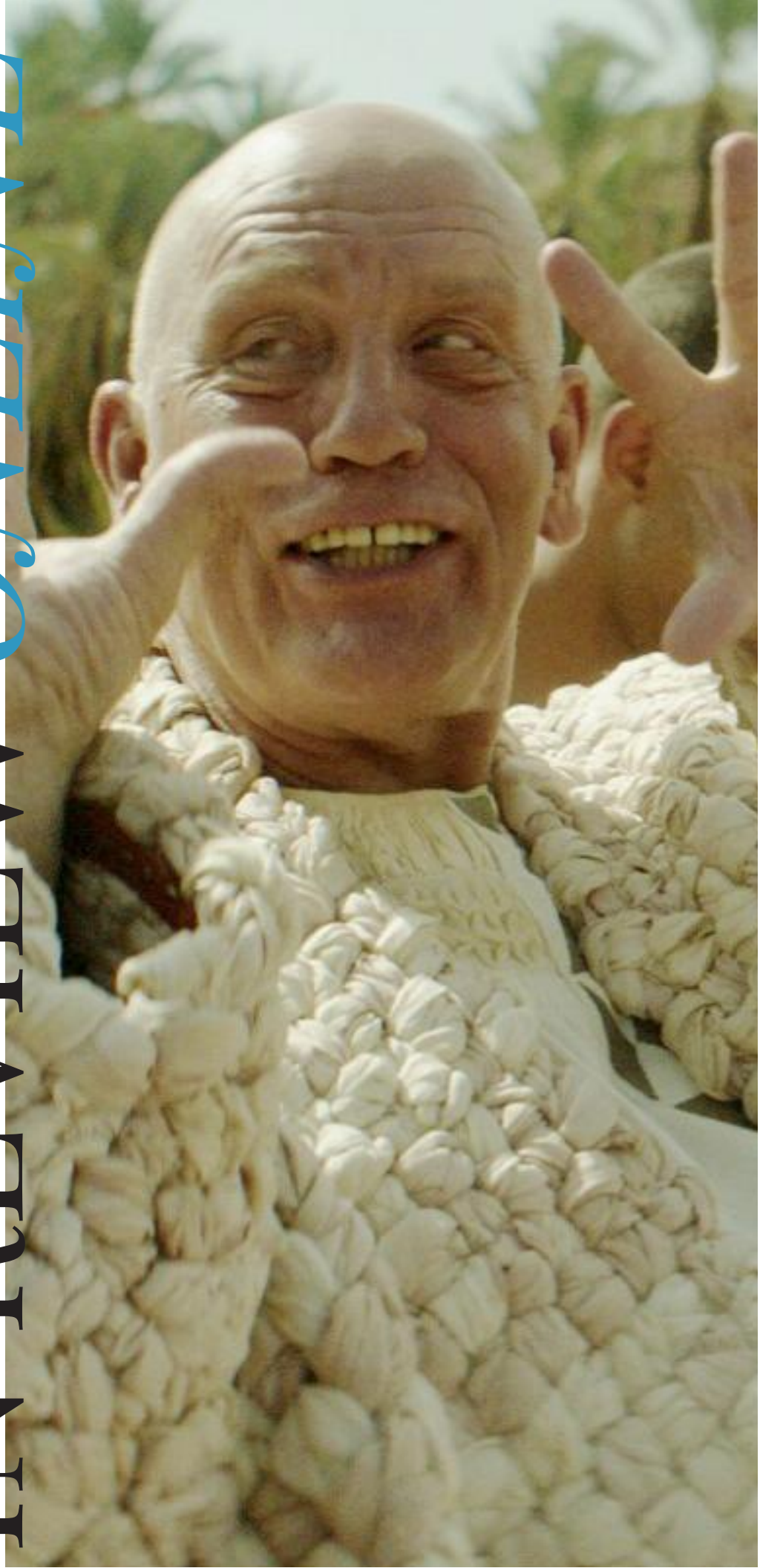
IN REVIEW ONLINE



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IN WATER

Hong Sang-soo

As the star of Hong Sang-soo has improbably grown, the traditional (and often erroneous) stereotypes lobbed against his films have stayed stuck in the mud. None of these are fair, strictly speaking, impressions largely drawn from loglines and ignoring the often wild differentiations that arise between his films, especially those in this current period inaugurated sometime around 2018. *in water* [sic], which unusually (but fittingly) premiered in the Berlinale Encounters section rather than in his customary Competition slot, provides a stellar example of how deceptively flexible his approach has become, even as his recent concerns about inspiration and creation of art remain constant.

