

# IN REVIEW *ONLINE*



## FEATURES

### CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

*CLUB ZERO* – 1

*LAST SUMMER* – 2

*KIDNAPPED* – 3

*THE DELINQUENTS* – 4

*MAN IN BLACK* – 6

*NO LOVE LOST* – 7

*L'ABBÉ PIERRE* – A CENTURY  
OF DEVOTION – 8

*CREATURA* – 9

*TIGER STRIPES* – 11

## FILM REVIEWS

*SPIDER-MAN: ACROSS THE  
SPIDER-VERSE* – 12

*THE BOOGEYMAN* – 13

*PADRE PIO* – 15

*ANONYMOUS SISTER* – 15

*THE HOLE IN THE FENCE* – 16

*PAST LIVES* – 17

*THE ROUNDUP: NO WAY  
OUT* – 18

*TOPOLOGY OF SIRENS* – 18

*SHOOTING STARS* – 19

*FOLLOW HER* – 20

*AFTER SHERMAN* – 21

*CONCERNED CITIZEN* – 21

*FALCON LAKE* – 22

*SQUARING THE CIRCLE* – 22



## CLUB ZERO

Jessica Hausner

A favorite of the Cannes selection committee for the last 20 years or so, Austrian filmmaker Jessica Hausner has enjoyed a semi-embattled relationship with attendees of the festival for just as long. Well suited for the Un Certain Regard category under which most of her feature films have premiered, the largely positive reception of her harsh, anti-romantic period suicide comedy *Amour Fou* (2014) ended up elevating her to main competition, in which she premiered 2019's *Little Joe*; this year, she landed in comp again, with *Club Zero*. This context has brought with it some of the harshest criticisms of her already divisive career, though one imagines such pushback is a mark of success for Hausner, whose particular approach to satire targets our broad complicity in societies failings while offering little certainty in how to resolve these grand conflicts. For many, this perspective immediately casts Hausner as a satirist in the same tradition as Michael Haneke, or Matt Stone and Trey Parker, artists who often indulge glibness and tend towards a sneering, combative relationship with their audience. But Hausner's work is more nuanced even as it tackles thorny subjects like our complicated relationship with SSRIs (*Little Joe*), or food (*Club Zero*). Hausner's films walk a delicate line, introducing unreal,

allegorical element into a world that is otherwise, essentially, reality, and as such there is a commitment to allowing events to unfold as they likely might were we to become entangled in such a spectacular scenario as those depicted in these two most recent projects.

And indeed, *Club Zero's* premise is quite tantalizing, centering on a group of students at an expensive European boarding school who fall under the sway of Ms. Novak (Mia Wasikowska), the recently appointed "conscious eating" instructor who quietly indoctrinates her neglected, mostly unsupervised pupils in the dubious ways of her cutting edge philosophy. Presented as a sort of pseudo-celebrity in the world of dieting and nutrition, the parents (wealthy, globetrotting elites reliant on the school to do their parenting for them) and headmaster unanimously see Novak's hiring as a progressive step, her dieting ethos a means of educating the children about their social responsibility in relation to current day food production's dire environmental impact, while also encouraging them to lose a little weight. While the latter notion is accepted as an inherent benefit of this program, it inevitably proves to be the point of conflict that wedges between these willful youths and their complacent, liberal parents, who quickly become concerned that conscious



eating is really just disordered eating, yet are incapable of deflating the convictions of the kids after a lifetime of exhibiting none of their own.

Those resistant to *Club Zero's* machinations appear most suspicious of Hausner's cynical depiction of the central mentor/student dynamic, and the way in which earnest, youthful political fervor is portrayed as a malleable force (there's also some reticence to embrace the rigorously choreographed awkwardness of her formal style, which gives every performance an arch quality). But this misses the rest of the canvas; the film's characterization of this culture amounts to a vast system in which we've all been webbed up, with no character — parent and child alike — more savvy than the next, all turning to some modern day higher power for a sense of guidance or control that they might better find amongst each other. That *Club Zero's* screenplay (co-authored with Hausner's semi-frequent collaborator, Géraldine Bajard) is laden with the language of intermittent fasting and autophagy gives it a contemporary edge that contextualizes Wasikowska's sinister, diet tea-peddling Ms. Novak as a figure akin to conservative internet thought leader/con artists like Jordan Peterson or Andrew Tate (both of whom have loudly pushed their own curious theories on human eating habits over the years). Many

might balk at the choice not to make the Ms. Novak character the sole explicit villain of the piece, but Hausner, always adept at forgoing the boring path, opts for something far more slippery and less punishing than some have made this film out to be. *Club Zero* is ultimately less about attributing explicit blame to specific parties, and instead more interested in summing up this particularly modern sense of frustration (and perhaps alleviating a bit of the tension it brings with its wry, comedic sensibility) that's been a byproduct of the absurd systems we've allowed ourselves to be trapped by. — **M.G. MAILLOUX**

## LAST SUMMER

Catherine Breillat

As Catherine Breillat's first film in a decade, *Last Summer* scans initially as an altogether more mannered affair for the director. Known for her sexually frank inquiries into desire, taboo, and transgression, Breillat's latest drops us into the upper-crust world of Parisian couple Anne (Léa Drucker) and Pierre (Olivier Rabourdin), as well as their two young daughters. Anne is a respected lawyer who works with abused children, and, by her own admission, her sister is her only friend. These details establish a few things. In her professional capacity, Anne is a champion of the young, and we witness her refusal to take



chances with the safety of the children; she is also decidedly “domestic,” and though we’re not yet privy to an interiority that might suggest if she feels strongly any which way about it, what is clear is that her life is guided by a certain work-and-home structure.

Breillat’s films are often predicated on an essential rupture in characters’ perspectives or stabilities — whether self-imposed or externally urged — and here that disruption comes in the arrival of Théo (Samuel Kircher), Pierre’s troubled, 17-year-old son from a previous marriage. Théo presents an immediate dissonance: his visage is mopsy but his charm is devil-may-care, and his particular adolescent male confidence pours out into an otherwise staid family dynamic, particularly when he starts to bring local girls over. Anne is immediately intrigued by this outsider presence, and it doesn’t take long before an *amour fou* begins between her and Théo.

An adaptation of May el-Toukhy’s *Queen of Hearts* (2019), *Last Summer* is ironically and by far the tamer of the two films, at least when it comes to graphic depictions of sex. Never a mere provocateur, Breillat has always taken her characters’ desires quite seriously, and without the affronts to conservatism that she traded in earlier in her career — particularly the five-film run from *Romance* (1999) to *Anatomy of Hell* (2004) — it’s perhaps easier than ever to see her fascination with the complexities and contradictions of desire. With *Last Summer*, she’s stripped away what some would reduce to simple tawdriness and laid bare Anne’s psyche in her presentational restraint — the compositions are gentle, close-ups on small intimacies like stolen kisses or light touches, reflecting both the insidious predation at play and the deeply vulnerable state Anne has found herself in.

The problem, however, is that *Last Summer*’s middle section is built entirely around the encounters of this brief affair, and while it’s no fault that the director has moved away from the irruptive force of her early, more confrontational portraits of feminine desire, the accumulation of these scenes and their relatively subdued rendering proves enervating by the time the liaison is made known. A few visual juxtapositions fare a little better — a shot of Anne kissing Théo contrasted with one of Pierre crying into Anne’s neck stands out — but outside of the intrigue

presented by Breillat’s aesthetic pivot, it’s all largely perfunctory. This amounts to a lot of tilting toward anxiety without managing to actually build much during this stretch, and the lingering impression is of Breillat hustling through these couplings in order to get to the third act’s thornier material.

Which is perhaps wise, as this culminating section does work to course-correct a bit, exploding both Anne and Théo’s psyches in surprising ways while avoiding the trap of the erotic thriller the film at times suggests it might become. Instead of anything more melodramatic, Breillat sticks to incisive survey, cataloging the depths of self-delusion and -preservation we harbor beneath our curated façades and arriving not far from where the tryst began: with two fragile individuals facing uncertain futures. And so, while *Last Summer*’s imbalance certainly hamstrings its cumulative power, it works more often than not thanks to Breillat’s bid at authorial reflexivity and her commitment to taking seriously both our ugly and admirable recesses of character. — **LUKE GORHAM**

## KIDNAPPED

Marco Bellocchio

Many critics’ wrap-ups from Cannes this year included dismissive language directed at Ken Loach’s new film competition film, *The Old Oak*. As is often the case with late Loach, the consensus has been that the director’s heart (and politics) may be in the right place, but that he sacrifices nuance in the name of agit-prop. Well, the same can be said for Marco Bellocchio — at least as far as his own new competition film is concerned. *Kidnapped* is a florid docudrama based on the case of Edgardo Mortara (Enea Sala), a six-year-old boy from a Jewish family in Bologna. Edgardo was surreptitiously baptized by the family’s servant (Aurora Camatti) as an infant. Per canon law in what was then the Papal State of Italy, this meant that the Vatican had a legal right — and in their eyes, a moral obligation — to remove Edgardo from the Mortara family and raise him as a Catholic.

