in *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*—is not abstract, sentimental, or intellectual. She is not tempted by melodrama or polemic. Her interest is sensorial and experiential: it's all about textures and faces, behaviors and silences, how destabilized everything is when you're young and hormonal and inexperienced. The societal and cultural issues at play in *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* are only background noise. Navigating sex and "growing up" is a treacherous business on a good day, but even with the bombardment from television and magazines of well-meaning empowerment messages about consent and boundaries and peer pressure, not much has filtered down to the population for whom it would really make a difference—at least not in Hittman's films. She does not look back on puberty with nostalgia; her films would be much different if she did. But her stance also isn't that of a horrified protective adult. Because of this, she is frank in a way that other directors often aren't. She's in the thick of it with her teenage characters—she remembers so well what it was like to be them.

Sheila O'Malley is a regular film critic for Rogerebert.com and other outlets including The Criterion Collection. Her blog is The Sheila Variations.



SHORT TAKE SAINT MAUD

Director:

Rose Glass

Country/Distributor:

UK, A24

Opening: March 27

Though the Catholics would prefer it under wraps, there remains a hazy division between madness and piety in the lives of the saints. Rose Glass's debut feature exacerbates that tension by depicting a woman in a seaside village whose moral courage seems no different from that of Joan of Arc, and whose zealous determination has disastrous consequences. Glass taps into the imagery and fanaticism at play in Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, sometimes suffocatingly framing her protagonist Maud (Morfydd Clark), and other times depicting her as Christlike in the sullen brown shadows of an old mansion. There is always a sense of incense burning somewhere just

out of view.

At a spare 84 minutes, *Saint Maud* is tautly paced, like a tealight candle slowly but surely burning down to a molten mess. Would-be saint Maud proselytizes to her newest nursing client, Amanda (Jennifer Ehle), a once-illustrious (and still hip) dancer suffering from cancer, who's retired from the spotlight to die peacefully at home. Amanda's boredom and her fascination with the devout Maud leads her to toy with the young woman, inadvertently pulling at the strings of Maud's sanity and faith.

Glass's collaboration with these actors yields great rewards, but it is Glass and editor Mark Towns's partnership that really shines, expertly walking the tightrope between the real and the imagined right up to the film's most thrilling and jaw-dropping final seconds.
—April Wolfe

The Truth

BY MOLLY HASKELL

Director: Hirokazu Kore-eda

Country/Distributor: France/Japan, IFC Films

Opening: March 20

IT SEEMS REMARKABLE YET SOMEHOW unsurprising that the celebrated Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda should move seamlessly into the French language and a Parisian household in this autumnal portrait of an aging actress, a diva extraordinaire named Fabienne, played, naturally, by Catherine Deneuve. The occasion is the publication of Fabienne's memoirs, which her daughter and family have come warily to celebrate. But the daughter, Lumir (Juliette Binoche), a screenwriter living in New York, has another agenda: to finally read the

manuscript that her mother had promised to send her in advance. Of course she failed to do so. "Oh, memory..." She will wave her hand airily and we must accept that it simply slipped her cunningly forgetful mind.

Memory and unreliability are at the center of this masterful exploration of a classic Kore-eda theme: the way in which families construct their mythologies, often at variance with whatever truths can be rescued from a past that has been pushed and pulled, rewritten and reshaped into forms that family members can live with. That is, until some precipitating event, like the publication of a memoir that omits as much as it discloses, forces their hands.

The tension between the mother and the daughter, their wildly different versions of the past, the strained relations between Fabienne and her son-in-law Hank (Ethan Hawke, generously playing second banana), make this anxious and lyrical family drama a sort of

Binoche is wondrous, mousy in *The Truth* in the way that daughters raised in the shadows of great beauties often are, and yet luminous, exuding the naked authenticity of someone who has nothing to protect.



SHORT TAKE SORRY WE MISSED YOU

Director: Ken Loach
Country/Distributor: UK/France/Belgium, Kino Lorber
Opening: March 6

As with Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*, the title of *Sorry We Missed You* repurposes customer service jargon to condemn the corporate meat-grinders into which workers must feed themselves, in order to feed themselves. While Riley's title (and film) teems with caustic irony, Loach—who's been telling versions of this story for more than 50 years (often with screenwriter Paul Laverty)—tempers his outrage with a deep well of regret for the dehumanization inherent to the gig economy.

Fed up with feast-and-famine workloads and malingering colleagues, father-of-two Ricky (Kris Hitchen, resembling a weary Damian Lewis) takes a job as a parcel courier for an Amazon-esque company

that employs independent contractors ("You don't work for us, you work with us"). What this really means is that he supplies the truck, pays the insurance, and receives crippling sanctions for late deliveries. Sold on the dream of being his own boss, he's soon relieving himself in a water bottle so as not to fall behind, while his wife Abbie (newcomer Debbie Honeywood), an hourly-paid home-care nurse with too many clients, suffers the same squeeze of exploitation.

Anyone who's recognized that freelancing is a losing bargain with a mendacious aura of romance and independence (akin to hobos riding the rails) can appreciate the truth of Loach's vision. He's the Bernie Sanders of filmmakers: he hammers us with problems we'd rather not face, and often that hammer is blunt, but his message has never wavered, and neither has his commitment. —Steven Mears

inverted image of the ramshackle ad hoc family in *Shoplifters*, the film that won Kore-eda the Palme d'Or in 2018. "Sometimes it's better to choose your own family," says one of the cheerful con artists in that film. To which the wise granny replies, "Yes, if only because you don't have great expectations."

Dashed expectations and festering wounds mark the tense relationship between a mother who never had time for her daughter and a daughter who still bears the scars of having been cast as a disappointment. Binoche is wondrous, mousy in the way that daughters raised in the shadows of great beauties often are, yet at the same time luminous, exuding the naked authenticity of someone who has nothing to protect.

Living in grand bourgeois splendor, Fabienne is being interviewed as *The*

they worked with him on the script), the cruel and the comic play off of each other: Fabienne manages to retain members of her retinue (factotum and cook), while other servants have fled her high-handed ways. She patronizes Hank—she's seen him in some series on YouTube and decided that he's not a real actor. Yet we sense the terror beneath her façade.

Kore-eda's handling of Clémentine Grenier as the bilingual daughter of Lumir and Hank, ferreting out the treasured possessions of her mother's childhood, is nothing short of amazing, confirming his uncanny gift for getting inside the heads of children, granting them a measure of independence from the adults. More than any French director, he seems to have inherited the mantle of Renoir in the privileging of multiple points of view,



Truth opens. Far from the placid matriarch of Desplechin's *A Christmas Tale*, this beautiful grande dame is imperious, frosty, edgy, and gives very little away—perhaps knowing from a lifetime of interviews how words, once uttered, take on a life of their own. Fabienne is especially guarded—and silent—when the journalist asks what actresses have influenced her. She is, we're given to understand, sui generis. Yet there is someone, as it turns out: an actress named Sarah, whose extravagant talent unnerved Fabienne. Sarah was also close to Lumir before committing suicide, an act for which the girl blamed her mother. Her ghost will intrude, accentuating the divide between the two, then gradually uniting them.