At only 61 minutes, *in water* is Hong's shortest feature yet, and like his other mid-length film from just two years prior, 2021's *Introduction* (in the Berlinale competition), it stars Shin Seok-ho — the fresh-faced youth who has risen to provide a compelling contrast to past Hongian men — as Seoung-mo, an actor who seeks to direct a short film for the first time. In order to do so, he travels to the rocks of Jeju Island with his friends — Nam-hee, an actress (Kim Seung-yun), and Sang-guk, a former filmmaker (Ha Seong-guk) — in tow. Without a script, they intend to spend a week at a rented house, all paid for by Seoung-mo, as he searches for script material on the beach and in the alleys. Even more than in other recent Hong films, *in water*'s presentation is deceptively spare, with much of the on-screen conversation springing forth from two people getting to know each other while the would-be director sits pensively, pondering the surroundings.

And even more so than in *The Novelist's Film*, *in water* explicitly takes Hong's way of artmaking as its raison d'être; he mentioned that he shot the film in a week himself, and his increasing shouldering of almost all production responsibilities mirrors the skeleton crew on display here. So, it's fascinating to see how, if not his mindset, then how his process is imparted onto someone on the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of life and experience; while Hong has worked at an unceasing pace, Seoung-mo describes himself as scared, only now finally breaking out of acting to pursue his own inspiration. This perspective does not feel like an imposition: unlike *Introduction*, there is no adult balance to counterbalance the faces of youth, but only the continually adrift director, reflective beyond his years, carving out a world-weary niche all the same.

Getting deep into a review of *in water* without mentioning the film's greatest gambit, shooting most of the film (every exterior and a majority of the interiors) out of focus, might seem foolish, but it does not (and should not) capture everything that distinguishes this film. But it *is* constantly beautiful, and

purposefully inconsistent in the degree to which the shots are out of focus, a slight change in gradation that becomes especially noticeable as the characters are placed or move closer or further away from the camera. There are certain "pay-offs," but the blur remains principally compelling in its reflection of Hong's own recent eye troubles, which have overlapped with his decision to lens all his films himself. It serves as a constant reminder of his presence, yet one that does not detract from the film in the slightest. Instead, it further essentializes the nigh archetypal nature of his three young people. At their core, specific characterization matters little in the face of what Hong is interested in exploring, and the depth of feeling, arising from questions relating to a belief in that which exists both within and apart of one's perception, is conveyed as masterfully as ever. ***— RYAN SWEN***

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 Devid — 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.

> Afire is something of a reinvention for Petzold, moving away from the politico-historical drama... and into the realm of the Rohmerian summer sex comedy.

But above all, Leon is a tornado of repression. Awoken by the sounds of Nadja and Devid's furniture-rattling sex in the other room, an agitated Leon decides to sleep outside. Afterwards, a nude Devid 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***

MUSIC

Angela Schanelec

Read a review of any of Angela Schanelec's feature films and you're bound to encounter adjectives like "elliptical," "confounding," and "obscure." It's true — the German filmmaker has a peculiar approach to storytelling, favoring all manner of narrative obfuscation while honing in on movements, gestures, and that most basic building block of cinema: the image itself. Echoes of Bresson permeate her filmography, so too the works of Straub-Huillet, perhaps the key filmmakers of the second half of the 20th century (apologies to Godard). In any case, Schanelec has positioned herself as part of a specific lineage in Modernist European filmmaking. By eschewing establishing shots, standardized continuity editing, most narrative exposition, and even traditional temporal logic, Schanelec seems determined to perfect a kind of addition through subtraction. Her's is a search for the essence of the *thing*. There's a magic to it, if one can attune themselves to her sensibility.