Bellocchio has indicated that this is a story he’s wanted to film for quite a while, and the appearance of *Kidnapped* in 2023 seems hardly coincidental. Bellocchio’s cinema has long exhibited a simultaneous fascination and repulsion with respect





to the Catholic church, particularly as seen in films like *My Mother's Smile* (2002) and *Blood of My Blood* (2015). His films have succeeded at showing why religion exerts such a pull on the human psyche, despite the violence and social division that it also often engenders. By contrast, *Kidnapped* is an outright attack on the Italian Catholic church of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, embodied by the glowering, fanatical Pope Pius IX (Paolo Pierobon). In a portrayal that recalls that of Porfirio Diaz in Glauber Rocha's equally anti-clerical *Earth Enraptured* (1967), the Pope sees the abduction and reeducation of Edgardo as a way for the Vatican to flex its political muscle, the last gasp of a regime on the decline.

Most of Bellocchio's most interesting films are those that depart from realism, drawing on Italy's tradition of grand opera. Never one to shy away from outsized gestures, Bellocchio often juices the drama with crashing music stings and sweeping camera movements. There's some of that in *Kidnapped* — especially the deployment of sharp, discordant Bernard Hermannisms — but like his last film, *The Traitor* (2019), *Kidnapped* finds Bellocchio operating in a rather conventional register. When he crosscuts between Edgardo reciting the Latin Mass and his family engaging in a Hebrew prayer, it's a bludgeoning maneuver. Even *Kidnapped's* flights of fancy — Edgardo freeing Christ from the cross; the Pope being forcibly circumcised by a quartet of menacing mohels — are restricted to dream sequences.

*Kidnapped* is a film whose point is impossible to miss. Religion

becomes dangerous when it succumbs to fundamentalism, and this is never more the case than when the church and the state are one. Bellocchio clearly recognizes the existential threat of Christian nationalism, and acknowledges that a new Medievalism is on the rise. The adult Edgardo (Leonardo Maltese) becomes a priest and fully embraces Christianity (not that he had much choice). But in a moment of emotional crisis, a schism occurs in his mind, and he suddenly condemns the Pope.

Fundamentalism is a kind of schizophrenia, at odds with lived reality. This essential trauma, and its irrational rupture, would have been a great subject for Bellocchio at his best. Instead, he's preaching to his historical moment, hammering home ideas that he has, in his anger, greatly simplified. — **MICHAEL SICINSKI**

## THE DELINQUENTS

Rodrigo Moreno

Blanket declarations about three-hour-plus runtimes always seem curious when filmmakers employ said length for wildly different purposes. Though the sweeping epic may be the most classic Hollywood implementation, the space can be used to house labyrinthine plots, emphasize repetition, or facilitate other experimental practices. In Rodrigo Moreno's new film, *The Delinquents*, the director uses the space to play. Throughout its runtime, the film shifts in form and genre, often feeling like an entirely different work than it was a mere half hour ago. These shifts, though, are not tectonic, and furthermore the film is united even in its disparity by the pleasure of discovery, as new facets of its characters and the world they inhabit are revealed.

*The Delinquents* tracks two men, Morán (Daniel Elias) and Román (Esteban Bigliardi) — the resemblance of their names goes unremarked upon until a transcendent whip pan gag about halfway through the film — in the years after Morán robs the bank they work at. In some ways, the procedural nature of the film's first section resembles Bertrand Bonello's *Nocturama* —



similarly to how the actions of of that film's characters take a while to emerge as a terrorist plot due to the project's opaque marketing, there are few indications of Morán's plan as he and Román go about a day's work. When Román asks to leave early to get his neck brace removed, viewers may think it's a part of the plan, but he is entirely surprised when Morán approaches him after work with a proposition: Morán has stolen a sum equal to the combined salary the two men will make in the twenty five years before they retire. Morán will turn himself in, exchanging the twenty five years at the bank for three and a half in prison, and Román needs only to hold onto the money for that time in order to receive his half.

Thirty minutes into the film, then, things seem to be coalescing around a fairly ludicrous premise. But though Moreno is not afraid to occasionally risk ludicrousness, he does thoroughly resist allowing his film to coalesce. Before his theft, Morán takes a smoke break with his boss and another co-worker. Claiming to have quit smoking the previous day, Morán quickly accepts a cigarette. His boss begins a tirade about all the places, including

the bank, in which they used to be able to smoke: "We used to be freer," he says. But when challenged, he immediately relents: "We weren't freer, but we could smoke." Morán drops his cigarette, and says he's quitting. To the extent the film has a unifying theme, it's this problematization of freedom. This is further illuminated by one of Moreno's boldest formal quirks: in two key moments, a sliding split screen shows both Morán and Román smoking. Again, perhaps a thuddingly explicit metaphor, but an effective one.

But this sense of play is perhaps most evident in the film's music. Though much of *The Delinquents* is scoreless, each non-diegetic cue Moreno does employ is entirely different — jaunty, electronic, Herrmannian. Similarly, the split screen isn't the only formal flourish Moreno utilizes. There are a few things holding the film together despite this heterogeneity, and though Moreno's visual impishness can be jarring, his formal punctuations never feel out of place. A hard cut conveys the irrevocability of a harsh touch; a slow rack focus searches the landscape. And operating as dual signposts for all of this are





Elias and Bigliardi's performances — though their decisions don't always follow clear logic, they precisely communicate Morán and Román's development. *The Delinquents* is a film rooted in change, the two men at its center evolving in the wake of Morán's crime and engendering its surprising shifts. But the two performances are as steadying and guiding as they are rich, elevating what otherwise might have only been a delightful formal playground into captivating character study. — **JESSE CATHERINE WEBBER**

## MAN IN BLACK

### Wang Bing

In many respects, each of the works by Wang Bing at Cannes this year exemplify the now reigning axes of Wang's interests and style. *Youth (Spring)* is the latest embodiment, in now sparser and more controlled form, of what *West of the Tracks: Tie Xi Qu* (2002) established, *Crude Oil* (2007) (for want of a better word) refined, and *15 Hours* (2017) crystallized, in terms of worker focus. And *Man in Black* expresses the filmmaker's other set of concerns — starting with *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* (2007) and typified in *Dead Souls* (2018) — regarding the history of China and its brutalized individuals under communism and the Cultural Revolution, with particular focus on those who

became victims of labor camps such as Jiabiangou and the ways all and sundry lives were left to rot and ruin after. In a 2014 documentary on Taiwan New Cinema, *Flowers of Taipei*, Wang briefly laments Mainland Chinese cinema with the provocation that “there [are] no people,” and in many respects it is this problematic that his cinema exists to correct. Indeed, while the two definitive modes of Wang's career thus far mentioned above clearly articulate this, the films that fall in between do so in ways that reify this interest all the more so in the anonymous homeless (*Man With No Name* [2010]), refugees (*Ta'ang* [2016]), rural lives of children (*Three Sisters, Alone* [2012–3]) and mentally ill (*Til Madness Do Us Part* [2013]). In all respects, the director's works are rooted in, as French film scholar Georges Didi-Huberman puts it, “observing, studying, respecting, and finally admiring [people] exercising their intelligence and their experience in the fight for existence with very little help.” *Man in Black* is a distinct and specific expression of this project in the “historical oppression” lens, at once rhyming with Wang's portrait of artist Gao Ertai, *Beauty Lives in Freedom* (2018), and its record of a life that took flight, while also displaying evocative formal and sonic flourishes not seen since works such as *The Ditch* (2010) and the short *Brutality Factory* (2007).

*Man in Black* takes as its focus the fight for existence of classical composer Wang Xilin, and violence that he endured during the Cultural Revolution, as he repressed and eventually came to find avenues of expression for his artistic impulses in minor rebellions against the strictures of hegemonic control. In contrast to many of the Wang works mentioned previously, this new film is a considerably tighter, more blistering, and provocative affair. It also only lasts a mere 60 minutes: Wang Xilin appears nude, on a stage, for stretches, taking on positions and voicing sounds made during his struggle sessions, which are then interrupted by either performances of his musical pieces or interviews in which he discusses his life, the historical setting and experience, and the inspiration each brought to bear on the music in question, as recordings of his musical pieces aggressively swell over and suffuse the sound design of the film. Much as *Brutality Factory* exists as a work of memory and specters in an industrial setting which bears within itself the history of this violence, *Man in Black* sees Wang Xilin offer a literally naked portrait of what his existence as a performer is like, as the stage of the film's rundown French theater



remembers the suffering that every stage his work plays on becomes a host for in the performance of his and his nation's pain. It's a notion the film powerfully expresses, formally, in its closing moments, as a shot of Wang Xilin ambling in circles on the stage spirals up and around the theater to finally fix and conclude on a shot of him looking down at the same stage, presumably at himself, and what he cannot but relive. It is a striking and stirring end that underscores an impressionistic dynamism not commonly witnessed in Wang's oeuvre, given as it has been (particularly in recent times) to distended, protracted rhythms of repetition, spoken memory, and silent pain.

