



IN-REVIEW ONLINE

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BLOOD FOR DUST

Rod Blackhurst

With its uninviting snowbound setting, drab wood-paneled roadside motels and bars, and sudden explosions of gangland violence, there is a decidedly *Fargo*-like shape to Rod Blackhurst's *Blood for Dust*. The story of an overextended salesman and husband pulled into a criminal enterprise because of the stifling limitations of an honest day's work — leaving a trail of bodies in his wake — *Blood for Dust* parts company with the beloved Coen brothers' film when it comes to tone. There is no impish grand design, gallows humor, regional specificity, or, most importantly, bleak yet exacting sense of style. Instead, the film carries itself like a morose elegy for the American dream, one where desperate men live out of a suitcase and can't afford to put gas in their cars after schlepping from sales call to sales call. The template here is as much Willy Loman as it is Jerry Lundegaard. This lends a self-seriousness to the proceedings, while also draining much of the fun out of all the double-crossing and scheming at play.

Scot McNairy plays Cliff, a salesman for a medical supplies company trying to sell defibrillators out of his Oldsmobile across the Mountain West, desperate for a large enough commission

check that will allow him to pay off his mounting debts back home. Years earlier, Cliff was caught up in some shady business dealings: money disappeared from the company he worked at, and an accountant blew his brains out at the office. Cliff avoided real consequences at the time, but the fallout follows him everywhere he goes, making a tough job even harder as whispers about past impropriety hound him, freezing him out of legitimate opportunities. It's a good thing he still has friends in low places.

Cliff is approached at a characteristically depressing strip club — where he seems more interested in the food than the girls — by Ricky (*Game of Thrones*' Jon Snow, Kit Harington), a former coworker who likewise got caught up in the bad business with the missing money. Sporting a giant handlebar mustache and a geographically confusing good-ol'-boy accent, Ricky announces his criminality in his every word and action, splashing around cash while dismissing the entire notion of selling legal goods as a sucker's game. Ricky splits his time between gun-running and acting as a drug mule for a local crime syndicate that is presently looking for someone with low visibility to ferry hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of product across state lines. With his Haggar slacks and sweaters and hangdog expression, Cliff doesn't look the part of a drug dealer, which

makes him a perfect front for some bad hombres (led by Josh Lucas' low-key terrifying ringleader, John, who gingerly gesticulates while holding his wire-rimmed glasses when he's not slamming Cliff's head into a table). Soon, Cliff's paired up with a stoic, gun-toting babysitter (Ethan Suplee), and the two go on the road with a trunk full of narcotics, hoping to avoid detection by both the law and rival outfits.

With a film like this, it's never a question of *if* things will go south but rather how *badly* they will. The agent of chaos here is Ricky, who unexpectedly shows up to the drug buy, guns blazing, killing everyone in the room except for Cliff. Intending to sell the cocaine he just ripped off from his employer to yet another buyer, and using the ill-gotten earnings to fund his exit from a life of crime, it becomes a real question as to whether Ricky kept Cliff alive out of an ingrained sense of loyalty or simply as a contingency plan in case he needs a patsy somewhere down the road. Not quite a hostage but definitely not free to come and go as he pleases, Cliff silently contemplates his options. Can he actually extricate himself from the situation with both his life *and* his share of the cash? And is there really such a thing as getting away clean?

In its dramatic beats, *Blood for Dust* couldn't be more familiar, which is only exacerbated by how sluggishly paced it is. The first act, in particular, is interminable in establishing Cliff's practically hand-to-mouth existence, as well as his emotional and physical distance from his wife (Nora Zehetner). Meanwhile, much of the film's final 30 minutes is spent in a conveniently vacant, unfurnished house where Cliff and Ricky go round and round about the nature of morality, guilt, and the collateral damage of a life in crime. But there's little crackle to the dialogue (credited to David Ebeltoft, based on a story by Ebeltoft and Blackhurst), nor any real tension between Cliff and Ricky. Harington slots into the Johnny Boy in *Mean Streets* role here as the ne'er-do-well, casually threatening friend, but there are scant signs of real danger in the performance and no chemistry to speak of with McNairy. We're ultimately forced to accept both the friendship and the omnipresent threat of violence almost entirely because the scenario demands as much.

If the film works at all, it's attributable to McNairy. Long one of our most dependable character actors — he's provided

memorable supporting turns in films like *Argo*, *Gone Girl*, and *Killing Them Softly* — McNairy draws upon his soft-spoken pragmatism in a rare leading role to paint Cliff as an unassuming family man, concealing his demons by demonstrating quiet competence. Though projecting fundamental decency, Cliff also has a tendency to keep things close to the vest, with the character proving to be more of a wildcard than he initially lets on. *Blood for Dust* is at its best when it finds Cliff being underestimated, allowing McNairy to turn things around on his more outwardly intimidating co-stars. There's a real intelligence to the performance, as well as an unshowy desperation to the way Cliff navigates right and wrong while attempting to provide for his loved ones (who aren't necessarily his family). But it's not hard to appreciate a deserving actor getting a showcase role while still acknowledging the film around it as derivative and listless. *Blood for Dust* functions largely as a generic crime-drama, but absent either the tangy malevolence or the affecting pathos of the films that ostensibly inspired it. —

ANDREW DIGNAN

AFIRE Christian Petzold

In Christian Petzold's latest film, sexual tensions rumble with such intensity that the only natural outcome is the eruption of a devastating forest fire. *Afire* is something of a reinvention for Petzold, moving away from the politico-historical drama (which dominated his filmography from *Barbara* to *Transit*) and into the realm of the Rohmerian summer sex comedy. Set to the perpetual buzz of insects, *Afire* encircles the bubbling tensions amongst four friends — Leon, Felix, Nadja, and David — vacationing near the Baltic Sea, where the complex social-sexual weavings between the quartet slowly become overshadowed by a forest fire burning on the horizon.

At the core of *Afire* is its protagonist, Leon, and his total absence of charisma. He's a textbook curmudgeon, forever downcast; whichever bed he sleeps in has only wrong sides. He's a caricature of every insecurity imaginable, yet also a surrogate for the worst vices of the artist archetype. His anxiety envelops his writing and his need for artistic validation. His sophomore manuscript is called *Club Sandwich*, and it's packed with pretentious, cleavage-centric prose. Throughout the film,

characters quietly eviscerate Leon's work, tossing his ego into a blender, and sending him into a hostile frenzy of self-loathing. The only inkling toward Leon's capacity for affability is his friendship with Felix. Throughout the movie, he treats Felix with scoffs and impatience — there's no tenderness, no compassion. Yet the presence of this friendship, now plagued by Leon's insecurities, suggests a past-Leon capable of navigating meaningful human connection, though now, he's only a void of resentment. Petzold captures the chasm between the two men's outlooks through their individual getups: the laidback and open-hearted Felix saunters about, stripped-down to sandals and swim trunks; Leon, on the other hand, is always overdressed, moping about in a cardigan, long sleeves, and slacks — he wears his discomfort on his body.