After the (relative) success of her last feature, 2019's *I Was at Home, But...*, Schanelec returns with *Music*, a loose retelling of the Oedipus myth that allows her to hang her formal and conceptual concerns onto a well-known framework. It doesn't necessarily make everything "make sense," but the familiarity allows audiences a kind of anchor to get their footing as Schanelec leaps past years in a single edit. Beginning with a torrential storm and a wailing man carrying what appears to be a dead body, paramedics arrive to discover a newborn baby with curious wounds on its ankles. One of the first responders, Elias



(Argyris Xafis), takes the baby home to his wife, Merope (Marissa Triantafyllidou), and the two become the child's de facto adopted parents. As Merope washes the child's feet in the gentle ocean waves, we cut to a group of young adults out for a joy ride. It's not until we see a shot of swollen, irritated ankles that we realize the baby is now fully grown. He's named Jon, played for the rest of the film by Aliocha Schneider, and while we don't get the full sense of his relationship with the other revelers, it's only a few minutes before he is accosted by a strange man. Jon pushes the man away, who then accidentally cracks his head on a jagged rock and dies. Jon is quickly sent to prison, where he meets a female guard, Iro (Agathe Bonitzer). Upon Jon's release, the pair fall in love and have a child. Eventually, they return to Jon's parent's home, where the remainder of this tragedy will unfold.

This brief synopsis doesn't quite do justice to Schanelec's austere and, yes, even elliptical storytelling. Favoring a mostly static camera, Schanelec films scenes from either a great distance, immersing characters in the natural landscape surrounding them, or in extreme closeups, singling out feet and legs or arms and cutting off the rest of the body at the edge of the frame. Large swaths of connective narrative tissue are excised altogether; for example, Jon's stay in prison is represented by two brief sequences that imply violent altercations that aren't actually shown, while Iro wiles the time away with her coworkers playing games. Further, Jon and Iro's romance is constructed entirely out of furtive glances and longing looks, their affair solidified when Iro goes to a pharmacy to purchase ointment and bandages for his ankles. The two eventually hold hands, before the next shot reveals that Iro is pregnant, then another that shows her accompanied by a child roughly six or seven years old. In this sense, *Music* acts as a companion piece to *The Dreamed Path*, where Schanelec has two lovers separate and then meet again decades later, but makes no effort to "age them up." Time becomes elusive, belying the otherwise realistic milieu at hand. Indeed, Schanelec's willingness to infuse this ostensible realism with flights of fancy and formal game-playing links her to Rivette, of all people. Objects become important as both identifying markers and totems; Jon's birth father is introduced wearing thick, black-rimmed glasses. When they meet again years later, he's still wearing them, and later Jon will adopt a similar pair as his eyesight wanes with age. It's all very precise, Schanelec's rigorous formal control creating opaque connections and thrillingly unpredictable ellipses.

Anyone already familiar with the Oedipus tale will be well aware of the fate in store for several characters here, but curiously, Schanelec changes Jon's part of the story. Rather than blinding himself after the death of his mother/wife, Jon instead carries on, becoming a musician (another echo of *The Dreamed Path*, whose protagonist strives to become a musician before succumbing to drug addiction). If the tale of Oedipus is understood as a warning about fate, Schanelec instead seems to be suggesting that we can, in fact, free ourselves from a predetermined path. Jon sings periodically throughout the film, but it's not until after Iro's death that he seems to fully embrace it. The film ends with a joyous promenade, full of singing and prancing, as Jon and his remaining family march toward an unknown future. Like all great films, Schanelec's latest teaches you how to watch it. *Music* is a masterpiece. **— DANIEL GORMAN**