In his *InRO* review of *Youth (Spring)*, Noel Oakshot concluded with the idea that Wang is currently in a state of "abdication" as an artist, "retreating to the same subjects with no change in orientation," due to struggles with censorship. As the opening here may suggest, this writer sees these subjects as having always been Wang's only subjects, the variable being the ways in which the director finds in the historic the modern and the modern the historic. To risk what may be pure, spurious anecdote and conjecture, it is understood that Wang no longer resides in China but France, works almost exclusively with foreign producers to skirt State censorship, and visits purely for filming purposes. In this sense, it's hard not to see in the figure of *Man in Black*'s Wang Xilin (who now lives in Germany) — or, indeed, *Beauty Lives in Freedom*'s Gao Ertai (who fled China for the US) — surrogates for a dilemma that the director may find himself to be in as an artist: the search to find the people of his home, to record their memories and erect monuments to their fights for existence, and how it's led him away from that home all the more, left him circling the stage and oriented wholeheartedly towards his only subjects and the ways he may express them. There are definite concerns to be gleaned from this film and others by Wang, including his particular reliance on foreign finance and how it's limited certain of his works to the confines of art exhibitions, as well as the political ostracization that could be construed as a kind of diasporic and ideological navel-gazing. But what *Man in Black* underscores — just as any Wang film does — is that there is power in an unwavering orientation toward keeping memory alive and maintaining a faith in the truth spoken and experiences endured by *people*, as much today as in the past, who have been made to fight for their existence. —

**MATT McCracken**

## NO LOVE LOST

Erwan Le Duc

A deceptive airiness courses through *No Love Lost*, the sophomore feature from Erwan Le Duc —, which follows his 2019's equally quaint and whimsical *The Bare Necessity* (2019). That earlier film, which was stylistically memorable for its eccentric cast and bucolic images, chronicled the unlikely romance between the police chief of a sleepy French town and his free-spirited carjacking victim. Both Pierre (the chief, played by Swann Arlaud) and Juliette (Maud Wyler) were oddballs nestled within an equally idiosyncratic wider ecosystem whose assortment of exotica — World War II reenactors, nudist colonies, a lonely hearts radio show — helped embellish the film's loose sensibilities, a riff on Wes Anderson that was more authentically Gallic than *The French Dispatch* could hope to be.

With *No Love Lost*, Le Duc retains this looseness of style, but his principal concerns have taken a more somber turn. The film's central conceit is of loss so, sudden and irreversible, that it affords no explanation and leaves a lifetime of self-doubt in its wake. In place of Arlaud's doe-eyed physiognomy comes Nahuel Pérez-Biscayart, as Étienne, an young and aspiring footballer who falls for Valérie (Mercedes Dassy), a feisty climate protestor. Their elopement and whirlwind romance are consecrated in the film's first ten minutes or so, frenetically cut and assembled as a montage of kisses, gazes, and Parisian boulevards. Drunk on its initial vitality, *No Love Lost* quickly sobers up when, after the birth of the couple's daughter, Rosa, Valérie drops her off at Étienne's and drives away, never to come back. Étienne, remarkably, doesn't quite stumble through the fallout as he raises Rosa with dogged determination, even as his eyes nurse that same unquiet melancholy fifteen years later.

The elements of parody are less prominent in *No Love Lost*, despite their prevailing signature in the quirky, laidback world of its characters. Once a lanky heartthrob, Étienne now works as a provincial coach for a periodically losing football team, shouting quasi-intellectual words of encouragement on the pitch as he elsewhere struggles to stave off his obsolescence. Rosa (Céleste Brunnquell), now a typical teenager with typical teenage woes, contends with leaving her childhood home, her father, and perhaps even her boyfriend, Youssef (Mohammed Louridi), as she



heads off to art college. But she's most worried about the void in Étienne's heart, which she suspects even she and his new flame, Hélène (*The Bare Necessity's* Wyler), can't quite fill. Her suspicions come true one evening when Étienne glances over at the television only to glimpse Valérie in a surfing report. A ghost haunting the coast of Portugal and the pixels in Étienne's hazy memory, Valérie marks the crucial absence which tinges the frames of the living, and her reemergence brings back all the bitterness and crippling silence of lovers lost to scorn.

Frustratingly for some, *No Love Lost* indulges neither in overt sentimentality nor in insulating its slapstick world from sympathy. The result, then, is a drawn-out negotiation of rules and responsibilities for everyone, especially the jovial yet fragile single father, who's yet to settle the many affairs of his heart. But while this languid pacing does result in the film's predictable finale, it doesn't detract from establishing a curiously contrapuntal rhythm to the stereotypical melodrama that many a French production has retained in silent bondage to the dramedy's realist conventions. Especially refreshing is Biscayart's screen presence — even if it's also sometimes exaggerated. The actor makes for — as a dynamic lead, who seamlessly conveyings both levity and sadness, and convincingly passing himself off for less than half of his age thanks to his boyish features. Like Le Duc's misleadingly palatable aesthetic, this simple feature belies a poignant truth about love: sometimes, not having it is better than having loved

but not quite lost; or, for a quick death is preferable to a slow, stunted life in decay. — **MORRIS YANG**

## **L'ABBÉ PIERRE — A CENTURY OF DEVOTION** Frédéric Tellier

Priest, politician, resistance fighter, and social worker Abbé Pierre remains one of France's most popular figures, best known for founding Emmaus, a charity movement with the aim of eradicating homelessness. Frédéric Tellier is the latest director to attempt to capture the broad and vivid life of Pierre (here played by Benjamin Lavernhe), cramming almost every one of his life's pivotal moments into the film — from his exile from the Capuchin order to his parliamentary speeches in the early days of French Reconstruction, all the way to the final moments of his life. Historical breadth seems to be a feature of modern biographical films, and it's something that can potentially be done well — Terence Davies' recent *Benediction*, for example — but sadly, it doesn't work here. Tellier fumbles this poorly paced, repetitive film by indulging narrative loops that quickly wear you down and result in more of a boring slog than a captivating portrait of Pierre's political and spiritual struggles.

In the first act of *A Century of Devotion*, we're shown Pierre's life during WWII, first in combat with soldiers, then as a priest. during a section that features some of the clumsiest edited action in a long time, all blurry wide-angle shots and shaky



camerawork making everything indistinguishable — and then finally, as an underground resistance fighter. It's there that he meets his lifelong comrade and organizing partner, Lucie Coutaz (Emmanuelle Bercot), who helps him forge his new identity, shedding his previous name (Henri Groues) to become Abbé Pierre. These moments, which include references to the occupation of France and the Holocaust, seem oddly glazed over. No doubt, the despair and suffering which Pierre witnessed alongside his fights against fascism shaped many of the beliefs that he carried with him, but the film treats them as little more than obligatory trivia.

A vast majority of *A Century of Devotion* focuses on the 1950s, when Pierre and Lucie began their work tackling the ravaging epidemic of homelessness in postwar France. Eventually, the film snowballs into swiftly paced montage and even delves into Baz Luhrmann-esque split-screen territory, which sees Pierre explore his newfound stardom through a cycle of assembly hall speeches against the French government, seeking support for his program to end homelessness. It's a strange, almost laughable departure from the rest of the film's dry and color-drained aesthetics, yet for a moment it's injected with a much needed dose of vitality; this style of impressionistic collage showcasing Pierre's monumental rise to fame could have been a technique better utilized for a longer period of time. But Tellier seems so dedicated to depicting Pierre's life in a strict chronological order that he affords the film little room for experimentation. Although there are strange bookended scenes which show Pierre on some celestial plane, floating in the sky as he ponders if he has worked hard enough, they mostly feel like cobbled together attempts at surrealism rather than anything truly fleshed out.

Throughout Tellier's film, there are moments that try to capture poetic beauty: Pierre gives us confessional narration that questions the notions of existence or faith while scenes of nature play out on screen. The problem is that these instances amount only to a superficial examination of faith, especially when Pierre's spirituality provides mostly just background texture; consequently, many images feel like little more than a botched facsimile of Terrence Malick's aesthetic, and land without any emotional engagement. Considering that this is a film about a man who was staunchly dedicated to fighting

poverty and social injustice, this lack has a tendency of tempering that radicalism. There is virtually no mention of Pierre's denouncement of the Popular Republican Movement (a French Christian democratic party) which led him to joining the Christian socialist movement (the word socialism is seldom even uttered). This juxtaposition — the spiritual vs. the political — feels ripe for exploration, but it simply isn't unpacked much here. And considering Pierre's battles against the Vatican, and his involvement with popular movements like liberation theology, it feels like an odd choice to spend so much time watching the man repeat a handful of speeches, with little discernible difference beyond his increasing age. The film does, however, depict the time Pierre met an aging Charlie Chaplin (who donated money to his cause), and it's arguably its high point.