In a balancing act made possible by the two actresses (Kore-eda has noted that

along with the feeling for nature as an expressive set—in this case ravishing autumn sliding into gray winter.

In a playfully Pirandellian twist, Fabienne is working on a new film in which she plays a septuagenarian woman whose mother never aged, because, to fend off an illness, she retreated into an alternate universe. Movies are, of course, that ageless realm where our idols remain forever young, forever fair, even as they lead us bravely toward their (and our) mortality.

Molly Haskell has written for many publications, including *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times*, *Ms.*, *Saturday Review*, and *Vogue*. She is the author of *Steven Spielberg: A Life in Films* and *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*.

***The Wolf House* dismisses any sort of factual, didactic outline to embrace the allusive, metaphorical drive of fables and folktales.**



The Wolf House

BY MANU YÁÑEZ MURILLO

Director: Joaquín Cociña & Cristóbal León

Country/Distributor: Chile/Germany, KimStim Films

Opening: March 20

THE NAME COLONIA DIGNIDAD (“Dignity Colony”) is never mentioned in *The Wolf House*. But this first feature by the duo of Chilean animators Joaquín Cociña and Cristóbal León fashions, in all its eerie imagery, an allegorical approach to one of the most sinister episodes of the deeply turbulent second half of the 20th century in Chile. The infamous colony was the field of operations, or rather the nightmarish playground, of a cult led by Paul Schäfer, a former Corporal of the Nazi army who fled West Germany after being charged with sexually abusing children while first working at and then managing supposedly Christian-philanthropic organizations. At Colonia Dignidad, founded in 1961, Schäfer ruled as a despotic patriarch who imposed his corrupted reading of the principles of the American Healing Revival—including strict isolation, division of the families, gender segregation, and pedophilia—for more than three decades, including the 17 years of Augusto Pinochet’s military dictatorship, when the colony became a center for the

internment, torture, and murder of political dissidents.

Conceived as a veiled indictment of the colony’s—and an entire nation’s—long history of tyranny, quotidian horrors, and impunity, *The Wolf House* dismisses any sort of factual, didactic outline to embrace the allusive, metaphorical drive of fables and folktales. The film opens with a pinch of disturbing satire, in the form of a fake home-made infomercial where an avatar of Schäfer celebrates the “secluded” and “pure” nature of the Colony. But then, while the overture of Wagner’s *The Master-Singers of Nuremberg* bursts onto the soundtrack, a series of intertitles introduce the viewer to the story of Maria, a German girl who is chased by a wolf while running away from the Colony, where she’s been punished for letting three pigs escape from their pen. From this point on, *Red Riding Hood* meets *The Three Little Pigs* meets *Snow White* in the haunting stop-motion extravaganza of *The Wolf House*, as the angelic Maria tries to lovingly nurture two little pigs that end up growing into a couple of wicked human siblings, outwardly Aryan in their blond, blue-eyed genetics.

All this immersion in the tormented psyche of a victim of an authoritarian regime is molded by Cociña and León through a richly textured animated single shot that meanders through the film’s titular house: a labyrinthine, Escher-like sample of oneiric architecture. Everything is always in motion in *The Wolf House*, and each movement of the characters or the house itself—most of them actual transformations—leaves behind



SHORT TAKE THE WILD GOOSE LAKE

Director:

Diao Yinan

Country/Distributor:

China/France, Film Movement

Opening: March 6

Set in the bustling metropolis of Wuhan—the currently quarantined epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak—Diao Yinan’s *The Wild Goose Lake* probes the cracks and fissures of contemporary Chinese society through the noir-tinged story of a fugitive gangster and the prostitute who accompanies him on his journey toward self-sacrifice and redemption.

Punctuated by flashbacks of the events leading up to the protagonists’ nocturnal encounter outside a dingy train station, the film depicts the inner workings of the criminal underworld and highlights its ruthless violence with such gory images as a decapitation and an umbrella stabbing through a chest.

Contrasting with the bloodshed is the melancholic fragility of the female character, who oscillates between compliance and quiet defiance against her oppressive fate.

But while the heroine may elicit our sympathy, *The Wild Goose Lake*’s atmosphere of ambiguity and doubt ensures that we perceive danger everywhere and trust no one. This sense of anxiety crystallizes during a law enforcement raid on a zoo: the film cuts between near-subliminal shots of the eyes of caged animals and those of the police captain and his hidden outlaw adversary. Forging a connection between hunter and prey, this sequence is imbued with an oneiric quality, but its buildup is too abrupt for us to invest in it emotionally. By emphasizing symbolism and abstraction over narrative and characterization, the film comes across as a rather shallow exercise in style whose political subtext fails to materialize.
—Yonca Talu

Autumn de Wilde's new adaptation of *Emma* seems to pull its characters from our flesh-and-bone dimension and trap them in a Regency England simulation, where landscapes flatten into Gainsborough pastorals.



SHORT TAKE THE PAINTED BIRD

Director:

Václav Marhoul

Country/Distributor:

Czech Republic/
Slovakia, IFC Films

Opening:

April 17

Chronicling an abandoned boy's nightmarish wanderings through Eastern Europe during the Second World War, Jerzy Kosiński's 1965 debut novel was long considered unfilmable. That's not only due to its relentless scenes of ghoulish violence and humiliation, but also its potentially offensive portrayal of Polish country folk as by and large superstitious, petty, and sadistic. Despite the story's composite nature, *The Painted Bird* is still commonly regarded as auto-fiction—a conceit Kosiński himself did much to support. But he took pains not to specify the novel's location, while also endowing it with a timeless quality and writing in neutralizing English.

Thus it is among the masterstrokes of Václav Marhoul's surprisingly faithful

adaptation that most of the characters speak a range of hybrid Slavic dialects, with many of this international co-production's high-profile cast members—Stellan Skarsgård, Julian Sands, Harvey Keitel, Barry Pepper, and Udo Kier among them—dubbed over in post. Along with the paucity of exposition and stark monochromatic imagery, whose fusion of pastoral calm and extremity at times recalls Tarkovsky, the discrepancies between faces and voices imbue the film with a feeling of not quite being anywhere.

Shot over several years, during which time its magnetic lead, Petr Kotlar, aged from child to adolescent, the film's overall effect is to bridge historical atrocity with folklore or fable. That underscores the key themes of Kosiński's literature: opportunity, tenacity, and the almost infinite malleability of an individual identity when confronted with extreme circumstance.

—José Teodoro

a discernible physical trace, creating a sort of open map of the film's perpetuum mobile, and also an X-ray of its sociopolitical and historical subtext (as when the shaping of a squared window's frame reveals a glimpse of a swastika). The filmmakers claim that this is the movie that Schäfer, their wolf, would've made if he had been Walt Disney. But one could also imagine *The Wolf House* as a handcrafted reimagining of Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*, animated by the Czech surrealist master Jan Švankmajer and set in the pulsing, hellish house of Darren Aronofsky's *mother!*.