ON THE ADAMANT

Nicolas Philibert

In an edition of surprises, programming eclecticism, and a refreshingly measured jury performance, Nicolas Philibert's Golden Bear win for his latest documentary might yet prove the most unexpected. Having snubbed the Twitterati's two prime choices, namely Makoto Shinkai's *Suzume* and Celine Song's *Past Lives*, for the top prize, the gentle and wistful *On the Adamant* marks only the second time a documentary film has garnered this level of recognition at the Berlinale, the first being Gianfranco Rosi's bracing *Fire at Sea* in 2016. Both films, incidentally, share an aquatic metaphor, literalized in the latter's canvases of human compassion and indifference toward the European migrant crisis and personified here in the floating barge, from which Philibert's film gets its title, moored to the banks of the river Seine. Yet the septuagenarian's aim is less an activist one, a call to sustained moral action; rather, *On the Adamant* undertakes the often thankless task of surveying the outer, sometimes inner, lives of the barge's daytime inhabitants — for the *Adamant* is a therapeutic facility, and its visitors are those with mental disorders.

Philibert's documentarian reflexes, honed across nearly five decades, buck the usual trend of narrativization, and his subjects typically straddle communal as opposed to individual horizons. *To Be and to Have*, released in 2002, was hitherto the filmmaker's most acclaimed and well-known work, set over a single year in a municipal primary school classroom. With *On the Adamant*, Philibert tackles, in similarly observational fashion, the delicate issue of representing mental illness on screen, rarely intervening into the camera's frank depiction of reality and seldomly furnishing context beyond the *Adamant*'s quaint, tranquil surroundings. His subjects speak for themselves,



unencumbered by the fear and anxiety of documentary's tendency towards rigorous categorization. Over several months, Philibert's camera tracks the mundane happenings onboard what's essentially a daycare center and mental health retreat: various workshops for cooking, song, and dance, alongside film club screenings, sewing sessions, and a coffee bar manned by the patients themselves, are given their due screentime with a gentle indifference. Hierarchy, in other words, has little import within this little community.

This quasi-utopian portrait, however, is tempered with the looming, if implicit, realization that such communities are as rare as they come, and that they may not always be here to stay. "For how much longer?" poses a title card at the film's denouement. Many of the patients in *On the Adamant* report solace in the supportive atmosphere they find amongst each other, but their personal conditions have, by and large, stymied their ability to work, interact, and otherwise function outside this space, unless bolstered by heavy and constant doses of meds. One of them recounts, tragically, her son's relocation to a foster home due to her inability to care for him; another relates his frequent highs and hallucinations: like "Jesus surrounded by little birds," he shrugs. Yet others, in their little time before the camera, reveal their hobbies, passions, interests — one sings and plays the piano, showcasing his novel composition, for example — and therefore their individuality.

On the Adamant doesn't always penetrate, and frequent stretches of its runtime do call for *some* exposition, if only to undergird the center's integrated organization and functioning beyond the subjectivities of its constituents. One wishes for a more systematic treatment of contextual exigencies: the institution's founding, its funding, the way its patients are screened, selected, and ultimately nursed to good or decent health. Philibert steadfastly holds onto his free-floating, indifferent formalism though, if only to reject the need to explicate or elaborate and to, instead, humanize the struggle with disorders of the mind. That's a promising outlook on the whole, inflected with the pathos and poignancy of a sanctuary that, perhaps, won't always be there and won't always be open to all. When asked about occupations, one patient replies, "poetry," and quickly adds, "but it's not a job." The demands of wider society may not always be kind to its people, but sometimes the little gestures of solidarity may be enough. ***— MORRIS YANG***

TÓTEM
Lila Avilés

From the first moments of *Tótem,* it's easy to think about Lucas Dhont, which is never a good thing. Like Dhont's recently released *Close*, Lila Avilés' sophomore feature is shot in that familiar festival style: tight close-ups, handheld and with a shallow depth of field. If this approach, at first, endeavored to push a sense of reality and a feeling of being in-the-moment, it now only signifies a festival origin story and suggests that the film won't have much life outside of that enclosed ecosystem. Dhont breaks through this because it's all a front, a thin layer of prestige to cover his cruelty and sensationalism; he is ultimately shameless in a way that Avilés clearly isn't. That might make her film seem a little slight, but it's probably the better for it. When shot in this way, the opening scene, where the young Sol (Naíma Sentíes) and her mother Lucía (Iazua Larios) mess around in a public bathroom, seems a little insistent on its own openness, on how it's showing the life of women, and people more generally, in an unadorned way, but there is still a real sense of life to it. Unlike in Dhont's films, where everything reveals itself to be an empty signifier — where every character is a symbol for some hare-brained idea — Avilés' film feels authentic even underneath its signifiers of authenticity.