The scenery in *A Century of Devotion* consists of sweeping landscape shots of rural France and huge, crowded halls, but the film's visual design is nonetheless often drab. There's little attention paid to crafting beautiful compositions, and the camera is constantly moving, never holding onto any moment for longer than strictly necessary. On top of all that, there are a number of bizarre aesthetic choices here, one of which involves footage of real world events being sporadically dropped into the film, such as the Hiroshima bombing, which has almost no obvious relevance to the plot. Tellier amplifies this frustrating inclination at the end of film, when he cuts from the narrative — which has ended — and moves into modern-day footage of housing insecure folks; it's a scene that is clearly, clumsily, supposed to remind viewers that Pierre's work isn't finished. However, the overbearing synth music and surveillance-style camerawork somehow make the whole thing feel far more predatory — more liberal gawking than genuine compassion. It's an unfortunate final maneuver that leaves a lingering bad taste in one's mouth, and doesn't do any favors to a film that, while ultimately inoffensive, is hamstrung by its bloated length and fairly boring approach to biography. — **OLIVER PARKER**

---

## CREATURA

### Elena Martín Gimeno

Elena Martín Gimeno is the director, co-writer, and star of *Creatura*, a somewhat oddly titled film. When Mila (Gimeno) and





her partner find themselves unable to have sex during a period of stay at Mila's childhood home, the situation leads to the couple's estrangement. Mila then develops a rash, exacerbating issues of physical intimacy, while her partner is unwilling to address the underlying emotional problems of the relationship. Throughout *Creatura*, Mila flashes back to various points in her childhood, and we witness a similar pattern of shame and physical reaction as that taking place between her and her partner now. Often we see men, sometimes Mila's own father, express their discomfort with Mila's sexuality, followed by her developing a rash. Given the title of this work, and the plethora of horror tropes that have been used to articulate struggles of female sexuality throughout film history, a viewer may expect something similar to take shape here. And there are indeed a few motifs in *Creatura* that hint at various familiar mythologies: in the throes of passion, Mila sometimes bites the neck of her partner; she not only lives near the sea, but also often seems drawn to the water in other ways as well. Ultimately, though Gimeno's film is simpler than that: it's about a woman who breaks out into hives, quite literally, when she is unable to fully express or explore her sexuality.

That virtually implied misdirection becomes a bit of a double-edged sword for *Creatura*. On one hand, Gimeno's teasing of vague genre gestures can become frustrating; on the other, this film's subtlety does feel welcome. By keeping the physical manifestation of Mila's sexual frustration grounded, more emphasis is placed on her mental state — because one isn't distracted by thinking about how the rashes are hinting at

something more mysterious. It's unfortunate, then, that there isn't more propping all of this up. The actors who play Mila as a child are generally winning and impetuous, but Gimeno's interpretation comes off as more impassive. Though it's clear she's unable to talk about her sexuality because she wasn't given the tools to do so as a child, it's less interesting to watch her flail around as an adult than it is to watch her youthful attempts at opening up. Not only do these patterns of inhibition from childhood persist, but she also seems less equipped to deal with them in adulthood. Similarly, while the film is perfectly handsome with its gliding camera and compositions of beautiful beaches, its overarching visual design, much like Gimeno's performance, is too flat to enhance its themes or clarify discursive import of its flashbacks.

On the other end of the spectrum, Gimeno's presentation of Mila's relationship with her parents is the film's high point. Both actors playing her father Gerard convey this man's struggles differentiating affection from inappropriate intimacy, which Mila more explicitly confronts with him as an adult. His attempt at healing toward the end of the film is moving in its clumsiness, and it's also during this stretch that Mila begins to renew her relationship with her mother. It becomes clear that some of her memories of her mother may have been incomplete, and a bid toward healing is seen in Mila allowing only her mother to physically help alleviate her rashes.

Though *Creatura* is a film *about* discomfort with sex, it is not itself uncomfortable with it. Its sex scenes — including a fairly

lengthy one in which the conflict between Mila and her partner first surfaces — are shot frankly, and the portrayals of childhood and adolescent sexuality are equally unabashed. It's a relief, even without considering recent discourse on the necessity of sex scenes, to find a film in which sex can be uncomfortable without being violent, and that room is left for tenderness even in confusion. — **JESSE CATHERINE WEBBER**

## TIGER STRIPES

Amanda Nell Eu

In *Tiger Stripes*, Amanda Nell Eu's debut feature, a trio of twelve-year-old girls contend with the sudden and inexplicable physical changes that occur inside one member of their group. Reactions range from surprise and sympathy to disgust and jealousy, frequently interspersed within the same incongruent frames. The elders in the girls' village, similarly, coax and castigate the youths equally under an umbrella of conservative superstition. Strip away the bodily horror and mythological subtext, however, and what underpins this refreshing, if somewhat frustrating, work is a narrative of childhood and growing up whose register oscillates wildly between animated vibrancy and whimsical levity.

For twelve-year-old Zaffan (Zafreen Zairizal), growing up has always meant some kind of uneasy negotiation between the various institutions that surround her. At her rural Malaysian school, a respect for authority is paramount in all interactions between staff and students, even as a streak of preteen rebellion peeks its head out from time to time. Within the larger societal context of patriarchal, *tudung*-clad religiosity, Zaffan's clandestine TikTok dances in the school's bathroom provide gleeful and temporary respite from a strident yet matter-of-fact way of life. That way of life is shared by Zaffan with her friends, Farah (Deena Ezral) and Mariam (Piqa), and is rather calm and uneventful — at least until the night when Zaffan gets her first period. Almost immediately afterward, the world around her changes: she's excused from daily prayers, which her friends first envy her for, and then shun her because of; her senses become more attuned to the living beings around her, including possibly supernatural ones; and, when stranger symptoms begin to show, there's little understanding for her predicament to be found in the wider community, much less acceptance.

Zaffan's physical changes are compounded by a tantalizing blurring of the lines between the natural and supernatural worlds. There is a persistent, though sparse, presence of folkloric elements in the urban legends that are traded amongst the girls — and that preoccupation comes to fruition once Zaffan undergoes a gradual but pronounced metamorphosis into a tigrine hybrid of whiskers, claws, and tail. In fact, much of what's natural here overlaps with the supernatural domain: the film's lush cinematography, courtesy of Jimmy Gimferrer, underscores the impenetrable beauty of the surrounding jungle, which is unspoiled and untampered by rational civilization. But equally, civilization holds the supernatural's proxy — here manifested as a wild and primal Zaffan — within its controlling sight, its regimental structures first enlisting parental authority, then the help of a self-proclaimed exorcist, to restrain what is otherwise unfamiliar to it.

The seamless blend of folklore and realism both hampers and distinguishes *Tiger Stripes* from a genre frequently ridiculed for its clumsy exaggerations of the former; think corny jump-scares expedited by woebegone *pontianak* spirits, which Eu defiantly resists in her measured and peripheral treatment of the locale's spookier elements. While the film's tonal ambiguity (a result of situating its POV as being through the girls' playful eyes) lends itself more to the imaginative than the didactic, this also translates to a glaring absence of narrative momentum, leaving viewers waiting for the inevitable transformation without quite following the reasons behind it. Unlike more conventional body horror fare — such as Julia Ducournau's cannibalistic *Raw* — *Tiger Stripes* boasts an even more impressionistic mélange of sequences, from smartphone medleys of bra tryouts and school bullying to implicit discourse on racial and sexual hierarchies, which reward only as much as they color the specific milieu within which the film's youthful characters occupy. Coupled with a funky synth soundtrack in uncanny matrimony with the otherwise tranquil landscape, *Tiger Stripes'* mise-en-scène proves simultaneously enthralling and somnolent, much like the lead performances, which are especially compelling in the context of Eu's childhood vignettes, but also shy away from coherence when juxtaposed against the larger picture. This is a vivid enough depiction, but it could use more meat. — **MORRIS YANG**





## ***SPIDER-MAN: ACROSS THE SPIDER-VERSE*** Joaquim Dos Santos, Kemp Powers, & Justin K. Thompson

In a movie landscape dense with stodgy prequels, unremarkable sequels, and remakes that nobody asked for, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* is that rare thing: a palpably joyous second installment in a franchise that, far from overstaying its welcome, is only just warming up. It's not so much a breath of fresh air as a life-sustaining *gust*, and it's hard to think of a better way to spend an afternoon at the movies than buoying along in its slipstream.

2018's *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* introduced audiences to Miles Morales (Shameik Moore), an Afro-Latino kid from Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn bit by a radioactive spider while graffitiing an abandoned subway tunnel. Unlike Batman, Miles has two loving parents: Jefferson (Brian Tyree Henry), a cop about to get promoted to Captain, and Rio (Luna Lauren Vélez), a nurse. Both are loving and kind, if understandably frustrated by their son's slipperiness. Neither is Miles a shunned mutant like the X-Men, nor an alien creature like Superman. But there is something (else) that makes him different from all the humans in his life — and as well, something that sets him apart from all the other Spider-Men he keeps bumping into. As Miles discovers, the spider that bit him was actually from a different universe. It wasn't

meant for him. His entire Spider-Man alter ego was never supposed to happen. And yet...enter multiverse.

This conceit — that Miles is one of a near-infinite number of Spider-Mans, all fighting crime in their own cozy little slice of the universe — is a storytelling gold mine. The deeper you dig, the more there is to find. Directors Joaquim Dos Santos, Kemp Powers, and Justin K. Thompson have fashioned from familiar comic-book lore and a fifty-year old franchise an entry that's every bit as hyperactive, dizzying, and kinetically imaginative as our chronically online, ADHD-riddled brains. Memes, easter eggs, and snippets of pop culture from the Renaissance to, like, yesterday all put in an appearance, if only you can spot them from the thicket of references unfolding onscreen. Visually, the movie revels in gorgeous montages of Miles zipping around the city in a perpetual golden hour, splashing through water towers and vaulting across above ground subways. When night finally falls, characters are traced in glitchy, chromatic lines that pulse as if transmitting 2D heartbeats. Even everyday textures, from the glossy hood of Miles' Spider-Man costume to the grimy taped-up posters on his bedroom walls, are recognizable but amped, thrillingly hyper-real.