The Wolf House may seem an elusive film, its centerless quality being reinforced by a five-year shoot which took place through-

out 14 art workshops in Santiago de Chile, Hamburg, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, and Amsterdam—some of them open to the public. In the end, it is precisely its perennial shape-shifting nature that solidifies the film's meaning. What could better represent the mechanics of fascism than a world where nothing is certain, where everything is transitory, where the very notion of being seems governed by some secret rules of oppression and fear?

Manu Yáñez Murillo is a film critic and journalist, and has written for *Fotogramas*, *Rockdelux*, *Ara*, and *Otros Cines Europa*. He is the editor of the anthology *La mirada americana: 50 años de Film Comment*.

EMMA.

BY PHOEBE CHEN

Director:

Autumn de Wilde

Country/Distributor:

UK, Focus Features

Opened:

February 21

PERIOD FILMS SET BEFORE THE MID-19th century often suggest that candle flame and streaming daylight are enough to shoot and lift the deep shadows of a preelectric world, and even those that sidestep a *Barry Lyndon*-level commitment to natural luminescence tend to go easy on

the fill light. Not so in Autumn de Wilde's debut theatrical feature, a new adaptation of *Emma*, which seems to pull its characters from our flesh-and-bone dimension and trap them in a Regency England simulation, where landscapes flatten into Gainsborough pastorals and even sunlight looks like the uncanny invention of a force just outside the frame.

Unsurprisingly, de Wilde is a seasoned commercial photographer and director, drawing the mood for *EMMA*. unreservedly from her recent work for fashion house Rodarte. The adaptation is also the screenwriting debut of author Eleanor Catton, who visits the 19th century with the same



THE PAINTED BIRD: COURTESY OF TIFF; EMMA: COURTESY OF FOCUS FEATURES

Corpus Christi's factual backing helps rebut potential problems of strained credulity, while writer Mateusz Pacewicz and director Jan Komasa smartly fleck the often death-dominated and hate-haunted material with comedy.

prodigious eye she brought to her Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Luminaries*. In this fondant-draped retelling, Emma (Anya Taylor-Joy) remains hot, smart, rich, and meddling, adopting her new friend and matchmaking project, Harriet (Mia Goth with a Brittany Murphy pout), while denying the longtime love at her doorstep, Mr. Knightley (Johnny Flynn). Taylor-Joy plays Emma's lived-in snobbery as a collection of loaded tics—total dismissal in a raised brow and a tilt of the head; faint distaste in a quick double-blink and slight dip of the chin. Once Emma locks onto wily local vicar Mr. Elton (Josh O'Connor) as the ideal match for Harriet, so begins the puppeteering.

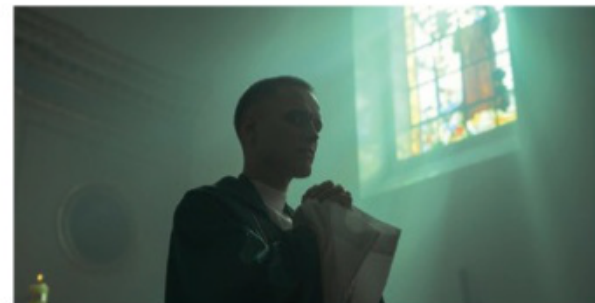
Austen's social world already brims with the landed gentry's household paraphernalia and rules of etiquette, but its reanimation by cinematographer Christopher Blauvelt and costume designer Alexandra Byrne beguiles through not rococo excess but mesmerizing specificity. There's some strange power in visuals that compel this much precision of language: a yellow so striking it has me juggling "butter," "canary," and "dandelion." Every shot is a typology of pastels and calls for a log of the tactile: rippling velvets, diaphanous cravats, plumed hats that sit like clouds on blonde corkscrew curls.

Even *EMMA*'s sound design plays into its pointed "too much"-ness. The busy score is ubiquitous to the point of distraction, and Austen's clause-heavy dialogue flies out in single-breath missiles during battles of wit and caustic monologues.

Emma charms because she is so articulate, an easy winner in a setting where palaver and comportment are social currency. But even as it irks, this sonic glut sets a stage for Mr. Knightley's famous confession—"If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more"—which makes the case not for silence as profound, but for love as a gentle displacement of self. In their sudden speechlessness, this usually articulate duo make room for one another.

And there it is: I wonder if de Wilde's adaptation isn't ultimately about the incoherence of making a self. For all her good intentions, Emma mistakes the narcissistic pleasure of authoring another's happiness for the altruism of helping a friend find love. It's a delusion happily maintained by the devotees who orbit her good fortune, bolstering this version of a best self in a sugared fantasy. Tellingly, the scene before Emma's pivotal realization that her naïvete might veer into cruelty is one in which praise is lavished on her in uncomfortable excess, hyperbole that briefly bursts the echo chamber. It's the sense of hermetic idyll that makes *EMMA* feel so thoroughly of-the-moment, the Instagram algorithm's hall of mirrors switched out for a tight circle of bonnet-sporting sycophants. Doubling down on this aesthetic, de Wilde has made a film that knows it charms and amuses with just how much it crowds its perfect frames. ●

Phoebe Chen is a writer and grad student living in New York.



SHORT TAKE CORPUS CHRISTI

Director:

Jan Komasa

Country/Distributor:

Poland, Film Movement

Opened:

February 19

Fresh-faced priest Daniel (Bartosz Bieleń) materializes in a small Polish town, where he's been asked to sub for the local parish leader who's off to rehab for his secret alcoholism. Though initially baffled by his off-book preaching style, the townspeople—still nursing the psychic wounds caused by a recent car crash that killed six of their own—soon warm to Daniel. His raw methods disarm their grudge-holding stubbornness. There's one problem: he was just released from a youth detention center after serving time for a violent crime, which bars him from ordainment. Daniel's a fraud. But if he's providing real succor, Jan Komasa's film hazards to ask, does it matter?

Mateusz Pacewicz based his screenplay on news stories of ingenuous parish-

ioners hoodwinked by sham priests in Poland and Spain. The factual backing helps rebut potential problems of strained credulity (did none of the locals think to research his past?), and Pacewicz and Komasa smartly fleck the often death-dominated and hate-haunted material with comedy—such as Daniel, in the booth for the first time, quickly Googling "how to conduct confession," or straining for casual pulpit profundity ("Go have a chat with God") in the manner of the break-dancing, youth-targeting preachers of YouTube.

If Warsaw '44, Komasa's loony 2014 Polish resistance romance, was Besson, *Corpus Christi* is Bresson, a stylistic volte-face country priest tale shot naturalistically in drab charcoal gray and moss tones. The mostly unknown Bielenia's wan, vaguely alien handsomeness provides an ambiguity in harmony with the film's irreverent questioning.
—Justin Stewart



● DVD/★ DEBUT
● BLU-RAY/★ DEBUT
▶ STREAMING
▶ EXCLUSIVE TO VOD

HOME MOVIES

*Cinema spun,
streamed, and
beamed*



Public Outrage

BY INA DIANE ARCHER

●★ **Bamboozled**

Spike Lee, USA, 2000; The Criterion Collection

SPIKE LEE'S 14TH NARRATIVE FEATURE IS A DRAMEDY edging on horror, with an ironic sensibility sharpened by the director's bold artistic and technological choices. According to his interview with Ashley Clark for the DVD extras, Lee was motivated by the centenary celebrations of cinema in the late 1990s to consider the darker side of film history. These supplements also reveal the influence of earlier cinematic critiques of the small screen and its manipulative broadcasting, like Sidney Lumet's *Network* and Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd*.