This contrasts quite interestingly with the film's title. *Tótem* plays out in loose and incidental scenes, as Sol's large family prepares for a birthday and goodbye party for her dying father, Tona (Mateo García Elizondo); it's a film of specificities, and so nothing seems obviously totemic. Except maybe for the bonsai tree the voiceless patriarch is pruning, but that symbol doesn't mean much when confronted with the reality of his family, where no amount of pruning can contain the growing chaos. The film's project, then, seems paradoxical: to create something symbolic through the specific. This is much like Ozu's films, of much calmer family incidents and entanglement, that accumulate far beyond their specific and literal material to something almost transcendent.

But, as with symbols, Avilés is suspicious of transcendence, of anything too spiritual, or she's at least conflicted. When a middle-aged exorcist visits and starts burping out the spirits, it seems obvious that that's not what haunts this place, but when



Tona's friends give speeches at his party and try to frame their friendship — and, more importantly, his imminent death — through a spiritual framework, there is still some sense that they're forcing it. But the feelings these ideas conjure ring true. Unfortunately, this can't be said of the film itself, which, despite Avilés' formidable ambitions, never quite takes off. It might be that suspicion that stops it, that constant doubt smudging the edges until it becomes more vague and elusive than it should be.

But *Tótem's* ultimate failing comes from the perspective it's told from, that of the seven-year-old Sol. As she looks on quietly at the chaos surrounding her, she embodies many of the same clichés about childhood that *Close* peddled: namely, the idea that children have a kind of magical innocence; that they have some deeper insight into the adult world since they are not yet burdened by its pressures, despite the fact that they have been subjected to almost nothing else — their lives are so defined by these rules they have almost no context for. This might give a different perspective on them, but it's hardly a better one. To know how something works specifically is to know it better than merely having felt its weight. Sure, the justifications that prop up *the way the world works* haven't yet been formed, but neither have the objections. Things simply are as they are. That profound disempowerment is part of what makes childhood so isolating, and is probably where this archetype of the distant, almost voyeuristic child who blankly takes everything in, comes from; when everything is beyond your understanding or control, all you can do is watch.

Of course, adults can also be blind to these structures, but that's usually for different reasons. When so entangled within the minutiae and daily struggles of one's own life, it's hard to take the time or energy to look at it more broadly (and then even more time and energy is needed to do anything about it). But this isn't

glamorized in the same way; it isn't imbued with the same magical thinking, probably because this feeling of disempowerment is much more present in the lives of the people who tell these stories and reproduce these archetypes. And so, while it might seem a stretch to call *Tótem* nostalgic, there is something idealistic in the character of Sol. It's not that she's lacking in complexity or even a little prickliness, but there is an avoidance in not showing the ways that an intelligent child interacts with the world around her. That lack of context which brings this innocence and fear is also what allows children to be uniquely cruel. As with language, they learn partially through imitation, and so they naturally replicate the cruelty of the world around them, empowered by that totalizing sense of *the way things are supposed to be*. Without this, unlike so much of the film that surrounds her, Sol is flattened into a totem, a symbol of childhood.

Maybe that's what makes the ending, where all the ambiguities in Sol's life become sharpened into a specific and painful form as she realizes what it really means for her father to die, somewhat unconvincing. But this quite brilliantly conceived scene would likely still hit if not for the form, which suddenly shifts from an insistence on reality to an insistence on significance. Everything points toward it, from Sol's long glare at the camera to the soundtrack's heavy, dooming drone, to the loud snap of the candles on her father's birthday cake. These don't heighten because they take away the sense of accumulation that the film was building toward: there can be no leap to this reverse transcendence, this powerful awareness of material reality, when Avilés takes that leap herself and simply tells us that it's happening. ***— ESMÉ HOLDEN***

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.