*Into the Spider-Verse* is set about a year after the first installment of the series. This Miles is a bit taller, and quietly in the throes of mourning the twin losses of Uncle Aaron

(Mahershala Ali) and Gwen Stacy (Hailee Steinfeld). He's also — much like this movie itself — stronger, quippier, and more confident. He can't always make it to his guidance counselor appointments, but he handles run-of-the-mill baddies with a dismissive sneer. The only one who's evaded his web so far is The Spot (Jason Schwartzman), an ex-scientist named Jonathan Ohnn who resembles a walking inkblot, if each stain were a portal to another dimension. He might not be the most menacing nemesis we've ever seen, but definitely don't call him a villain of the week.

Luckily, an interdimensional cleanup club (er, "elite strike force") known as the Spider-Crew was formed to round up stragglers and wrangle them back to their home universe. They're led by the stone-faced "ninja vampire" Spider-Man 2099 Miguel O'Hara (Oscar Isaac), the straight-talking and heavily pregnant Spider-Woman Jessica Drew (Issa Rae), and Spider-Punk (Daniel Kaluuya), a cockney lout named Hobie who looks like the unholy love child of Sid Vicious and Basquiat. Unlike the ragtag gang of optimists that banded together at the end of *Into the Spider-Verse* — Spider-Ham, anyone? — this team is older and tougher, with a lot more to lose and significantly less patience.

For Gwen, their newest and youngest member, slipping away from the squad for a quick sojourn to Bed-Stuy is a harmless bit of hooky. How else is she supposed to stoke the "will they, won't they" tension and hang underneath the Williamsburg Savings Bank like a sleek blonde gargoyle? But for the crew, it's unforgivable. Especially when Miles, visiting Pavitr Prabhakar (Karan Soni) in delightfully riotous Mumbattan (yes, the traffic's terrible), saves a police captain from what was supposed to be certain death. It turns out the universe, already delicate since the team played fast and loose with space and time in the first movie, is connected by no more than gossamer threads of canonical storylines that replicate across every universe. And by snipping one of those threads, as Miles did when he saved Captain Singh, the entire known universe is now in danger of collapsing like a house of cards. And the only way to repair it is to let the canon in his own universe — the one involving his father, Captain Morales — play out unchecked.

This sets up a delicious moral dilemma, while letting *Across the Spider-Verse* — an upstart entry in a well-established franchise —

break its own, already tenuous, fourth wall. This particular quandary, but also the entire movie in which it's set, is what happens when someone who knows the canon inside and out decides that maybe it's not that important after all: guideline, not gospel. What's the worst that could happen? We'll have to wait for the sequel, slated for 2024, to find out. But now might be a good time to evoke another example of morality turned monstrous: Gotham's Harvey Dent, who famously said, "you either die young or live long enough to see yourself become the villain." Miles might think he knows which side he falls on, and maybe he does. There's just all the other versions of him to contend with. —

**SELINA LEE**

**DIRECTOR:** Joaquim Dos Santos, Kemp Powers, & Justin K. Thompson; **CAST:** Shameik Moore, Hailee Steinfeld, Oscar Isaac, Jake Johnson; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Sony Pictures; **IN THEATERS:** June 2; **RUNTIME:** 2 hr. 20 min.

## **THE BOOGEYMAN**

Rob Savage

One of the things that Rob Savage's *The Boogeyman* has going for it is that it's often too dark to see what's happening. That's not being flippant — okay, it is a little, but it's also an aesthetic choice which serves the film well. Based on a Stephen King short story first published in 1973, *The Boogeyman* makes manifest the ill-defined yet universally understood presence of the film's title





that exists in the minds of small children, hiding in their closets, crawling under their beds, and necessitating a nightlight. It's a form of terror intrinsically tied to the sense of the unknown, and in turning the conceit into a typical creature feature, it presents something of a problem once the monster — a computer-generated nasty primarily defined by its long spindly arms and exposed teeth — is drawn into the light and revealed in its underwhelming form. So the film avoids doing so for as long as humanly possible, employing deep shadows for cover, obscuring our vantage point by utilizing reflective surfaces or indicating the creature's presence by reducing it to a pair of beady, photoluminescent eyes peering out from the dark. It's an appreciably low-tech approach that props up this otherwise derivative fright factory longer than it should.

“ There's still much to admire in Savage's direction... [He] brings an independent filmmaker's sense of ingenuity to a big studio assignment.

When we meet the Harper family, they're still grieving the recent death of the family's matriarch in a car accident. Dad, Will (Chris Messina), is a therapist who plies his practice out the family's home yet can't bring himself to talk to his two daughters about their shared sadness. Moody adolescent Sadie (Sophie Thatcher of *Yellowjackets*) clings to her mother's memory, strolling through her art gallery, pawing through her belongings, and wearing her dresses to school, where she struggles to ingratiate herself to a clique of mean girls. And then there's tween Sawyer (Vivien Lyra Blair), who still sleeps with the lights on and asks her dad to search her bedroom for monsters every night before she goes to sleep. One day, while the girls are at school, a drawn-looking man named Lester Billings (character actor and “twitchy guy” extraordinaire, David Dastmalchian) makes an unscheduled appearance at the Harpers' door, pleading for the good doctor Will to speak with him. Lester, we learn, has lost multiple children in relatively quick succession and believes a malevolent force is responsible for their deaths. He comes armed with a drawing of the creature which, along with his shaky demeanor, doesn't make

Will any less concerned, leading him to sneak away to phone the police. While Will is downstairs making a call, unaware that Sadie has come home early from school, Lester sneaks off to a closet and appears to hang himself — although not before trashing the art gallery and putting up a loud fight against... *something*.

In the grand tradition of gypsy curses, monkey paws, and evil video tapes, Lester — through his actions — has foisted the evil manifestation which tormented him and his family onto the unwitting Harpers. Attracted to sadness and vulnerability (yes, this is yet another horror film that's not-so-secretly about trauma), repelled by light and possessing the uncanny ability to mimic the voice of those it comes into contact with — an unnerving instance of the creature toying with its prey, even imitating deceased loved ones, that the film largely squanders — the monster sets up residence in Sawyer's closet, its presence denoted by black mold-like markings creeping across the walls. With the nightly encounters escalating (and increasingly less open to interpretation or claims that it's all in a scared young girl's head) Sadie begins to investigate Lester's fantastical story, breaking into his dilapidated, although not quite abandoned, home in search of answers on how to rid herself of a menace which is literally trying to drain her family of their life force before killing them and moving on to another household.

Starting with its generic title on down, there's something rather boilerplate to how this film's been conceived. Adapted by Mark Heyman and the writing team of Scott Beck and Bryan Woods (the latter two knowing plenty about fraught family dynamics and crummy-looking ghoulies, having written the first *A Quiet Place*), *The Boogeyman* retains many of King's more irksome tendencies, including marginalizing his adult characters (Messina inexplicably disappears for half the film, despite most of it taking place in the middle of the night in his home) and embracing a squishy spirituality. There is, thankfully, no Lovecraftian mythology or attempts to explore the monster's physiology; it's merely a nondescript evil that can appear anywhere at any time (assuming the lighting conditions are suitable) and induce a jump scare or twenty. But the film's stabs at exploring grief are at best glancing and at worst a cynical attempt to latch onto a horror trend which has long overstayed its welcome. It paints Messina's psychiatrist as a particularly ineffectual figure — as both a therapist and a father to two heartbroken children —

without really considering his motivations, while Thatcher's attempts to come to terms with her mother's death keep running headlong into almost comically outsized bullies at school (another moldy King trope).

And yet, in the spirit of it's the singer not the song, there's still much to admire in Savage's direction. A British filmmaker whose most recent films, *Host* and *Dashcam*, were pandemic-shot exercises in desktop cinema and found footage, respectively, Savage brings an independent filmmaker's sense of ingenuity to a big studio assignment. His *Boogeyman* makes fine use of off-screen space, inhuman sound design, and misdirection of our eyes to wring scares out of a familiar scenario. An early sequence set in a child psychiatrist's office, where Sawyer is attempting to overcome her fear of the dark, introduces a maniacal, flashing hellfire red light that reveals the monster in fleeting glimpses as it crawls down from the ceiling. A later scene finds Sawyer playing video games on a large HD TV while sitting in the dark, illuminating the creature in the screen's reflection as it attempts to sneak up behind her by triggering colorful combat that fills the room with light (if one must integrate product placement into a production, this is the way to do it). The film's central conceit repeatedly forces the viewer to search out the darkness for dangers, teleporting us back to a time when a pile of clothing at the foot of the bed might have been something that would reach out and try and eat you. If the film overdoes the gag of something lunging out from the shadows, accompanied by a scare sting on the soundtrack —

which, to be clear, it very much does — it can't be denied that it remains remarkably effective. *The Boogeyman* doesn't amount to much more than a haunted house ride, but that doesn't mean the approach is without its own rewards. — **ANDREW DIGNAN**

**DIRECTOR:** Rob Savage; **CAST:** Sophie Thatcher, Chris Messina, David Dastmalchian; **DISTRIBUTOR:** 20th Century Studios; **IN THEATERS:** June 2; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 38 min.