In a plot loosely borrowed from *The Producers*, creatively frustrated network employee Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) comes up with a plan to escape his contract: he proposes a shockingly offensive minstrel show, enlisting two homeless street performers, Womack and Manray (played by comic Tommy Davidson and tap-dancing phenomenon Savion Glover) to appear in blackface. To Pierre's horror, his crass, racist boss Dunwitty (Michael Rapaport) enthusiastically greenlights the idea, and *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show* goes on air.

With the availability of small-scale prosumer formats and editing software, black independent artists in the 1990s were challenging the role of Hollywood and commercial broadcasting in perpetuating infamously stereotypical images of African Americans. With its sophisticated mix of multiple film and video formats, its depictions of "New Age" burnt-cork performance, and the class striving of its African-American characters, *Bamboozled* invokes these contemporaneous developments, as well as older indepen-

dent media that had been grappling with the cultural complexities of minstrelsy and black misrepresentation since the 1970s. As Clark notes in his monograph, "*Bamboozled* is a Hollywood film that also functions as a daring piece of experimental cinema."

Made on a budget of \$10 million, *Bamboozled* was shot by documentary cinematographer Ellen Kuras with a Sony VX 1000 miniDV digital camera and consumer handycams—sometimes 10 at a time—and then blown up to 35mm for its theatrical release. Notably, the *Mantan* show sequences were shot with Super 16mm film. It's Lee's most artfully designed and arresting production, incorporating animation, graphic styles, and mock commercials, as well as the work of visual artists such as David Levinthal and Michael Ray Charles. Eerie, malicious golliwogs, caricatured Sambo banks, and racially charged memorabilia silently accumulate around Delacroix throughout the film like poisonous mushrooms.

The high-key illumination of the minstrel show scenes—which feature rich black makeup (shot with blue light to create a metallic sheen) and bright, primary-colored costumes (by Lee's regular designer, Ruth E. Carter—interviewed on p. 20)—make the "real-life" scenes feel muddy and faded. This contrast underlines the diegetic audience's (and historically our country's) complicit embrace of the minstrel show. Delacroix's cynically conceived, racist transgression is recast as burlesque, and tragically for all involved, becomes hugely successful entertainment. We've been warned.

Ina Diane Archer is an artist and filmmaker and a media conservator at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

DAVID LEE/NEW LINE/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

Tenderness brings out the best in Shinya Tsukamoto: *Vital* and *A Snake of June* turn nightmare scenarios into explorations (and exploitations) of sheer physical sensuality.



★★ **Solid Metal Nightmares: The Films of Shinya Tsukamoto**
10 films, USA, 1987-2018; Arrow Films

PERPETUALLY OUT OF STEP, Shinya Tsukamoto goes where his gut leads him, handcrafting freaked-out sci-fi nightmares from 8mm, 16mm, 35mm, digital video, stop-motion, aggro sound design, and funky optical effects. The resulting filmography (shown in part in Arrow's new set) is littered with movies that disappear up their own rear ends, but also a few masterpieces. Most famous for body-horror nightmare *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989), Tsukamoto also created the riveting *Bullet Ballet* (1998), in which characters pursue grief counseling via black-market handgun dealing. Tenderness brings out the best in Tsukamoto: *Vital* (2004) and *A Snake of June* (2002) turn nightmare scenarios into explorations (and exploitations) of sheer physical sensuality. And let's not forget *The Adventure of Denchu-Kozo* (1987), a fast-forward sci-fi romp about a boy with a power pylon growing out of his back who fights cyborg vampires.—GRADY HENDRIX



●★ **The Whisperers**
Bryan Forbes, UK, 1967; Kino Lorber

THE COLDLY BEAUTIFUL 1967 British film *The Whisperers* tells the story of Margaret, an elderly woman who has been abandoned by her family and is now dependent on government assistance. Her trips to receive money constitute the majority of her contact with humanity, and as a result she is a mean woman shaped by a mean system. The film, directed by Bryan Forbes, plays as a critique of British society, where the elderly are callously left to fend for themselves as stewards of government attend to only their most basic needs. But Edith Evans as Margaret escapes oversimplification. She connects the dots between Margaret's delusions of grandeur, her meanness, and her confusion, and comes up with a woman whose senses have become bewildered by cruelty. If the rest of the film gets lost in structural critique, Evans never loses sight of the human animal.—TEO BUGBEE



●★ **The Prince of Tides**
Barbra Streisand, USA, 1991; The Criterion Collection

IT TOOK BARBRA STREISAND almost 10 years, after the critical success of *Yentl* (which she produced, directed, co-wrote, and starred in), to get *The Prince of Tides*, an adaptation of Pat Conroy's 1986 best-selling novel, off the ground. In addition to directing and producing, Streisand plays Dr. Lowenstein, a New York psychiatrist attempting to unravel the story of the tormented Wingo family. Tom Wingo (Nick Nolte), brother to the suicidal Savannah (Melinda Dillon), gives Lowenstein background on their South Carolinian roots, treading into increasingly traumatic waters. An old-fashioned melodrama powered by James Newton Howard's score, *The Prince of Tides* is grounded in complex, nuanced performances from Streisand, Nolte, Dillon, Blythe Danner as Tom's wife, and Kate Nelligan as the Wingo matriarch. Despite seven Oscar nominations and both critical and box-office success, Streisand wasn't nominated as actor or director. The more things change, the more they stay the same.—SHEILA O'MALLEY

**20 DISCS
TO WATCH**

- ★★ **The Cremator** Juraj Herz, Czechoslovakia, 1969; Criterion
- **The Grand Budapest Hotel** Wes Anderson, USA/Germany, 2014; Criterion
- ★ **Guys and Dolls** Joseph L. Mankiewicz, USA, 1955; Warner Archive Collection
- ★ **Kinetta** Yorgos Lanthimos, Greece, 2005; Kino Lorber
- ★ **Leave Her to Heaven** John M. Stahl, USA, 1945; Criterion
- ★ **Spike Lee x 2: *Jungle Fever***, 1991; *Crooklyn*, USA, 1994; Kino Lorber
- ★★ **Lightning Over Braddock: A Rustbowl Fantasy** Tony Buba, USA, 1988; Zeitgeist Films & Kino Lorber
- ★★ **Little Women** Greta Gerwig, USA, 2019; Sony
- ★ **Masked and Anonymous** Larry Charles, UK/USA, 2003; Shout! Factory
- **My Bloody Valentine** George Mihalka, Canada, 1981; Scream Factory
- ★ **Vsevolod Pudovkin x 3: *Mother***, 1926; *The End of St. Petersburg* (co-directed by Mikhail Doller), 1927; *Storm Over Asia*, 1928; USSR; Flicker Alley
- ★★ **Richard Jewell** Clint Eastwood, USA, 2019; Warner Bros.
- ★★ **Show Boat** James Whale, USA, 1936; Criterion
- ★★ **Suburban Birds** Qiu Sheng, China/Taiwan, 2018; Cinema Guild
- ★★ **Synonyms** Nadav Lapid, France/Israel/Germany, 2019; Kino Lorber
- ★★ **Uncut Gems** Josh & Benny Safdie, USA, 2019; Lionsgate
- ★ **Zu Warriors from the Magic Mountain** Tsui Hark, Hong Kong, 1983; Eureka

Tex Avery supervised some of the most violent, frenetic, fourth-wall-smashing cartoons that were ever produced during the Golden Age of Hollywood animation.