Leon spends the movie dodging any social excursion. "My work won't allow it," he mutters like his own version of Patrick Bateman's, "I have to return some videotapes." Instead, he stands on the outskirts, watching his companions' pleasure. Leon's gaze is a look of desire, yearning for both the sexual and emotional liberty the others exhibit so freely. *Looking* becomes a self-pitying act, reflected inward towards himself. To see others and recognize their pleasure only accentuates the misery he condemns himself to. No matter how many (overly generous!)

offers Leon receives to join outings, he rejects them plainly. Self-removed from the social drama, Leon becomes an interpreter of looks; in his sphere of self-centric self-loathing, all gestures from afar read as chastisements of himself.

But above all, Leon is a tornado of repression. Awoken by the sounds of Nadja and David's furniture-rattling sex in the other room, an agitated Leon decides to sleep outside. Afterwards, a nude David steps out and wanders into the woods, followed by Leon's watchful eye, and Petzold uses these POV shots to imitate desire — Leon is constantly eyeing his three companions with unspoken longing. The excitement of *Afire*, then, comes in how its sexual dynamics spiral out into all directions — from an early homoerotic wrestling match, it's clear that any combination of characters might suddenly erupt into furious lovemaking, Leon included.

The film begins with serene landscapes, from beaches to fields of tall, windswept grass (a recurring image in *Barbara*, too). Yet as the forest fire approaches, Petzold leans into a vocabulary of apocalyptic imagery. The vacation turns into an inferno, red flames engulfing the blue night sky and ash raining down. By the time we've launched into the heart of the natural disaster, *Afire* has become a very different film. Leon, who resonates as little



more than a gag, becomes the lynchpin of a melodrama about love, mortality, and artistic creation. The dramatic pivot occupies a space of sincerity its larger-than-life protagonist cannot co-exist with; his wavelength is that of a cartoon. But in an attempt to pull the rug out from under his audience via bold tonal shift, Petzold loses his footing and tumbles along with us. It's a shame because, otherwise, his work feels so invigorated here: infinitely funnier than ever, and cognizant of how to pack a scene with so much unspoken desire that it totters on the constant verge of explosion. — **RYAN AKLER-BISHOP** [[Originally published as part of InRo's Berlinale 2023 coverage.](#)]

SOMEWHERE QUIET

Olivia West Lloyd

More exasperating than the woebegone premise of Olivia West Lloyd's feature debut is the experience of actually watching it all unfold. The film limps along, its images time-stamped and registered by our eyes but offering little else; the exasperation becomes one of self-loathing, as we look upon ourselves with tired resignation, trudging along an arduous path that tends to look the same as it did several minutes hence — and the same as it will several minutes later. *Somewhere Quiet* — about a creepy little vacation in the woods with the sense of reality vacuumed out of it — is a gaslighting drama with neither the gas to propel it anywhere nor the light to illuminate why any of it matters. In other words, it's the modern indie genre film *par excellence*, stripped of virtue and shorn even of vice, leaving behind the skeleton of a synopsis to tick the checkboxes of virtue signaling and fill press screenings with dunces who couldn't tell Hitchcock from *Hereditary*.

If this sounds harsh, it's a gentler framing than that of the numbing exhaustion we're put through and presumably meant to feel while watching the thing. Meg (Jennifer Kim), a Korean-American woman with frazzled hair and a serene countenance, has yet

to fully process the traumatic experience of being kidnapped some time ago. To take things slow, she follows her mysterious (and white) husband, Scott (*Sylvio* and *Strawberry Mansion's* Kentucker Audley), back to the forbidding countryside he calls home. They're on holiday, supposedly, but of course, it doesn't feel like it: Scott sleepwalks at night, eerie portraits litter the walls, and an old plate with an ominous message appears and vanishes right before Meg's eyes. Stoking her paranoia is Madeleine (Marin Ireland), whom Scott introduces as his cousin. She barges into their bleak domicile, disarming Meg with aggressive pleasantries and probing anecdotes that unsettle her and prompt her to uncover some part about herself not yet brought to light.

The dynamics among this throuple deteriorate progressively — although “regressive” better captures the feeling of how the plot moves — to the point where we're not sure whom to trust: Meg's judgment, or the comfort of strangers. The film offers no reprieve, preferring to luxuriate in its perfunctory markers of victimhood laced with menace over explicating husband, wife, and Madeleine beyond the attributes of bad, sad, and mad, respectively. Ireland, as a sufficiently unhinged wine-mom type, is poorly cast playing-out a stultifying routine of cat-and-mouse with Kim, whose one-note helplessness. Meanwhile, Audley's limp-dick shenanigans stretch the film's credibility thin, since, despite his lack of appeal, he seems to persistently exert his hold over Meg. But what *Somewhere Quiet* gets most deafeningly wrong is its commingling of the social and the supernatural. Lloyd invests considerable effort trying to conjure otherworldly



distress for her protagonist, only to retreat into pathetic he-said-she-said territory once the atmosphere wears off. It'd be irksome enough if we were genuinely oblivious to Scott and Madeleine's antics, but the film's suffocating glum dispels all doubt as to who the bad guys are, and so we're left with the unenviable task of indulging Meg's vertiginous journey from start to finish. Sounds



compelling on paper? Perhaps, but *Somewhere Quiet* regrettably sands off its meager thrills, barely plodding along despite its dizzying screams. — MORRIS YANG

THE ADULTS

Dustin Guy Defa

The logline of *The Adults*, Dustin Guy Defa's follow-up to *Person to Person* (2016), does not appreciably differ from that of a prototypical Sundance movie. Eric (Michael Cera) returns to his childhood hometown for a weekend to catch up with his two sisters, Maggie (Hannah Gross) and Rachel (Sophia Lillis), but finds himself extending his strategically short trip in order to play at a series of poker nights which he becomes desperate to win. During his stay, the siblings confront some deep-seated family issues. One might think, for instance, of the Bill Hader and Kristen Wiig vehicle *The Skeleton Twins* (2014), in which estranged, suicidal siblings reunite after years apart, and which climaxes with a lipsynced dance sequence that melts away emotional barriers. Indeed, *The Adults* similarly builds to Eric and his sisters doing a choreographed routine at a party — and whether the scene reminds one of a Sundance climax or, say, the famous dance sequence in Godard's *Bande à part* (1964) may serve as an index of one's overall response.