## ANONYMOUS SISTER

Jamie Boyle

The central message behind Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign in 1982 was this: if an individual could say no to drugs, there were other individuals who willingly agreed to them. If the addict could be blamed for their illness, pharmaceutical companies and the carceral state were officially off the hook for their complicity in the opioid crisis. As Michelle Alexander writes in *The New Jim Crow*, the story of addiction in America also tells the story of "who is viewed as disposable — someone to be purged from the body politic — and who is not." Purdue Pharma's introduction of OxyContin helped justify the state's incarceration of marginalized communities, and in return, they were given the impunity to sell highly addictive prescription drugs for profit. Oxycontin was introduced in 1995. Now, in 2023, it was just announced that the Sackler family will be shielded from potential lawsuits as part of a six billion dollar settlement. But the opioid crisis continues, and so do the devastating effects it leaves on

## PADRE PIO

Abel Ferrara

"His latest outing, *Padre Pio*, could be characterized as a return to a pre-tech-anxiety period for the Bronx-born filmmaker, who moved from New York to Rome two decades ago, fed up with the rapid gentrification of his beloved city, as well as continuing difficulty with finding funding for his projects in America. While he never abandoned the unflinching interiority of his early films, there was a noticeable outward turn around the beginning of the new millennium. Ferrara's characters no longer just grappled with their inner lives and immediate surroundings, but saw their turmoil projected onto the world at large. *Padre Pio* trims that scope, although the grim sense of foreboding that has been a staple of his late-career work remains very much intact." — **FRED BARRETT**  
[Published as part of InRO's Venice International Film Festival 2022 coverage.]

**DIRECTOR:** Abel Ferrara; **CAST:** Shia LaBeouf; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Gravitas Ventures; **IN THEATERS:** June 2; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 44 min.





between the personal and the systemic refuses Purdue Pharma the comfortable luxury of distance for their role in destroying families like Boyle's. As clinical and cruel as the language of medicine and business both are, *Anonymous Sister* wants viewers to remember the humanity

millions of families.

Jamie Boyle's documentary *Anonymous Sister* is a searingly visceral and personal look at how the filmmaker's mother and sister were affected by prescription opioids. The maniacal claws of the Sackler family are in many cultural and artistic institutions — it is impossible to tell a story of addiction without acknowledging their presence. But Boyle's documentary starts small and pure — a few home videos of a family and their young children playing in the backyard. These children are Jamie and her sister, Jordan, when they were just toddlers. It is 1996 in Colorado. Elsewhere, far away from the family home, Purdue Pharma has released a drug that both Jordan and Boyle's mother, Julie, will get addicted to within the decade. The first time that Boyle names Purdue Pharma is also when she rewinds her documentary back to these home videos, and in doing so, powerfully corrupting the love and nostalgia that they supposedly invoke. Not even Boyle's memories of childhood happiness are safe from the destruction that the Sackler family has caused.

*Anonymous Sisters* is a fairly standard documentary — there are rarely any aesthetic embellishments to Boyle's direction — but its brilliance lies in its familial intimacy and lived-in closeness. Jordan and Julie are addicts, and they are not disposable. In a culture which views addiction as a wilful abnegation of life, Boyle's documentary shines a light on people who desperately want to live. *Anonymous Sisters* mostly comprises a series of home videos that are interspersed with interviews with experts on addiction and evidence of Purdue Pharma's complicity in perpetuating the opioid crisis. The film's frequent contrast

of addicts. But Boyle also turns the documentary's introspection onto her experience as someone with loved ones who are addicts, and this is shown when Boyle's father abruptly pauses his interview to tell her that she has had a nervous breakdown because of Jordan and Julia.

"I didn't really include that in the film," Boyle replies. The documentary then follows with a voiceover of Boyle listing all the mental illnesses that she has been diagnosed with. Boyle isn't an addict, but the opioid crisis, as the film makes clear, also paved the way for other disorders to flourish. A harrowing moment in *Anonymous Sister* comes toward the end, when it is revealed that one of Boyles' interviewees, a woman named Kayla Carter who has struggled with addiction, has passed away. While the film's title is reminiscent of *Narcotics Anonymous*, it is also a defiant ode to the addicts who are seen as expendable statistics; *Anonymous Sisters* explicitly names Jordan and Julie, and by extension, boldly names all the stories of addicts who have been silenced by shame and fear. — **SHAR TAN**

**DIRECTOR:** Jamie Boyle; **CAST:** —; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Long Shot Factory; **IN THEATERS:** June 2; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 34 min.

## **THE HOLE IN THE FENCE** Joaquin del Paso

There's something rotten at the heart of the Mexican elite, so says writer-director Joaquin del Paso in his new film, *The Hole in the Fence*. Students at Los Pinos, a Catholic school for the preteen sons of the powerful monied class, have converged on the outskirts of a small village for what is ostensibly a spiritual

## PAST LIVES

Celine Song

"Unfortunately, a solid story hook is about all *Past Lives* amounts to, lacking as it does any robust cinematic interest. To be sure, the film has any number of competently, even pleasingly framed shots. Unlike Hong Sang-soo's *in water*, say, every shot in *Past Lives* is properly in focus. Occasionally, the film even includes sequences that convey narrative information without the use of dialogue (!), which some will put forward as evidence that Song, a playwright, truly understands the medium she is working in. No, the issue is not that *Past Lives* fails at any effect it strives for, but rather that it doesn't strive for any effects worth having. This is all the more irksome as the basic premise opens a bevy of compelling possibilities." — **LAWRENCE GARCIA** [*Published as part of InRO's Berlinale 2023 coverage.*]

**DIRECTOR:** Celine Song; **CAST:** Greta Lee, Teo Yoo, John Magaro; **DISTRIBUTOR:** A24; **IN THEATERS:** June 2; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 46 min.

retreat. In actuality, it's an emotionally abusive gauntlet designed to harden these future power-brokers into class warriors, teaching them to fear and despise the disenfranchised, the poor, the powerless. These hateful, petulant boys will someday grow into men and be placed in positions to make or otherwise influence policy — a proposition that terrifies del Paso. The filmmaker, working with co-writer Lucy Pawlak, starts small, carefully charting the everyday homophobia and racism that spews freely from the boys' mouths, as well as the carefully calculated manipulations of the adults charged with their care; the boys are not to leave the manicured grounds of the camp, as the village (we are told) is replete with violence. There are murderers, rapists, and kidnappers just beyond the electrified fence that surrounds the compound, and to venture beyond it is forbidden.

Within the confines of the camp, the only thing worse than being called "gay" is being singled out as an outsider. That ignominious designation belongs to Eduardo (Yubah Ortega), a dark-skinned boy who attends the camp thanks to a scholarship. His peers —

most of them light-skinned, with blonde hair and blue eyes — taunt him mercilessly, occasionally escalating from verbal to physical attacks. His only friend is Joaquin (Licciano Kurti), himself the frequent victim of jeers. There's also Diego (Eric David Walker), a victim of some undisclosed violent accident prior to the film's start that has left him with a broken arm, a neck brace, and in need of crutches. He's under the care of Edwin (Raúl Vasconcelos), a nervous, nebbishy type clad in paramedic gear and who harbors his own dark secrets.

There are other adults present, of course, but del Paso makes clear that these are not clueless, distant educators who are simply unaware of the boys' behaviors, but active participants in this theater of cruelty. Professor Monteros (Enrique Lascrain) is the most authoritative of the bunch, leading the group in frequent prayers, but also cruelly manipulating the weakest of the bunch. Professor Tanaka (Takahiro Murokawa) at first appears to be a kind of "cool" teacher, the sort you'd want to be friends with, but this too is merely a facade. These "educators" are acutely aware that they are forging these boys into men, which means constant surveillance and a bevy of psychological games designed to turn them against each other.

The titular hole is one of these games; the boys come across a gap in the electrified fencing and are prodded by the adults into believing that the dredges of the village now have access to the camp grounds. While it serves a literal narrative function, the hole also becomes a symbolic gesture — a sort of boundary into the unknown. The film walks a fine line with this sort of thing, vacillating between realism and heavy metaphor. Things occasionally threaten to take a turn toward the surreal, or even into outright horror (others have compared the film to the works of Ari Aster and Michael Haneke, although this seems like a stretch). But del Paso opts to keep things mostly naturalistic; several terrible things happen, but they are either alluded to or kept largely offscreen. There's a nagging sense of being fed a thesis, like the filmmakers started with a polemical endpoint and then reverse-engineered a film, but there's no denying that *The Hole* is visceral enough to leave an impression in either case. As late-period capitalism, neoliberal policies, and the widening gap between the haves and have nots all proceed unabated and at a rapid clip, del Paso's angry, desperate invective can't be ignored. Increasingly, the cruelty is the point (to borrow a frequent online



## FILM *REVIEWS*

refrain), and del Paso diagnoses it with precision. One does wish there was more differentiation between the boys; only the victims get even cursory characterization, while the aggressors all blend together. But perhaps that's part of the point — they become “they,” and are fully united in their contempt for the rest of us.