20 TITLES TO STREAM

- ▶▶ **American Factory** Julia Reichert & Steven Bognar, USA, 2019; Netflix
- ▶▶ **Crip Camp** James Lebrecht & Nicole Newnham, USA, 2020; Netflix
- ▶▶ **Ether** Krzysztof Zanussi, Poland/Ukraine, 2018; MUBI
- ▶▶ **The Farewell** Lulu Wang, USA, 2019; Amazon
- ▶▶ **Frownland** Ronald Bronstein, USA, 2007; Criterion
- ▶▶ **Good Time** Josh & Benny Safdie, USA, 2017; Netflix
- ▶▶ **Patricio Guzman x 3: The Battle of Chile**, 1975, Chile/Cuba/Venezuela/France; *Nostalgia for the Light*, 2010, France/Germany/Chile/Spain; *The Pearl Button*, 2015, Spain/France/Chile; OVID
- ▶▶ **Hillary**, Nanette Burstein, USA, 2020; Hulu
- ▶▶ **Long Day's Journey into Night** Bi Gan, China/France, 2018; Criterion
- ▶▶ **Mackenna's Gold** J. Lee Thompson, USA, 1969; Amazon
- ▶▶ **Pioneers of African American Cinema: Within Our Gates**, Oscar Micheaux, 1920; *Body and Soul*, Oscar Micheaux, 1925; *Dirty Gertie from Harlem, U.S.A.*, Spencer Williams, 1946; *The Blood of Jesus*, Spencer Williams, 1941; USA; Criterion
- ▶▶ **The Plagiarists** Peter Parlow, USA, 2019; MUBI
- ▶▶ **A Thousand Suns** Mati Diop, France, 2013; Criterion
- ▶▶ **What Did Jack Do?** David Lynch, USA, 2017; Netflix
- ▶▶ **You Were Never Lovelier** William A. Seiter, USA, 1942; Criterion



★ **Tex Avery Screwball Classics: Volume 1** 19 films, USA, 1943-1951; Warner Archive Collection

TEX AVERY SUPERVISED some of the most violent, frenetic, racy (and occasionally racist), pun-filled, fourth-wall-smashing cartoons that were ever produced during the Golden Age of Hollywood animation. *Tex Avery Screwball Classics Volume 1* is bound to frustrate many with its achronological selection, ranging from his masterpiece *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943) to the fascinating *Symphony in Slang* (1951), which shows the influence of “limited animation” (a more modern approach that emphasized design and color over realistic movement). But it’s fun to see gags recur and to watch Avery spoof the mystery genre in *Who Killed Who?* (1943) for MGM, just as he did the gangster genre in *Thugs with Dirty Mugs* (1939) while at Warner Brothers. And Avery’s *Garden Gopher* (1950), showing a bulldog’s repeated attempts to foil a pesky gopher, points to Avery’s influence on Chuck Jones. Scanned in 4K from their original film elements, the 19 films included here look terrific.—DAVID FILIPI



★ **Guns** Robert Kramer, France, 1980; Re:Voir

A DELICATE CHINESE BOX of a movie, Robert Kramer’s 1980 *Guns* achieves, through a rigorous narrative and aesthetic attenuation, a power on par with the filmmaker’s classic 1970s explorations of the intertwining of the personal and political, *Milestones* and *Ice*. Kramer’s first film in French, *Guns* follows freelance journalist and former radical Tony (Patrick Bauchau) as he blithely picks away at a gunrunning plot that implicates the French government, Emirati oil barons, and a shady corporate gangster and his anxious failson. At the same time, Kramer describes in heartbreaking detail the intersecting personal lives of Tony; his partner, Katrin (Hermine Karagheuz); her American lover (played by Kramer himself); and Tony’s lover, played by a mournful Juliet Berto. As the story oscillates between the intrigues of global capitalism and the day-to-day of family life, the ways in which these two worlds inexorably shape each other are made brutally clear.—CLINTON KRUTE



●★ **Sweeney! & Sweeney 2** David Wickes, UK, 1977 & Tom Clegg, UK, 1978; Kino Lorber

BASED ON ITV’S PARADIGMATIC small-screen policier, *Sweeney!* is hamstrung by one of the original series’s defining strengths: smug-gling progressive social critique within the traditionally conservative cop-show genre. Its awkward blackmail plot involving OPEC malfeasance strands streetwise series characters in an unconvincing Foreign Office milieu. But the 1978 big-screen follow-up *Sweeney 2* is a gem. Returning to the grotty West London locations that the show explored (with a side trip to Malta), *Sweeney 2* backgrounds social commentary (the bank robbers du jour are UK tax exiles) in favor of pulp violence and personality. As D.I. Regan, the late John Thaw gamely embodies a uniquely English brand of dissipated joylessness, whether refereeing a terrorism scare-turned-booze-up, passing out while on the pull, or leading a perfunctorily triumphant victory jig at the unit’s local.—BRUCE BENNETT

Maya Deren's work—which she primarily wrote, shot, and edited herself—showcases an artist determined to puzzle out film's relationship to modernity.



Meshes of the Afternoon



The Very Eye of Night

Stay in Motion

BY SIERRA PETTENGILL

★ ★ Maya Deren Collection

Eight films, USA, 1943-85; Kino Lorber & Re:Vair

IN HER 1946 ESSAY “AN ANAGRAM OF IDEAS on Art, Form, and Film,” Maya Deren laid out her anti-manifesto approach to the artist’s manifesto. “In my case I have found it necessary, each time, to ignore any of my previous statements,” she said. Kino Lorber and Re:Vair’s new box set features 2K restorations of eight of Deren’s films, which show this revision in action. The collection allows for an appreciation of her evolving film statements as they unfold across an unfortunately short life: the symbolic psychodrama (she emphatically rejected any misapplied labels of “surrealism”) of the groundbreaking *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *Ritual in Transfigured Time*; her dance explorations in the perambulatory *A Study in Choreography for Camera*; the ethnographic studies of Haitian voodoo rituals in her unfinished hourlong *Divine Horsemen*.