Band of Outsiders would, in any case, be a decent title for Defa's film, which continually prevents the viewer from identifying with any of the three siblings. The opening scene sees Eric's impressively methodical procedure of checking into a hotel, but it quickly becomes clear that his sense of ritual is more

childishly stubborn than responsible. His interactions with his sisters, meanwhile, introduce us not just to the usual sibling rivalry, but also to the private games and in-jokes that the three established growing up, which are unusual in that they all involve some degree of theatricality and performance. Together, the three have an apparently extensive repertoire, developed when they aspired to form a roving performance troupe. They also have several cartoonish alter-egos which they put on at key moments — something like a set of imaginary friends whom they embody rather than engage with.

Across the film's compressed timeline, we see these personas emerge only intermittently — but when they do, they are invariably attached to unresolved issues from the siblings' childhood. Trouble is, whenever they try to settle these issues, they find themselves unable to take each other as genuine. They find it impossible to relate to each other in a way that doesn't depend on some performative mask. The main tension between the siblings is something like a game of chicken — except that swerving means breaking character, and breaking character is the ultimate sign of weakness. As in Eric's poker games, winning means knowing how to properly call a bluff.

The main issue with *The Adults*, then, is not that it doesn't have an interesting concept, but that it doesn't do enough with it to justify its general abrasiveness. The in-jokes and musical performances are all presented as alienating and airless, which is clearly by design: they are meant to constitute a closed space which only the three siblings have access to. But the repetitive structure Defa employs, which intensifies but does not vary the

core dynamic, results in character behavior that isn't productively obscure so much as incoherent. *The Adults* closes on a note that is meant to be unreadable — neither clearly optimistic nor pessimistic. Much like the film as a whole, though, it mainly comes across as lazily ambiguous. — **LAWRENCE GARCIA** [*Originally published as part of InRO's Berlinale 2023 coverage.*]

THE LISTENER

Steve Buscemi

Steve Buscemi's directorial efforts have tended to focus on outsiders and castoffs. In his 1996 debut, *Trees Lounge*, the hopeless and downhearted congregate at a dive bar; in *Animal Factory* (2000), the men of that film's focus occupy a prison, though even there the possibility for human connection exists. Buscemi's latest, *The Listener*, once again looks at some of the most troubled members of society, but at the same time, in some respects, it may be viewed as the director's bleakest film yet.

Shot during Covid lockdown, *The Listener* spends 90 minutes with Beth (Tessa Thompson), an operator on a crisis line. We hear her speak with ten different callers, though almost the entire film takes place in her L.A. home. There's not much visual interest in

The Listener; it's essentially a piece of black-box theater, and Buscemi doesn't try to artificially broaden its canvas. At the same time, one could argue that the cinematic claustrophobia underscores the isolation that plagues Beth's callers and, to a large extent, Beth herself.

The writing is sharp, but even this sometimes works against verisimilitude, since it's tough to believe that these Angelinos can deliver audition monologues when they're supposed to be at the end of their rope. Nevertheless, if one accepts *The Listener*'s basic limitations, it's often an engaging, deeply humane film. Not all the calls are particularly enlightening. Beth's extended parry with Ellis (Ricky Velez), a hateful 4chan incel, provides topicality but little insight, and a couple of callers, Corrinne (Margaret Cho) and Ruby (Casey Wilson), come off like frazzled Karens, annoyed that the world isn't progressing according to their desires.

As you might expect, the longest calls prove to be the most emotionally potent, in large part because Beth is able to develop a rapport with her interlocutors, offering counter-arguments along with a patient ear. The first caller, Michael (Logan Marshall-Green), is six months out of prison, and he describes the challenge of adjusting to life on the outside. Sharon (Alia Shawkat) is a self-described "mental" individual who is off her



meds, has no insurance, and seems to be in the throes of a manic or possibly psychotic episode. And in the final call, Beth struggles to convince Laura (Rebecca Hall), a recently fired sociology professor, that her life is worth living.

The Listener is indeed uneven, and feels — despite its clear connection to the pandemic — like an artifact from another time, say fifteen or twenty years ago, when modest Sundance indies could still wend their way through the nation's arthouses and gradually find an audience. Back in the pre-streaming days of cable TV, *The Listener* is a film you'd stumble upon one night on HBO, watch it quite unintentionally, and come away feeling like you'd spent your evening well. — **MICHAEL SICINSKI**

FINAL CUT

Michel Hazanavicius

Though remakes of beloved films are usually met with some degree of warranted skepticism, sometimes the combination of director and material is too enticing to ignore. News that Korean zombie hit *Train to Busan* would receive an American remake was received with expected derision, but that reaction ignores that the attached director, Timo Tjahjanto, is uniquely suited to packing an enclosed space with exuberantly bloody carnage. In other cases, like that of Guillermo Del Toro's recent ill-conceived take on *Nightmare Alley*, it's usually easy to see what drew the

artist to the project in the first place, regardless of the final product's quality. At first glance, then, it's baffling that Michel Hazanavicius would remake Japanese comedy horror hit *One Cut of the Dead*, a film that on the surface is so unlike the director's more recent output. But look deeper — okay, past the twist at the 40-minute mark — and see *One Cut of the Dead* as a tedious exercise in metafiction, a movie about the triumphs and pains of moviemaking, and it's a perfect match for the phony behind *The Artist* and *Godard, Mon Amour*.

Final Cut is almost the same movie as its predecessor, only worse. It concerns a director tasked with making a zombie film — one about a director making a zombie film whose set is attacked by real zombies — and opens on that film in full before pulling back and exploring its making. There is one added wrinkle: the movie being made is explicitly a remake of the one made in *One Cut of the Dead*. This is an opportunity for Hazanavicius to take the material that already exists and add another layer to maybe say *something* about the act of cinematic reproduction. And in the opening section of the film, which plays like a glossier, shittier version of the original where the white French actors all have Japanese names like Higurashi, it seems like that might be what the filmmaker is moving towards. But then the second half is more or less a mechanical reconstruction of the original film and, aside from struggles with the Japanese producers in charge of the remake, there's very little in the way



of perspective. Besides, the repetition of jokes and sequences from the first film in this “real” half doesn’t just lay bare creative neglect but also pushes the film past the point of believability, as the conditions of the production of their movie match exactly those of the film they’re remaking.

Everything good about *Final Cut* was already good in *One Cut of the Dead*, and while plenty of what doesn’t work was never good to begin with, Hazanavicius has fattened the film by 20 minutes to include pretentious middlebrow attempts at elevating the material. The cast of characters and their relationships are the same, almost exactly, but the filmmakers have decided that what *One Cut of the Dead* needed was more blatant psychological and emotional motivation. To that end, the film expands on the relationship between the director and his daughter to an irritating, precious degree, going so far as to give what was a previously joyous final moment of homespun creativity in the original a weak, sentimental motivation.