### **THE ROUNDUP: NO WAY OUT**

Lee Sang-yong

Ma Dong-seok has found his niche. Last summer brought us *The Roundup*, the sequel to Ma's hit 2017 vehicle, *The Outlaws*, and here we already have the third film in that series, with a fourth ostensibly on the way (there's a preview embedded in the end credits of *No Way Out*). Apparently, Ma has designs on an additional four films to follow that one, too. The original *Roundup* film was based on a true story, but the series has evolved into action/crime films of admirable purity, each putting Ma on the trail of vicious gangsters. He's smarter than his peers, but more importantly, he's the biggest, baddest man in town. His investigations proceed thusly: find a guy, beat him up until he gives Ma the name of another guy, then find that guy and beat him up until he names the next guy, and so on, until the final boss. It's an endlessly repeatable formula because, despite the amorality of it all, it's just so much fun watching Ma at work.

The case this time revolves around a new drug on the Korean club scene: “Hiper” has been stolen from Japanese yakuza by a conglomeration of Korean and Japanese gangsters, who hope to sell it to the Chinese Triads. Ma and his team of well-meaning but almost entirely superfluous detectives take on the case after a young woman falls from a hotel window. One thing leads to another, and the cops find themselves neck deep in a series of betrayals and revenge killings taking place among the various gangs. Only Ma is tough enough, and smart enough, to figure out what exactly is going on — and to survive it.

If the *Roundup* series is defined by anything (aside from Ma's enormous presence and a winking attitude toward police brutality and due process), it's a certain degree of xenophobia. The villains in the first film are Chinese, and in the second, while the villain is a Korean preying on Koreans in Vietnam, the Vietnamese police are depicted as completely unhelpful, at best, to Ma's noble pursuit of justice. This trend continues in *No Way Out*, of course, with its yakuza and Triads causing so much trouble. But the film leavens this read through the fact that the prime mover of all the violence is Korean, and ultimately revealed to be a cop, no less. It seems doubtful that the intention here is to conflate the Korean police with yakuza and Triads — but if so, that would mark a move in a decidedly progressive direction for such a fundamentally conservative series.

### **TOPOLOGY OF SIRENS**

Jonathan Davies

“Much of what compels about *Topology of Sirens* stems from this approach to narrative and how it maps onto Davies' contemplative style. The film feels very much of a piece with Tyler Taormina's *Ham on Rye* from 2019: Taormina and Davies are part of a drone music duo, produced each other's films, and both films are gorgeously lensed by Carson Lund, but while that film adhered to a clear if powerful structural trajectory, no such net exists for *Topology*. Instead, the film feels refreshingly charged in its conviction that any situation, any encounter, can unlock another link in the chain toward comprehension.”

— **RYAN SWEN** [Published as part of *InRO's FIDMarseilles 2021 coverage*.]



**DIRECTOR:** Jonathan Davies; **CAST:** Courtney Stephens, Whitney Johnson, Jeff Kober; **DISTRIBUTOR:** MUBI; **STREAMING:** June 5; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 46 min.

Regardless, the bad cop is played by Lee Joon-hyuk, who wears sharp suits, has coiffed hair, and stares down his opponents with crazy eyes. His stylish coolness and aura of explosive menace contrasts perfectly with Ma's lumbering everyman, windbreaker ever present, constantly warning people not to get in a fight with him, then knocking them out with an exasperated single punch when they don't listen. Given Ma's blithe disregard for the civil rights of witnesses, the comparison here isn't so much good cop/bad cop as it is bad cop/much, much worse cop. The two are surrounded by the usual colorful array of schemers, punks, silent killers, and other generic punching bags, though there is also a fun featured role for Aoki Munetoka as a yakuza enforcer. If you've ever wanted to see a man slice up a hallway full of gangsters with a katana, this is the movie for you.

*Now Way Out*, like the other *Roundup* films, is built around these simple pleasures. Director Lee Sang-yong films the fights with a clarity of purpose commensurate with their base purity. Ma Dong-seok is a martial artist of power, not of acrobatics, and the choreography and camerawork reflect that. Men rush at him with weapons (knives, aluminum bats, a sword) and he punches them (in the stomach or the head). Some men get up after that first punch, but most don't. The choreography swirls around Ma, but he punctuates every movement with a decisive blow. The editing is for clarity, above all, though occasionally Lee throws us in the middle of the action, such that a sudden edit puts us on the receiving end of Ma's fist. It's terrifying and hilarious at the same time. Hit us again, big man. — **SEAN GILMAN**

**DIRECTOR:** Lee Sang-yong; **CAST:** Ma Dong-seok, Lee Jun-hyuk, Munetaka Aoki; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Capelight Pictures; **IN THEATERS:** June 2; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 45 min.

## SHOOTING STARS

Chris Robinson

So far as vanity projects go, *Shooting Stars* is a refreshingly humble affair, which is perhaps fitting for a global superstar — LeBron James — who's proven to be thoughtful and responsible with his platform. Despite operating as something of a narrowly-scoped biographical portrait — though that's largely implicit, due to the way culture consumes celebrity, and our subsequent instinct to spin any tangential narratives to a

celebutante center — the film is actually far less reliant on stardom than the insipid corporate junk that was *Space Jam: A New Legacy*. Rather than explicitly detailing its subject's rise to the status of mononym and trans-basketball ubiquity, *Shooting Stars* instead details a teenaged LeBron's (Mookie Cook) storied high school success — as well as, of course, the obstacles he faced — through the collective, as he manifests a small basketball dynasty with childhood best friends Lil Dru Joyce (Caleb McLaughlin), Sian Cotton (Khalil Everage), Willie McGee (Avery S. Willis Jr.), and Romeo Travis (Scoot Henderson, soon to be a top three NBA draft pick later this month) at St. Vincent-St. Mary's High School in early-aughts Akron, OH.

Unfortunately, *Shooting Stars'* resistance to hagiography is about the only thing refreshing about it. Produced by James — with, quite bafflingly, Terence Winter also on board — it seems clear that the film is informed by the same nostalgia and loyalty that led 'Bron back to the Cleveland Cavaliers in 2014, as a championship-rich stint in the Magic City. The focus here is on the group, with the young basketball phenom situated on the periphery in the early going, in favor of giving screen space to the volatile, chip-on-his-shoulder Lil Dru and Willie, the best basketball player of the group in their pre-high school years. It's an admirable, self-denying approach to this story, but it's all unfortunately beset by a mess of clichés and narrative reductions: there are the jealousy- and insecurity-driven interpersonal conflicts that threaten the cohesion of this *nu* "fab five"; there's a sprinkling of the bureaucratic bullshit that commodifies amateur athletes for the corporate good and punishes individual gain; and there's *just enough* familial texture — Lil Dru's dad (Wood Harris) is a coach and long-term usher of these boys' upbringings, while Willie's barely touched-upon backstory bears far more potential dramatic heft than anything else present — to engender a few light feels in the typical sports flick mode of defining its players by single, simple characteristics.

But in fairness, much (most) of those critiques are closely tethered to generic sports narratives in general rather than specific biographic portraiture of superstar monoliths of athletic prowess. The far more aggrieving issue with *Shooting Stars* is its TV commercial-level of technical skill. Director Chris Robinson adopts what at best might be called a sub-*Remember the Titans*



## FILM *REVIEWS*

approach to should-be kinetic action (or more year- and sport-specific, last month's *White Men Can't Jump* remake) and at worst registers as slightly elevated *Luck of the Irish* nonsense. All of the actors that have been gathered here are at least legitimately skilled at basketball. (Those who have played the sport know how to spot a fake — anyone remember supposed phenom Hastings Ruckle from the *Friday Night Lights* TV show?) But it's all regrettably drowned out by Robinson's oppressively and embarrassingly silly visual design. The whole thing reeks of slick commercial sheen, with basketball games shot to glaring court brightness and nearly blacked-out bleacher presence (except when we habitually cut to individual reaction shots, fully-lit), while the games themselves are riddled with endless speed ramping, often slow-motivated multiple times within the same play, even the same pass or shot. Add to that the ridiculous compositions — there are so many low angles here you might think Charles Foster Kane took up hoops — and we're left with little to do with this trumped-up, cable-TV filler.

There's not even much to do with LeBron James himself. McLaughlin is really the only performer here who shows much presence at all, chewing the screen by virtue of how narcotized everyone else seems. For his part, Cook bears a remarkable resemblance to the young Bron — but à la Demetrius Shipp Jr. as Pac in *All Eyez On Me*, the effect is largely superficial, with the character rendered personality-poor on screen. Absent any aesthetic prowess, psychological insight into one of the world's biggest stars, compelling narrative maneuvers, or meta-commentary on how we turn people into product, *Shooting Stars* has little to define it beyond generic inspo-sports rehash. The film reflects generously on the man that inspired its genesis

and his dedication to the brothers he seeks to celebrate, but in execution, that feel-goodery is less an impressive assist than the film version of a game's-end pity substitution. — **LUKE GORHAM**

**DIRECTOR:** Chris Robinson; **CAST:** Wood Harris, Mookie Cook, Caleb McLaughlin, Algee Smith; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Peacock; **STREAMING:** June 2; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 56 min.