The extras in the Blu-ray anthology include commentary tracks by curator Thomas Beard and scholar Moira Jean Sullivan, who split narration duties across six of the films. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Beard reminds us that before she was a filmmaker, Deren was first a poet; that for her, writing was a process of translating images into words. Filmmaking was a revelation: a way of directly accessing those images, no mediation necessary. Her work—which she primarily wrote, shot, and edited herself—showcases an artist determined to puzzle out film’s relationship to modernity. The body, the mind, the form—it all

comes together in her last completed film, new to me, *The Very Eye of Night*. (Beard wonderfully refers to the film as Deren’s “b-side.”) Dancers from the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School rotate in and among a minimal celestial background, not so much spectral as hyper-exposed, the negative processing of the dancers emphasizing sinews, cheekbones, and arched feet, adorned by original graphic illustrations by Deren.

Also included here are audio outtakes from the soundtrack recording sessions from that film and *Meshes of the Afternoon*, composed by musician and Deren’s third husband Teiji Ito. (Deren affixed the score to *Meshes*, which was originally conceived as a silent, in the late 1950s.) Another special treat is *Invocation*, a beautifully illuminating 1987 documentary directed by Jo Ann Kaplan, featuring candid interviews with the likes of Alexander Hamid, Deren’s second husband and first film collaborator, who co-directed and co-starred in *Meshes*; Jonas Mekas, who gives a lovely tour of Anthology Film Archives before its expansion; and folklore scholar Joseph Campbell.

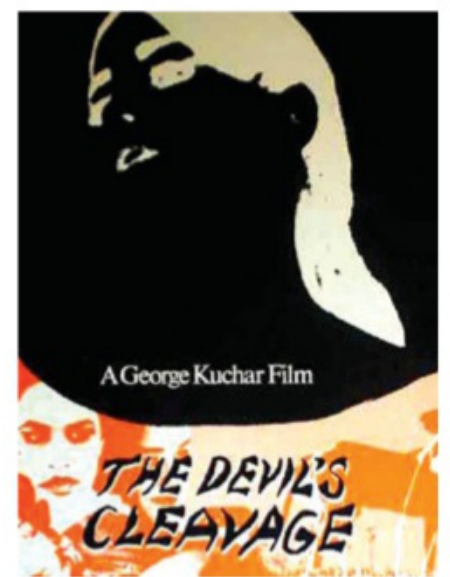
The collection showcases Deren’s remarkable, restless exploration of the film form and its ways of imprinting body and consciousness. “Instead of trying to invent a plot that moves, use the movement of wind, or water, children, people, elevators, balls, etc.,” she instructed in a written elegy to amateurism. Her movements remain a wonder. ●

Sierra Pettengill is a filmmaker and writer based in New York.

WISH LIST

THE DEVIL’S CLEAVAGE

Brakhage and Frampton have gotten the Criterion treatment—so why not George Kuchar? If Bergman’s glimpses into the soul of man blow your mind, wait until you see what Kuchar can do with a motel toilet. Setting aside the dream of a box set or a comprehensive streaming deal for the work of George and his twin brother Mike, 1975’s *The Devil’s Cleavage* seems like low-hanging fruit. One of Kuchar’s rare feature-length scripted films, it follows nurse Ginger Menninger (Ainslie Pryor) as she flees the fast life in San Francisco for Blessed Prairie, Oklahoma, only



to find horny randos wherever she turns. A breathlessly funny parody of Hollywood melodrama (“I stink, Frank—I stink so bad it scares me!” “Then let me take you in my arms and fumigate that beautiful body”), the film’s low-budget aesthetic owes more to Edgar Ulmer than to Roger Corman’s contemporary cheapies. From the dreamy expressionism of the opening, through the convoluted, absurd, and hilarious rest of the movie, Kuchar purely embodies an oft-abused term: the amateur, someone who creates solely for the love of it.
—Nellie Killian



PlayTime

Stop Making Sense

The master comic and total filmmaker showed the absurdity in daily life

BY J. HOBERMAN

Play Time: Jacques Tati and Comedic Modernism

By Malcolm Turvey, Columbia University Press, \$30

Jacques Tati: The Complete Works

Edited by Alison Castle, Taschen, \$225

FORMIDABLE FORMALISTS ROBERT BRESSON, JEAN-PIERRE Melville, and Jacques Tati are the three musketeers of postwar, pre-Nouvelle Vague French cinema, although, paradoxically, it's crowd-pleasing Tati rather than ascetic Bresson or tough guy Melville who may have been the most inner-directed. Eclipsing in ambition Chaplin's most grandiose self-projections, Tati's magnum opus *PlayTime* was a career derailer at once self-effacing and megalomaniacal.

What made Tati tick? Taking his title from the master, Malcolm Turvey has written the first book-length, English-language study since David Bellos's 1999 biography; it's somewhat shorter but more confident of Tati's importance, and almost exclusively focused on his aesthetic strategies, with "new critical" readings yielding a taxonomy of Tatian gags—running, fragmented, hidden, mutual-interference, potential, and truncated ones, as well as aleatory object-sound analogues, enlightenment images, switch images, and gag/topper/topper-toppers.

Having written on the French film avant-garde of the 1920s, Turvey identifies Tati as a modernist who consciously reworked silent-era slapstick—albeit a critical modernist in his satiric view of technology and urban design. The modern house in *Mon oncle* might

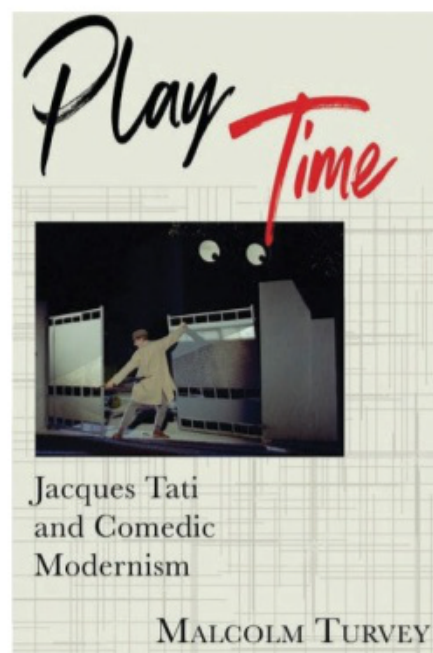
have been contrived by Frank Tashlin or Jerry Lewis, but rather than these analogues, Turvey cites the Dadaist fellow traveler René Clair as Tati's key precursor and, noting Tati's observation regarding the ubiquitous comedy of daily life "everywhere you look," name-checks John Cage. (But aren't *M. Hulot's Holiday* and *Mon oncle* also contemporaneous with the absurdist plays of Beckett, Camus, and Ionesco?)

Tati's desire to alter perception and encourage active viewership are most apparent in *PlayTime*, the film Noël Burch famously called the first to demand multiple viewings from different seats in the cinema. Turvey gives *PlayTime* its due and devotes a provocative afterword to Tati's last completed, least understood, and most personal film, *Parade*. Still, the book's relentless focus on the movies is not entirely satisfying. An athlete and performance artist in his youth, Tati was a physical comedian and his best-known creation M. Hulot was a comic icon. (No one before Peter Falk's Columbo was more identified with a drab raincoat.)