But what’s really missing from *Final Cut* is an attitude. Even skeptics of the original, like this critic, would have a hard time denying that director Shinichiro Ueda’s celebration of the DIY ethos and the scrappiness of making a low-budget movie was genuine. There’s nothing genuine about Hazanavicius, a big-name director whose Oscar win has aged like milk, doing the same thing almost beat for beat in a creatively bankrupt act of cannibalization. Were *Final Cut* doing anything new as a metafiction, there might have been reason to approach it with generosity. Instead, it’s merely a repackaging of what already worked for someone else, and exactly the kind of movie that it would seek to criticize in its few moments of theoretical clarity.

— CHRIS MELLO [[Originally published as part of InRO’s Cannes 2023 coverage.](#)]

ENTER THE CLONES OF BRUCE

David Gregory

Boutique label Severin Films’ documentary *Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched* — a supplement to their massive and beautiful box set of folk horror films — was one of the great films of 2021. Directed by Kier-La Janisse, the film took a little-known and under-explored corner of the horror genre and examined it in minute detail, covering not only the most prominent English

language titles, but also oddities from around the globe. What could have been in lesser hands a mere clip reel advertisement for a DVD box is turned into an endlessly thoughtful and provocative examination of the genre, how it works, and what it means. It’s basically the ideal version of this kind of film. *Enter the Clones of Bruce*, Severin’s new documentary, which doesn’t quite live up to its predecessor. A study of the Bruceploitation genre — that 1970s phenomenon where, in the wake of Bruce Lee’s untimely death, a vast array of independent producers and distributors generated a seemingly endless series of imitation Lee films for foreign markets — the film runs less than half the length of *Woodlands Dark*, but it does include an impressive cast of interviewees, including several of the most popular Lee imitators. Directed by David Gregory, a Severin co-founder, the film captures something of the chaotic energy of the grindhouse era, one that is interestingly balanced by the ambivalence, in some cases regret, that the stars have over their roles in the exploitation of Lee’s persona. Whether the documentary will, like its predecessor, become the centerpiece of a long-rumored box set has yet to be announced —but here’s hoping. For as trashy and, in some ways, downright evil as the genre can be, it was nonetheless one of the most endlessly fascinating and creative cycles in martial arts cinema.

Enter the Clones of Bruce starts with a capsule explanation of the state of the Hong Kong film industry circa 1970, with Shaw Brothers and star director Chang Cheh reigning supreme (somewhat surprisingly, former Chang assistant and future king of trash cinema Godfrey Ho is the film’s most fascinating and erudite commentator: I’d like to see a whole documentary of him talking about Hong Kong cinema and his career within and around it). Chang rejects the cocky Lee at his audition, so he signs with the upstart Golden Harvest studio, films a trio of massive hits, then dies just as his Warner Brothers smash *Enter the Dragon* is about to be released. Almost immediately, the exploitation begins: Golden Harvest head Raymond Chow sends a camera crew to Lee’s funeral, footage that will be recycled endlessly in the films to come. Bruce Li (Taiwanese martial artist Ho Chung-tao) is the first and possibly most prolific imitator, and the one with the most regrets, though dozens more will follow. The film mostly focuses on him along with Bruce Le (Wong Kin-lung, ethnically Chinese but born in Burma and discovered in Macau), Dragon Lee (Moon Kyung-seok, from Korea), and Bruce



Leung (sometimes Bruce Liang, probably the most recognizable face among the Bruces, from his comeback performances in Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* and the 2010 hit *Gallants*), but there are nods to many others. Kudos to Angela Mao, long-retired from the film industry and now a restaurateur in New York, for agreeing to appear in the film, though her connection to the genre is tenuous at best, relying on her small role as Lee's sister in *Enter the Dragon*, a fact repeatedly exploited by unscrupulous marketers for releases of her excellent series of starring roles in films like *Hapkido*. Kurata Yasuaki, who it is hilariously implied did not know he was frequently billed as Bruce Lo, makes a brief appearance, as does Sammo Hung, director and star of one of the very best Brucesploitation films, *Enter the Fat Dragon*. Most of the film, though, is made up of clips from dozens of films, emphasizing their outlandish weirdness but also their few basic approaches to dealing with the Lee story.

This genre is made up either of phony Lee biopics, unofficial sequels to Lee films (often involving the brother of the Lee character in the original film), conspiracy films involving investigations into Lee's actual death, or cheap remixes of existing Lee footage, as in a pair of films cobbled together from his work on the American *Green Hornet* TV series. (One interviewee wisely points out that, while the Hong Kong industry

itself quickly moved on to other established and newly established stars (David Chiang, Ti Lung, Alexander Fu Sheng, Gordon Liu, etc), foreign distributors were only interested in Bruce Lee, or whatever they could get away with deceptively marketing as "Bruce Lee.") In keeping with the spirit of the genre, all the film footage is presented in its badly dubbed form, on digital scans of prints of various quality, retaining the grindhouse feel that is an essential part of the genre's scuzzy, illicit appeal. To that end, it's telling that while the Bruce Lee imitators are all more or less chagrined by their work (the best they can do to justify it is by pointing to the fact that times were hard and they all had families to support), all the white commentators (British, French, German) are unabashedly enthusiastic about the films: the trashier they get, the more excited they are.

That said, there is value to be found in the Brucesploitation genre, as distasteful as it might be, beyond the camp value of the films' more outlandish premises and effects. First and foremost, in the artistry of the performers themselves, great screen fighters and stuntmen doing ridiculously dangerous things in the name of mass entertainment (two of the talking heads are legendary stuntmen Mars and Philip Ko, who are always delightful to see and somehow still alive after decades of

this kind of work), but also in the way the genre lays bare how the film industry regards the people who make its products as fungible assets, to be shifted around and replaced and, if necessary, cloned whenever it's most expedient (see the recent Hollywood trend of digitizing and de-aging its stars as a slightly more technologically adept variation on the Brucesploitation aesthetic). This is the subtext of every Brucesploitation film I've ever seen: that bodies, especially the bodies of Asian men, are replaceable assets, to be manipulated on the whims of and for the entertainment of foreign audiences. But within each film lies a contradiction that ultimately negates the power of that industry, and that is Lee himself, his image as an actor and as a man standing always in robust defiance of the systems that would demean and exploit him, even after his death. No matter how much the skeezy moneymen and cheap grindhouse operators would try to chop up and mangle and debase his work, they only served to establish more resolutely his indispensability.