---

### **FOLLOW HER** Sylvia Caminer

As of last year, 50 million people around the world considered themselves influencers. Whether it be a Twitch streamer playing video games, a TikTok persona dancing to the latest viral sound, or an Instagram star promoting the newest scam beauty products, influencers have irrevocably changed the Internet landscape. While there are certainly some leveraging their platforms for good, it shouldn't be surprising that this change has rather brought out the worst in most people, the most contemptible quality of which is the need for constant approval from strangers on the Internet. *Follow Her*, the new film from Sylvia Caminer, follows one such attention whore on her quest to break into the Internet's vapid upper echelon.

Jess Peters (Dani Barker, who also wrote the film) is an aspiring actress trying to make ends meet. With her streaming channel, Jess makes extra cash exposing creepy men on the Internet. With a seemingly endless wig collection, she responds to classified ads and films the interactions, which always devolve into depravity. She then blurs the faces of the men and posts the videos on her channel. She's trying to break into the top ten on



## AFTER SHERMAN

Jon-Sesrie Goff

"At its most fraught, to be Black is to feel as if locked in constant battle with the external forces committed to devaluing your life and interpretation of your experience. Often Black life on film, when Black people do not control their own narratives, is reduced to stories of trauma and subsequent triumph, an American underclass palatably refashioned into an underdog. So when a Black creator like Jon-Sesrie Goff finds himself behind the camera, the result is a piece of resistance filmmaking that can only be described as lyrically emancipatory. His latest work, *After Sherman*, traces the lives of his father and other Black South Carolinians as they all strive to live fully and honestly within communities freighted with slavery's various legacies. His film is a multidisciplinary exercise in truth-telling, infusing his expressionistic visual poetry with an ethnographic attention to detail." — **TRAVIS DESHONG** [Published as part of InRO's Tribeca Film Festival 2022 coverage.]

**DIRECTOR:** Jon-Sesrie Goff; **CAST:** —; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Cargo Film & Releasing; **IN THEATERS:** June 2; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 28 min.

"The Hive," a fictional social media network where the top performers earn money. She believes she's found the perfect victim when Tom Brady (not that one) posts in search of a woman to help him finish his screenplay. And so, Jess ends up in the middle of nowhere with a man and his outhouse.

Let's get one thing out of the way upfront — *Follow Her* is an atrocious movie. All that setup promises something interesting enough, and it wouldn't be unfair for one to think that the film might become an incisive critique on the narcissism of Internet celebrities and wannabes. One would be wrong. Eventually, we end up at Tom's (Luke Cook) cabin, where Jess sticks around despite red flag after red flag, hoping the footage she's capturing will be what finally launches her into Internet stardom. The film turns into a tedious game of cat-and-mouse, as each half of this insufferable two-hander tries to use the other for their game.

From here, viewers are guided through several twists and "surprises," each one further convoluting the film's central message. *Follow Her* touches on everything from sex work to misogyny, with each dangled topic brushed to the side before any real perspective can even be established. And while the film's shift from dark comedy to erotic thriller could in theory make for a fascinating tonal gambit, Barker is far too focused on scripted shock and awe to situate the film effectively in either lane, let alone navigate a compelling transition between the two. And if her screenwriting skills aren't problem enough, Barker's acting leads things in an even worse direction, with campy over-emoting seemingly the name of her game. (In fairness, Cook

isn't much better.) *Follow Her* ultimately has no idea what it wants to say about any of its many tangents, nor does it ever center any kind of cogent thesis. By doing the bare minimum, it does remind us that influencer culture has bred a class of overly-confident, sanctimonious idiots who believe everyone should hear what they have to say. Don't listen to them or this film — neither has anything of value to say. — **EMILY DUGRANRUT**

## CONCERNED CITIZEN

Idan Haguél

Detrimental is the perspective mired in solipsism, where the world that surrounds a character exists only to serve their compulsions. What is disclosed through this process, more often than not, is a subjectivity lacking in discourse, where a filmmaker has failed to intervene in their character and unintentionally reaffirms the ignorances of this worldview via their own. Such is the case with Israeli director Idan Haguél's sophomore effort, *Concerned Citizen*, a dispirited fable that spirals into mere conjecture. Such troubled perspective only derives from a failed schema, wherein secondary characters are positioned either as pawns with no discernible interiority or plot beats serving only to contextualize our protagonist — here, Ben (Shlomi Bertonov). He leads a life that is, empirically, quite pleasant. He lives in a refurbished apartment alongside his partner, and the two are looking to start a family and put down roots. As a way to emphasize this sentiment, the opening scene sees Ben plant a tree within spitting distance from his balcony, ensuring it can be surveilled throughout its maturation. This tree



## FILM *REVIEWS*

is not only a symbol of his ideals, but also a signifier of the desired gentrification of the neighborhood, a part of town all the white settlers — Ben and his partner included — continue to promise is “on the up and up.” But on one quiet night, as two boys are innocuously lounging around, leaning up against this young and pliant tree, Ben asks that they be careful — noting that it’s a newly planted tree, and that they need to responsibly upkeep the area — and simultaneously calls the city, who send in cops, inevitably leading to murder. Unfurling from this point are the conventions of guilt, the tropes of emotional volatility, and a general apathy toward the communities who must face this violence each and every day, as our white protagonist and his ilk look passively on, seeing only spectacle in the lives of those accosted simply for putting their time away on the sidewalk.

To go into much more detail about the plot specifics isn’t necessary, as it’s made of the anticipated frictions and externalized conflicts that come easily to the imagination: interpersonal troubles, loss of emotional control, outbursts, seething angers, etc. It’s a broad perspective that’s tackled, but one so stubbornly tethered to Ben that there’s little left to parse that isn’t myopic or reductive. Haguel has no interest in social dynamics, as exemplified by the act of violence which incites his film. This thesis stems from the film’s climax, where Ben is given

### **FALCON LAKE**

Charlotte Le Bon

“Impressive enough on its face, *Falcon Lake* also doesn’t feel like a typical directorial debut for an actor. While the performances by the young leads feel natural and lived-in, it isn’t realized as an actor’s film in the way that so many actor-turned-director’s movies tend to be. Le Bon displays a strong authorial voice and a keen visual eye, existing in a kind of haunted memory-space that’s both eerie and alluring, often recalling the dreamy visual aesthetic of Alice Rohrwacher. Le Bon eschews the typical sunny idealism... for something darker and more unsettling.” — **MATTIE LUCAS** [Published as part of InRO’s Cannes 2022 coverage.]

**DIRECTOR:** Charlotte Le Bon; **CAST:** Joseph Engel, Monia Chokri, Sara Montpetit; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Yellow Veil Pictures; **IN THEATERS/STREAMING:** June 2/13; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 40 min.

### **SQUARING THE CIRCLE**

Anton Corbijn

“For those who’ve ever lit a doobie and stared at Pink Floyd’s cover art with glazed eyes, wondering what it all means, man, rejoice: Anton Corbijn’s documentary *Squaring the Circle: The Story of Hipgnosis* will engulf classic rock fans and design junkies alike in a haze of cheerful nostalgia. Well, unless the album in question is 1970’s *Atom Heart Mother*, which bears the inscrutable photograph of a cow. If you’re wondering, “What has a cow got to do with Pink Floyd?” you’re not alone. But at this point, the only creature who can answer that question is the long-dead heifer herself.” — **SELINA LEE**

**DIRECTOR:** Anton Corbijn; **CAST:** —; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Utopia; **IN THEATERS:** June 7; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 41 min.

the chance to repeat his offenses. Two young men are once again idling by the tree, and without hesitation Ben calls the city, but this time demands that cops be sent. With their arrival and consequent harassment of the two, Ben runs out of his apartment, confronting the cop and angrily inquiring why he’s disturbing the men. The situation eventually calms down and Ben returns home, rejuvenated and empowered by his dispelling of guilt. One assumes Haguel knows that Ben would have to be both idiotic and parasitic to even attempt this, yet even if there were reflexivity contained within this intent, what exactly is being observed and articulated? That people who cannot live with their contradictions will narrativize their psychology until it proffers peace? This has been seen before, in many iterations on both television and the big screen, without appropriating the systemic racism within an active and ongoing settler colonial project and without ignoring, sidelining, or marginalizing the role violence plays in a society such as Israel. This is a film, then, that takes the violent immediacy of ethnonationalist supremacy and churns it for personal, exploitative use. It reduces victims to a position of anonymity in service of abstracting the brutality that affects them into a narrow thought experiment. It’s grotesque and useless. — **ZACHARY GOLDKIND**

**DIRECTOR:** Idan Haguel; **CAST:** Shlomi Bertonov, Ariel Wolf; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Greenwich Entertainment; **IN THEATERS & STREAMING:** June 2; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 22 min.



**Photo Credits:**

**Cover** - Sony Pictures Animation/CTMG; **Page 1** - Cannes Film Festival; **Page 2** - SBS Productions;  
**Page 4** - Kavac Film and IBC Movie; **Page 5** - Cannes Film Festival; **Page 6** - Gladys  
Glover/Louverture Films/Wang Bing; **Page 8** - Jérôme Prébois; **Page 10** - Cannes Film Festival;  
**Page 12** - Sony Pictures Animation/CTMG; **Page 13** - 20th Century Studios; **Page 16** - Anonymous  
Sister; **Page 18** - Mubi/Carson Lund; **Page 20** - Universal Studios; **Back Cover** - Cannes Film  
Festival

In  
Review  
*Online*

film  
&  
music  
*criticism*