Some of this can be gleaned from the beautiful if unwieldy Taschen production ("book" seems insufficient) *Jacques Tati: The Complete Works*, a box set of five volumes edited by Alison Castle,

over 16 pounds by my bathroom scale. Production stills and screenplays each get a volume; another is a series of appreciations, with Jonathan Rosenbaum's notes on all six Tati features a veritable book within the book; the fourth offers critical essays; and the fifth is devoted to interviews. If *Play Time* is cinema as installation, the Taschen tome is critical study as blockbuster.

Turvey notes that Tati's six features coincide with France's 30-year transformation from a largely rural, mainly Catholic imperial power to an industrialized, cosmopolitan, essentially urban society—a shift which neither Bresson nor Melville were nearly as preoccupied with or responsive to. Yet as neither Turvey's formalist analysis nor the Taschen hagiography addresses that subject in depth, there's another book waiting to be written. ●



Phantom Lady: Hollywood Producer Joan Harrison, The Forgotten Woman Behind Hitchcock

By Christina Lane, Chicago Review Press; \$30

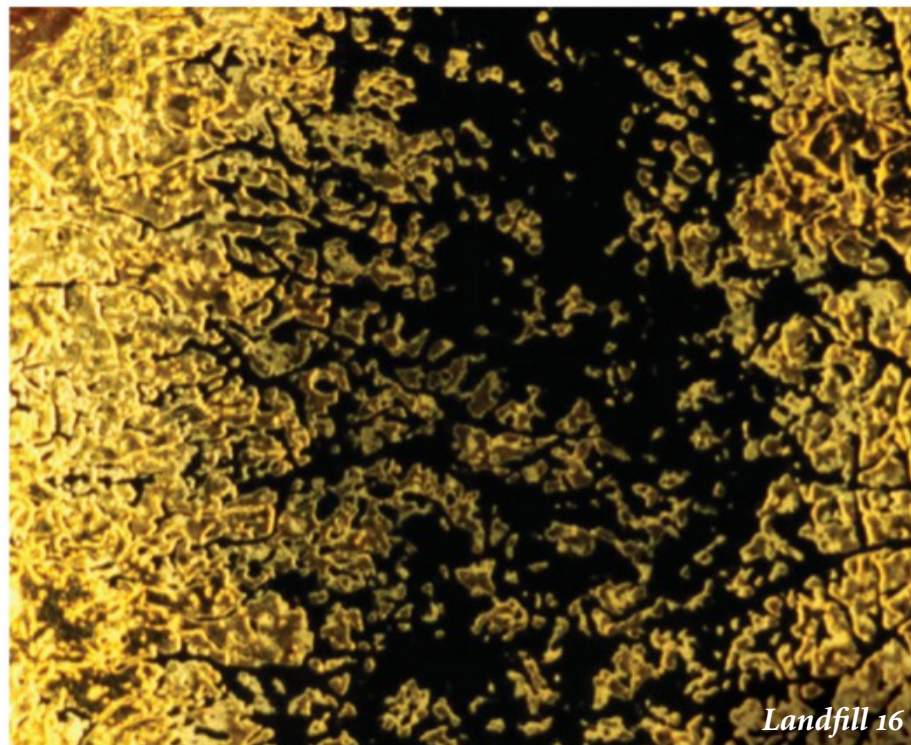
In *Phantom Lady* (1944)—produced by Joan Harrison—a man at a bar picks up a woman

sporting an outlandish hat. She's his only alibi when he's accused of murder, but no one can recall her. This nightmare of urban anonymity from Cornell Woolrich's eponymous novel morphs on screen into a wised-up coming-of-age tale as the accused's intrepid secretary tries to clear his name. James Agee gave Harrison the

lioness's share of credit for the movie's "style and scare," praising her "foresight and sharp common sense" and her "cagey . . . handling of the baser emotions."

Christina Lane's first-rate critical biography, *Phantom Lady: Hollywood Producer Joan Harrison, The Forgotten Woman Behind Hitchcock*, locates the wellspring of

Devoid of zeitgeisty romanticizations of the analog, Gregory Zinman's book, *Making Images Move*, presents a defiant yet clear-eyed alternative history of the origins of cinema.



Landfill 16

Light Industry

A materialist study returns cinema to its fundamentals | BY ABBY SUN

Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts

By Gregory Zinman, University of California Press, \$45

THE ETHOS OF ARTISANAL CRAFTSMANSHIP PERMEATES modern life, or at least its marketing does. But recently, there's also been a genuine return in film and video to the archive and to visual cues that convey physical materiality—bolstered, perhaps, by a swell in filmmaker-run collectives and experimental festivals that champion the crossovers of “moving-image artists.” Devoid of zeitgeisty romanticizations of the analog, Gregory Zinman's *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts* presents a defiant yet clear-eyed alternative history of the origins of cinema.

Primarily a scholarly reconsideration of the conceptual categories of film, the volume draws on some usual suspects (cultural theorists, art historians, and the aforementioned moving-image artists). But in Zinman's retelling, Romantic poets, composers, and painters are the forgotten influences behind “proto-cinematic” forms like early painted films and magic lanterns. Photographic

pioneers like Eadweard Muybridge are only briefly mentioned, countering the idea of mechanical image-reproduction as the essence of cinema. Focusing on abstract works, including those that don't involve the camera, Zinman's account of “handmade cinema” is robust and politically attuned.

Despite the emphasis on the handmade, Zinman isn't against institutional or corporate chains of production. He's more interested in retraining our understanding of the history of cinema as relational, underlining artists' connections to one another and giving due credit to state funding, the contributions of the wives of male filmmakers, and even, in his conclusion, Google's residencies for VR/XR artistic development. (Zinman himself has participated in the studio system as an experimental film consultant on James Gray's *Ad Astra*.) His project ambitiously puts at its center ways of working and the labor that often surrounds and supports filmmaking, such as artists' writing and teaching.

Zinman's prose sparkles in recounting artists' use of chemicals, bodily fluids, and elements like wind and water, which often render celluloid fragile or ephemeral. Jennifer Reeves's *Landfill 16* (2011), formed from 16mm scraps that the artist buried in a yard and then exhumed and “hand-painted” using iron powder and optical printing, is described as a “densely textured terraform” that “pulses like a living thing.” There are also correctives here to the dominance of the white male canon, through the work of filmmakers like Ja'Tovia Gary and animator Kelly Gallagher. True to Zinman's overall focus on craft, this is a handsome, glossy volume, with full-color reproductions of film stills and photographs of performances.

Making Images Move shifts into higher gear in its second half, on

“handmade moving images,” joyfully untethering itself from filmic medium specificity. A “shared desire to shift light in time” ties Zinman's investigations of light art, psychedelic light shows, and video synthesizers to film history. These spectacles, even when completely nonnarrative, have historically attracted and continue to draw enormous crowds. What a thrilling call to imagine these as possible futures of the cinematic arts! ●

Abby Sun is a freelance programmer and critic.