— SEAN GILMAN

SHORTCOMINGS

Randall Park

Randall Park's directorial debut, *Shortcomings*, is sure to draw immediate comparisons to *Crazy Rich Asians*, a film that made \$238 million and was praised for its representation of Asian culture in mainstream cinema. Park clearly knows this and addresses it immediately — *Shortcomings'* opening scene is an almost line-for-line lift of *Crazy's* opener. It's quickly revealed, though, that this setup is actually a film-within-the-film, for which protagonist Ben (Justin H. Min, in a decidedly different role here than in last year's *After Yang*) and his girlfriend Miko (Ally Maki) are attending the premiere. Miko, along with everyone else at the event, celebrates the meta-film for its representation, commenting on how this paves the way for lesser-known Asian filmmakers to get funding for bigger-budget films at major studios. But Ben, who calls himself a "filmmaker," thinks the movie is a "garish mainstream rom-com that glorifies the capitalistic fantasy of vindication through wealth and materialism."

Adrian Tomine — writer of both the script for this film adaptation of *Shortcomings* and the original graphic novel upon which it's based — would be hard-pressed to craft a more defining

introduction to a character. Ben is as unlikeable as they come, constantly pushing the limits of his relationship and friendships, never knowing when to shut the hell up and listen. But Tomine's sharp writing ensures Ben's bastardly characteristics are still of interest to viewers; no matter how unsympathetic you are to his idiocy, there's no denying that Tomine and Park have created a character you'll want to follow into the shit. Even Ben's more mundane qualities, like his porn-watching habits (Miko calls him out for exclusively watching porn with white women in it), are brought up frequently in the light of a joke, but they're clearly meant to reveal more about his insecurities and unstable identity than evince laughter.

Because of Ben's cynical outlook and his inability to bring an ounce of understanding to his relationship, Miko grows tired of her boyfriend and takes an internship in New York City, making it clear that she doesn't want him to come with her. The two part and agree to "take some time," which Ben uses as an excuse to immediately go on a date with the hot young performance artist he just hired at the theater that he manages. When that, unsurprisingly, fails to pan out, he moves on to Sasha (Debby Ryan), who is also coming off a fresh breakup, which only ends in Ben once again putting his foot in his mouth and getting called out by Sasha for his behavior. All these plot acrobatics culminate with Ben heading to New York to confront Miko in typical rom-com fashion. Predictably, the gambit doesn't end well, with Ben still unable to approach anything resembling real understanding.

While all this follows a predictable, if self-reflexive, rom-com template, Park takes care to keep things moving at a clip; at a comfortable 92 minutes, *Shortcomings* never stalls out or gets bogged down in unnecessary punchlines and self-congratulatory winking. This is partially due to the film's deep bench of secondary characters, who all inject the proceedings with the kind of legitimate personality that too many rom-coms are missing. Particularly appealing are Sherry Cola as Ben's serial-dater best friend Alice and the duo of Timothy Simons and Jacob Batalon as the film-nerd theater employees Ben supervises (the former tries to impress women by name-dropping Ruben Östlund and Céline Sciamma, while the latter hilariously names *Spider-Man: No Way Home* as his favorite movie).



While *Crazy Rich Asians* certainly did its part to move the Hollywood needle with regards to representation — though not without a **fair bit of controversy** — the film itself is little more than a tired rom-com recycle gussied up with the trappings of garish dresses and moneyed culture (in other words, Ben's not *entirely* wrong). But where that film's director, Jon M. Chu (and by extension the book's author, Kevin Kwan), failed in part by not connecting viewers to characters who, by design, are mere haute couture *types*, Park and Tomine don't want to be relatable (at least not pleasingly so). Ben's conceived of as an insufferable chump, and the film's ability to highlight that very fact while also, in the end, realizing something lovable in him proves that *Shortcomings* is a film that succeeds in advancing cinematic representation without taking the lowest common denominator path. — **EMILY DUGRANRUT** [[Originally published as part of InRO's Sundance 2023 coverage.](#)]

THE GRADUATES

Hannah Peterson

Hannah Peterson's directorial debut, *The Graduates*, begins a year after the end of the "before," a definitive "conclusion of youth" event that's alluded to, but never described in much detail. Genevieve (Mina Sundwall) is drifting through her senior year, grating against time as it flows toward the one-year mark of her boyfriend Tyler's death, trying to find hope in a future that feels so foreclosed by the past. It's soon revealed that a shooting in Genevieve's school claimed Tyler's life, along with the lives of five others.

At the outset of the film, the brouhaha has ended, there are no media parades. Public attention has moved elsewhere, yet the

absence of the schoolmates has only deepened. The scars of the horrific event are evident in the newly-installed metal detectors at the school doors, and a memorial adorned with "NEVER AGAIN"s that continues to grow in a pregnancy of grief. Tyler's good friend, Ben (Alex R. Hibbert), transferred schools, and then dropped out entirely. Tyler's father (John Cho), the school basketball coach, is paining himself to stay in the Utah town, away from his wife and daughter, who have now moved

to Houston; he's clearly hoping to remain close to his deceased son by seeing his classmates through to their walk across the graduation stage.

The Graduates broaches the long-term aftermath of horror with a gentle affection that never veers into sentimentalist melancholy. This is in large part due to the strength of Mina Sundwall's excellent performance of a teenager in grief, one that acts as a center of gravity for the orbits' of the rest of the casts' more uneven moments, and one that is both restrained, honest, and totally convincing of the subtlety of her pain. After all, *The Graduates* is not a film expressed in explicit language; it's a film about the impossibilities of communication, especially when faced with a purgatorial trauma of unfathomable depths. This is a theme throughout: Genevieve tells her mother that she is able to feel a sense of safety because her and her friends *don't* talk about what happened.

Peterson doesn't talk about what happened either, which plays to her film's strength. Ultimately, this film is about grief and its horror, rather than abject horror itself, something that has been reiterated in different filmic forms forever, and something that was tackled in the same context in the form of Gus Van Sant's 2003 film *Elephant*. Peterson's film, however, is completely opposite in focus from Van Sant's, and is an evident counter against the more exploitative (and likely damaging) media coverage of school shootings that spreads immediately after their occurrence, only to hopscotch to the next tragedy when it inevitably arrives.

This is to say: when dealing with such sensitive subject matter, there is always the risk of feeling a sense of borrowed

exploitation, but Peterson tackles such risk with a high degree of self-awareness. That said, this self-awareness is not necessarily always to the film's benefit, as the grief-inciting violence central to the film's off-screen history is treated more like emotional infrastructure than a locus of pain. Peterson's decision not to divulge the details of the shooting, or the shooter, or any such tabloidization, shows a necessary gentility in dealing with this subject. But, at the same time, her inability to interrogate the more realistic ramifications beyond grief, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse, shows a certain myopia that leaves the viewer wondering why the decision was made to center the film on a shooting at all.

Without prompting or explicit reference, viewers of *The Graduates* could just as well infer that the student deaths were a result of drug overdose or reckless driving, and as a result, has there's an air of tackling contemporary subject matter with form and style borrowed deeply from the past. By virtue of the emotional weight of its context, Peterson is able to let her film chug along, but only just. More accurately, *The Graduates* is forced along by a sense of temporal density, one that takes the space of a more incisive interrogation of the fallout of these events. Remember, thought-provoking ideas are also a form of provocation; here, the world of the film is one that exists so

wholly in the forefront of human consciousness, and yet somehow, it feels as though Peterson is barely able to let us in at all.

Ultimately, *The Graduates* is a strong debut about the incommunicability of grief and pain, and the sea of memories that we, as people, must wade through to anchor ourselves in a world of words. Unfortunately, it feels as though Peterson's film struggles to anchor itself in a visual language, and a spoken one, that is able to fulfill such an ambition. Still, there's enough of an emotional commitment here to understanding its subjects that suggests Peterson may have much more to say in the future. —

CONOR TRUAX

PERPETRATOR Jennifer Reeder

Jennifer Reeder's new film *Perpetrator* has received some very strong reviews at Berlinale, and to be honest, it takes a while to figure out exactly why. Granted, this writer is not the world's biggest horror aficionado, but Reeder's film initially strikes as clumsy and scattershot, a collection of half-formed ideas held together with a low-budget, 1990s direct-to-video ambiance. Other than the presence of Alicia Silverstone liberally chewing



scenery in a key supporting role, the appeal here isn't immediately clear. But context is everything, and it seems that, for horror fans as well as movie lovers more generally, *Perpetrator* is being appreciated for delivering an unapologetic gorefest in a genre that's become increasingly airless and antiseptic. In other words, Reeder and her badass mutant girl gang have arrived to liberate us from the tyranny of elevated horror.

In fact, the opening moments of *Perpetrator* almost play like a studiously downmarket remake of *Bones and All*, that lugubrious gewgaw from the perversely overrated Luca Guadagnino. We meet 17-year-old Jonny (Kiah McKirnan) just before her father sends her away to live with great-aunt Hildie (Silverstone), because the girl is undergoing "changes," and papa doesn't think he can handle her anymore. Jonny immediately clashes with Hildie, who comes off like an aging debutante holding court over a dank mansion whose glory days are behind it. But it's Hildie, of course, who assists Jonny in accepting her post-human birthright. And while this alone would be plenty to have on *Perpetrator's* plate, Reeder is working within the field of serial killer tropes as well. The private school where Jonny has just enrolled has a problem with young girls going missing, and although it's recognized as a problem — much of the girls' curriculum centers on weird, ineffectual self-defense maneuvers — it's not really regarded as a crisis. As Jonny remarks, "girls go missing every day." And *Perpetrator* exists in a world ever so slightly more misogynist than our own, where the dismemberment of girls is little more than an inconvenience.

Perpetrator clearly has a lot on its mind, but it's also a formally unspectacular specimen. The lighting is flat, the gore is cheap-looking (and plentiful), and the faux-John Carpenter soundtrack will conjure memories of other films that are both better and worse than this one. On top of that, some of Reeder's key concepts seem to be lifted from recent films like *The Fits* or Lucile Hadžihalilović's hermetic mood pieces *Innocence* and *Evolution*, while the puberty-as-monster-unleashed motif is a direct callback to *Ginger Snaps*. At one point, the masked killer even directly quotes Buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs*. And then there's the fact that virtually any slay-fest at a private girls' academy will be compared with Dario Argento. Which begs the question: Is *Perpetrator* derivative or a postmodern text? It's

hard to say these days, but based on Reeder's other films, it seems she's playing textual games with her viewers, calling on a wide array of genre sources to remind art-damaged snobs of the g(l)ory of straight-ahead horror, all the various themes and stylistic approaches that have been assayed under that proud banner. From late-night Cinemax cheapies to neo-Surrealism, the scary movie contains multitudes. The only constant is thus: in all the good slasher films, women outwit the patriarchy and live to fight another day. — **MICHAEL SICINSKI** [[Originally published as part of InRO's Berlinale 2023 coverage.](#)]

DEEP SEA

Xiaopeng Tian

It's frustrating when the awesome beauty of manicured, ornate spectacle gets caught in a quagmire of its own ideological reduction. When aesthetics, so carefully organized through the specificity of animated design, lose their entire capacity to emote, to enunciate the text that informs their movements, it becomes something of a cinematic flat tire. Tian Xiaopeng's *Deep Sea* unfortunately delivers this kind of failure. A work labored over by a thousand-strong team of animators over a seven-year period, the film's animation is consistently imbued with wonder and grace, yet it all culminates in a grotesque dismissal of child abuse. But to speak on the animation first: the film's style is inspired by Chinese ink painting, utilizing 3D computer-animated graphics to realize a fusion of painterly impressionism and the kaleidoscopic, elastically textured kinetics of something like the recent *Trolls* series. But if that latter comparison may perhaps suggest a bit of a blight on the quality here, this team of animators execute that style with a level of detail and tactility that those American animated studio pictures haven't managed to produce. Even as characters metamorphose and yield in the fashion of anthropomorphized jello, there's a genuine palpability to the weightlessness, verging on the phantasmagoric. Infused with these mechanisms, and likely the reason behind the aesthetic pleasure, is an ingenuity of composition: live-action light designs have been photographed and combined with the animated sequences, ensuring that real and very pointedly expressionist light structures emphasize the spatial and proffer the dimensionality to each frame that so many 3D-animated films cannot begin to conjure. Ultimately, the uncaring and stilted landscapes of contemporary animated blockbusters have



finally found a proficiency for expression, removed from the ironic, breakneck cynicism that has engulfed the media landscape.

Unfortunately, this all comes with a caveat for the shockingly depraved “lessons” that are to be drawn from the film’s narrative conclusions. Let’s start by drawing out the film’s first fifteen minutes of plot: our introduction to the film’s protagonist, Shenxiu, a child of no more than nine or ten, comes via voiceover (courtesy of Wang Tingwen). She writes cheerily to her mother about a cruise she, her father, his wife, and their new child are on. Prior to sending this text, however, she scrolls up to review earlier messages exchanged with her mother, and we see ones that read “another time” in response to Shenxiu asking to visit, or “please stop texting me.” Ultimately, she doesn’t send the text. Following this, Shenxiu’s phone sends her an automated “Happy Birthday” message while she sits at the dinner table, where her father and wife celebrate their child’s entrance into kindergarten, never mentioning the birthday girl. In the very next scene, Shenxiu watches a video of her estranged mother and father celebrating the birthday years prior, with her mother overzealously affirming their relationship: “We’ll be together forever!” This overtly insistent contrast is hilariously crude, the kind of thing only thought up for teaching very small children

basic emotional recognition. Not two minutes later, a water spout sweeps Shenxiu off the boat and into a purgatorial dreamscape, where she finds herself in an underwater restaurant, face to face with the head chef, Nanhe (who it so happens can magically turn himself into a clown), and the two embark on an entirely tangential journey to achieve a five-star rated establishment, where each and every animal would beg for a reservation.