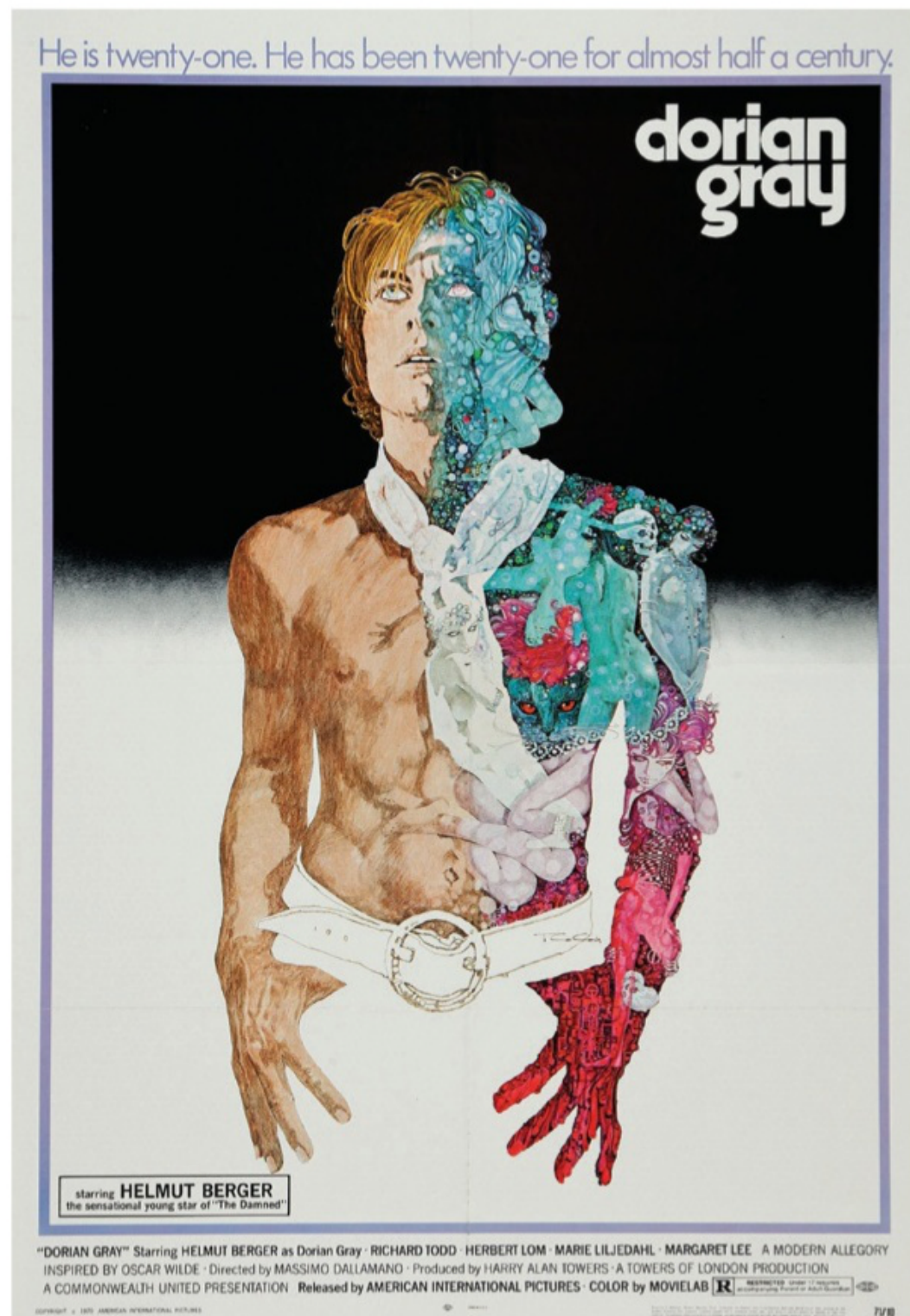
Harrison's creativity in her spry sensibility, not just her apprenticeship to the Master of Suspense. Vivacious, literary, and fascinated with “true crime” (her family ran a Surrey newspaper, and her uncle was the Keeper of London's Old Bailey, doling out cases to judges), she applied to be Hitchcock's secretary in 1933 and ended up his left-hand

woman: his wife Alma had already secured the right hand.

Lane persuasively depicts Hitchcock, Harrison, and Alma forging the auteur's trademarks—such as his sardonic, playful storytelling and sexualization of classy blondes like Harrison herself—between *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) and *Saboteur* (1942).

After years spent on her own as a writer and producer, Harrison engineered the cleverest American anthology TV series: *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-1962). It's the peak achievement of a creative who had co-written scripts like *Rebecca* (1940) and produced such thrillers as *The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry* (1945). She

still found time to romance men like Kirk Douglas and Irwin Shaw before marrying Eric Ambler. “Joan placed herself center stage as a ravishing and successful career woman,” Lane writes. Her book celebrates a heroine of movie history who is finally getting a spotlight of her own.
—Michael Sragow



TED COCONIS

UNTIL HE WALKED AWAY FROM COMMERCIAL illustration at the end of the 1970s, Constantinos “Ted” CoConis had one of the most distinctive styles in movie poster art. Incorporating elements of Art Nouveau and psychedelia, he drew memorable posters for *Petulia*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Man of La Mancha*, and *Hair*, all teeming with exquisite detail that rewarded close attention. I love his uncharacteristically simple line drawing for Clint Eastwood’s *Breezy*, but to my mind, his masterpiece is his multihued artwork for the 1970 film *Dorian Gray*, in which the eternally youthful hero’s body morphs into a cascade of beautiful naked women. CoConis typically drew in graphite before coloring in layers of luminous, translucent ink—but when the original painting for *Dorian Gray* was hung in art director Bill Gold’s office, the ink faded under the fluorescent lights, eerily reverting the painting to monochrome. Born in 1927, CoConis was awarded a scholarship to the Art Institute of Chicago while still in elementary school, but at 15, at the height of World War II, he enlisted in the Air Force (until it was discovered two years later that he was underage). He became a military artist before moving to New York and embarking on a stellar freelance career: he drew the 1971 Newbery Award-winning children’s book *Summer of the Swans*, and his painting for the paperback of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Ada* (1969) was so admired by the author that he purchased the artwork. In 1974 he created a poster for *The Muppets Valentine Show*, gaining the admiration of Jim Henson, and after CoConis retired from commissioned work to live and paint in France and the Greek Islands with his wife and muse, Kristen, Henson was the only person able to lure him back, asking him to do the official release poster for *Labyrinth* (1986). As with all of his best work, his design for *Labyrinth* is beautifully composed, with crowds of sinuous, painstakingly painted detail balanced against an elegant use of white space. Eternally youthful himself, CoConis, as Kristen told me, “is cruising smoothly through his 92nd year, still painting all day, every day.” ●

Adrian Curry writes about movie posters for mubi.com and is the design director for Zeitgeist Films and Kino Lorber.

Dorian Gray (Massimo Dallamano, UK/Italy/West Germany, 1970)
Petulia (Richard Lester, UK/USA, 1968)
Labyrinth (Jim Henson, UK/USA, 1986)

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