What unfurls from these somewhat unbelievable opening minutes is digression — mostly haphazard plotting accompanied by a peppering of small reconventions with Shenxiu’s trauma over her neglect. By *Deep Sea*’s end, we are watching her spirit fight to live, to wake up and return back to the corporeal world alongside her father, his wife, and their child. A montage of her neglect provides the film’s climax: school, family, and counselors all dismissing the burden of isolation that has been thrown atop Shenxiu, reducing it to the woes every child will eventually go through. But she is completely alone with no support system, and she is actively thrown away by everyone with whom she seeks intimacy. The narrative conclusion to this plight is that she must fight to return to the living and that this spiritual fight she has endured will reconcile all the grief which churned her into something like a ghost. It’s a strange message to impart, that a

child is responsible for such emotional conditions rather than the failures of the society that they are born into, which mold into oppressive environments as children grow not into maturity, but only cognizance. As such, *Deep Sea* becomes something like a moral fairy tale, one so hyper-individualized that the only lesson we're left to glean is "you're on your own, so fight" — the suggestion is essentially compartmentalization. It is a beautiful film, but also one that feels lacking in compassion or decency, embodying an ethic in ruins, where the future reflects our regressive approach to humanity. — ZACHARY GOLDKIND

KIM'S VIDEO

David Redmon & Ashley Sabin

With streaming services yanking titles from availability and even disappearing completed works that may now never be shown again, it might seem like the perfect time to eulogize physical media, once again. We've had movies about obsessive collectors, we've had the story of the sole remaining Blockbuster video; now comes *Kim's Video*, the cleverly titled tale of the legendarily huge catalogue of the New York-based Kim's Video chain.

David Redmon and Ashley Sabin's documentary bounces back and forth between Redmon's obsessive love of cinema and his

feelings of a psychic bond with the store's 55,000-plus collection and tales of clerks-turned-filmmakers (Sean Price Williams and Alex Ross Perry turn up here) or celebrity late fees (the Coens supposedly owed 600 bucks). Redmon can't go thirty seconds without name-checking a famous movie, at one point likening his compulsion to that of Kane with *Rosebud*. It's meant to be cheeky and playful, but then it becomes assaultive and annoying, like being trapped in a conversation with someone who doesn't care about your half of it.

Eventually, the film gets to its heart: In 2008, owner Yongman Kim decided to close the business, and dutifully sought another home for the collection. Bizarrely, he settled on the Italian town of Salemi, which promised to keep the archive available to any Kim's Video member, hold festivals, and even project titles in the town square, all in an effort to boost tourism. But as Karina Longworth [discovered in 2012](#), that never happened. Instead, the mountain of tapes and DVDs sat rotting in a crappy, locked basement. Redmon journeys to Salemi, where he finds not only this dismal sight, but encounters a shifty local politician, a possible mafioso, and even maybe a murder, before finally settling on a mostly tongue-in-cheek "heist," referencing both Godard and the movie *Argo*, to liberate Kim's collection and return it to the U.S. The performative nature of the whole thing is



WIM WENDERS

The Road Trilogy

functionally pretty grating, and seeing what's left of Kim's Video wind up in the hands of a theater chain using it as a kitschy loss-leader to sell beer and T-shirts is disheartening at best.

What's worse, *Kim's Video* has nothing to say about the value of the physical media Redmon is so intent on rescuing, nor does it spend any time discussing all of the other collections around the country (and indeed, the world) that are doing major work keeping that art alive and accessible. It's mostly just a nerd's prank. It's not enough to just love movies, it's not enough that that love has formed so much of your identity; you've got to have something to say about that. — **MATT LYNCH** [[Originally published as part of InRO's Sundance 2023 coverage.](#)]

ONE NIGHT WITH ADELA

Xiaopeng Tian

It takes a few minutes to realize that there hasn't been a single edit in Hugo Ruiz's new film, *One Night With Adela*, and then a few more to understand that there probably isn't going to be an edit, ever. Yes, *Adela* is one of those single-take films, a 100-minute long shot that follows the titular Adela (Laura Galán) in as she drives, walks, and otherwise stalks about a largely deserted urban area seething with rage. The film's opening minutes find Adela the victim of vicious catcalling, robbery, and attempted sexual assault, so it's not difficult to surmise the reasons for her resentment at the world. But the remainder of the film gradually reveals the much deeper seeds of her anger, with the film's real-time depiction ostensibly in support of developing our understanding. The merits, or lack thereof, of this type of gimmick film have long and passionately been debated; and there's no doubt the technique has gained in popularity as lightweight, hi-def digital cameras have gotten better and cheaper. Ruiz's film reliably evinces both the pros and cons of this filmmaking approach,

vacillating between a genuine narrative intensity and an unfortunate tendency toward long lulls. That it winds up closer on the spectrum to the more organically rendered *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* than the elephantine *Birdman* or *1917* is at least a point in its favor.

But back to the beginning: Adela is ending her night shift as a street sweeper. She's just visited an ATM and is making her way back to her truck when a car of aggressive men drive by and begin harassing her. She ignores them, but eventually one of the men exits the car and starts walking alongside her. He pulls her into an alley, gropes her, and discovers a wad of cash on her person. He stops assaulting her and instead decides to take the money and be on his way. Adela runs after him and strangles him to death, leaving the body under some debris and continuing on her way to her dealer's house. Once she arrives, she's understandably agitated, chain-smoking furiously while she does some lines and buys a joint for later. Adela leaves the dealer's house and makes her way back to her truck, where she calls in to a late-night radio talk show. It's one of those self-help advice shows, where people call in with their problems and the host (voiced by Gemma Nierga) offers vague platitudes and condolences. Adela informs Gemma that she is planning to murder someone, and that there is nothing anyone can do to stop her. Of course, we've already seen her kill someone, and even though that act was arguably in self-defense, Adela's rage suggests that her premeditated plan was going to transpire whether or not the initial assault ever happened. It's hard to know for sure, which is obviously the design Ruiz intends.



The film is ultimately a character study of an unknowable person, which both fascinates and frustrates. The single-take ploy also causes some dramatic issues in the early goings; Adela's walks to and from her truck are captured in real-time, at first bringing to mind the focused intensity of something like the Dardennes' *Rosetta*, but eventually tensions leaks as we're subjected to interminable stretches of simply waiting for her to



get to where she's going. One scene finds Adela hopping out of her truck to run into a gas station; the camera stays in the truck while we listen to Gemma's talk show for a couple of minutes, and it is entirely unclear what Adela is doing in the corner store. Using the bathroom? Buying more cigarettes? One finds themselves begging for an edit just to excise the narrative doldrums.

Still, one could make a case that the prolonged exposure to Adela's agitated state is necessary for the film's last act. Eventually returning home to a surprisingly lush apartment, Adela calls a male escort to keep her company. The threat of potential violence hangs over the proceedings, and Ruiz does a fine job of keeping the audience on edge, waiting for the other shoe to drop. What transpires in the apartment is better left unspoiled, but there's a reason for Adela's anger, a purpose behind her lashing out. As portrayed by Galán, who was so good in last year's *Piggy*, Adela is a force to be reckoned with. Blunt and bold, she "likes vices," as she informs her escort — "sex, drugs, and Black boys" make up her list. That kind of bullish self-possession is glimpsed elsewhere in *Adela*: Galán is a plus-sized actress, and while her weight isn't a central plot point here the way it was in *Piggy*, it does come up frequently, and highlights her understanding of how to leverage her underrepresented image to enrich characters, here asserting

herself and her physicality on screen as if declaring "Look at me." Maybe that's what *One Night With Adela* is really about — a damaged young woman who wants to really be seen, not just looked at like a freak show. — DANIEL GORMAN

SILVER HAZE

Sacha Polak

Dutch director Sacha Polak set a very high bar for herself with *Hemel*, her 2012 debut feature. Raw and at times agonizing, *Hemel* is a profile of a young woman careening through her life with violent abandon. Polak's fourth feature, *Silver Haze*, doesn't achieve the emotional highs and lows of her debut, but it's the first that even comes close. Working again with Vicky Knight, star of her last film, *Dirty God*, Polak delves into the lonely, desultory lives of working-class women in Britain, where to have any expectation for warmth and kindness is to set oneself up for bitter disappointment.

Franky, a twenty-something nurse who (like Knight herself) survived a fire and wears her burn scars in almost punk-rock defiance, lives with her mom and sister in a cramped council flat. One night during her shift, Franky treats Florence (Esmé Creed-Miles), a brash, bitter woman who has just attempted suicide. They bond, quickly becoming friends and then lovers.

"I'm a bad person," Florence warns Franky early on, and while *Silver Haze* refrains from judging its deeply damaged characters, Polak is also sending up a warning flare. For Florence, forming an emotional connection offers her a way to externalize her self-hatred, punishing anyone who risks caring about her.

Franky and Leah live in the shadow of the accident that nearly killed them, believing it to have been done deliberately by their father's new wife. They stalk dad's new family, furious that he has abandoned them, although as we learn, the situation is a bit more complex. Ultimately, *Silver Haze* is a tough film to evaluate, because Polak's narrative structure moves in fits and starts, just like the borderline personalities of its subjects. People suddenly move in with other families, or torpedo their relationships for no apparent reason, or (in Leah's case) convert to Islam, seemingly on a whim. The disgusting behavior of young men is taken to be a fact of life, as immutable as the weather. In a way, *Silver Haze* confounds traditional notions of characterization and cause-and-effect, because its working-class heroines are seldom able to rise above the chaos that engulfs them. It's an unstable film *about* instability, and as such it is gripping and maddening in equal measure. — **MICHAEL SICINSKI** [[Originally published as part of InRO's Berlinale 2023 coverage.](#)]

DEAD GIRLS DANCING

Anna Roller

Anna Roller's directorial debut, *Dead Girls Dancing*, boasts a quite familiar plot, following three German high schoolers who embark on a road trip throughout Italy after their graduation. It's an impulsive decision that, right off the bat, establishes a "girls just wanna have fun" narrative around the trio of Ira (Luna Jordan), Ka (Noemi Liv Nicolaisen), and Malin (Katharina Stark), and indulges certain tropes of the coming-of-age romantic summer. For the most part, *Dead Girls Dancing* tends, in the absence of a tight plot, toward capturing the free-wheeling breeziness of adolescence and intimacy among its ensemble characters, who are on an innocent quest to experience liberation from the constraints of modern society, its quotidian demands, and its usual boredom. This sense of longing for self-realization is reinforced when the girls run into another free spirit, an enigmatic hitchhiker named Zoe (Sara Giannelli), who soon befriends and accompanies them for the rest of their adventure.

Through delicate, rhythmic editing and an expressive sound design, Anna Roller breaks away from the conventions of most road movies and rite-of-passage fare. In fact, *Dead Girls Dancing* exhibits a specific aestheticism — simultaneously of inexplicable mystery and oozing beauty — that situates it within a certain lineage of works including Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*. Here, DP Felix Pflieger's cinematography plays a crucial role in making a character of the Italian countryside's great splendor, reveling in its vistas and landscapes (especially when the girls arrive at an abandoned remote village after a flat tire) and engendering the mildly cryptic eeriness that is constantly felt on screen. By embracing a formal mode built on peculiar camera angles, meticulous compositions, the use of natural light, and abstracted insert shots, Roller and Pflieger succeed in shaping a world that is concomitantly carnal and spiritual, animated and phantom-like. The camera heightens this unease, exerting a somewhat ghostly presence by either following the characters from behind or capturing them stealthily in the distance; a particularly memorable instance comes during an all-girls debauched evening, which in its aesthetic character recalls *Chungking Express* more than anything else.

Yet regardless of all its ambient beauty, *Dead Girls Dancing* falls a little short in its third act when it tries to distance itself from the established moodiness and pivot back to the "main" plot. From this point onward, the tension is relatively disjointed and things become slightly hastier and messier. Take, for instance, Ira's series of hysterical and guilt-ridden reactions during this stretch: they doesn't ring as convincingly as they should, and even if we can simply read her sudden tumult as a result of her newfound attraction for Zoe or the loss of her freedom, the way Roller executes this all is too loose. It's obvious that the director endeavors to depict the irreconcilable and violent clash between youthful longing and lawful enforcement, a clash compounded by religious and psychoanalytic institutions which label all things juvenile as indecent and criminal — the film opens with the students during their graduation photoshoot, and later we will see them in mugshots — but the film's denouement is too slapdash in its ambiguous metaphorical suggestions. Regardless, as we observe Ira in this final sequence, joyfully watching birds flit in the sky, it's not too hard to look past *Dead Girls Dancing's* failed landing and forward to Roller's future as a promising and free-thinking filmmaker. — **AYEEN FOROOTAN**



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