> The main issue… is not that it doesn't have an interesting concept, but that it doesn't do enough with it to justify its general abrasiveness.

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**

SENECA — ON THE CREATION OF EARTHQUAKES

Robert Schwentke

With his latest feature, director Robert Schwentke has moved away from his *Time Traveler's Wife*, *Divergent*, *Snake Eyes*-days of bad blockbuster filmmaking. *Seneca — On the Creation of Earthquakes* is roughly as audience-unfriendly as films come, sometimes to its benefit, but mostly otherwise. For proof, simply start with the conceit: a pseudo-satiristic comedy charting the final hours of the life of Stoic philosopher and playwright Lucius Annaeus Seneca the Younger. Famously the tutor of the tyrannical emperor Nero, Seneca (here played by John Malkovich) has by the point of Schwentke's film fallen out of "The President's" favor; and, as students of history know, will soon be asked to kill himself for (probably unfounded) treason against the sanctioned despot. And at one point post-condemnation, Seneca rails against the "fucking, fucking, fucking rich people." So, let's take stock: we have a president in quotes who rules as a dictator, an elitist antipodal class of self-indulgent and self-serious yokels, and some vague anti-capitalist rhetoric. If you're reading contemporary critique into this barely-A.D.-set historico-tragedy, well then you're picking up what Schwentke is laying down. Parallels between American and Roman excess — WHOA.

The problem, then, is that all of this would-be acerbic fodder is remarkably flaccid. It's also much besides the point. Despite such pointed but empty provocations littered throughout, *Seneca* is more accurately classified as a dark comedy of sorts; it's just a shame that the prime conceit of centering an oddball, Malkovich-starring comedy around Seneca's historically documented struggles to off himself would be so irksome. Much of this comes down to a series of inane and arch decisions made by Schwentke. The film boasts a baffling and somehow aurally anachronistic voiceover that lends the proceedings the feel of a Wes Anderson-does-Shakespeare historical tragicomedy; not actually a terrible gambit — that's, well, 70% Wes Anderson — but inconsistently and directionlessly utilized here. Then there's the grating fisheye lens that is employed for much of the film's first half, establishing a hallucinatory texture during an early,



particularly brutal performance of Seneca's *Thyestes* for a horde of rich wads at the dramatist's home; the askance angles and lensing admittedly help to infuse the first twenty minutes with some intrigue, as it's unclear at this point where exactly the bonkers film is headed, but it's all ultimately in service of momentary affectation. And we also have the garish, horror-adjacent costuming meant to channel the spirit of the Roman Empire's upper-class indulgence. But it all mostly amounts to a very *stagey* film, its line readings and spare production design feeling deeply theatrical — certainly intentional, given Seneca's profession, and the oppressively flowery screenplay delivered by frequent Schwentke collaborator Evan Spiliotopoulos and Matthew Wilder (which admittedly pulls directly from the Roman Senator's own words, but is assembled to maximalist effect) — and the myriad early, cartoonish tableaux landing mostly in *womp womp* fashion. There's a clear Julie Taymor influence here, the film attempting to occupy some heightened but nebulous space between the modern and antiquated, but there's nothing beneath the dressings.

> The problem, then, is that all of this would-be acerbic fodder is remarkably flaccid.

The film's second half is where Schwentke's intent clarifies a bit, but not really in any meaningful or appealing way. Here, after Seneca the Senator is informed by a particularly violent soldier of the end he has been commanded to meet, *Seneca* the film leans, quite spectacularly, into its comedy. Rather than rendering the circumstances a tragedy in their own right, or adhering to the more romantic historical version of Seneca's noble suicide, Schwentke opts for a more measured account of the event, by the historian Tacitus: Nero is never humanized, but the eponymous thinker is cast as more of a pompous, waffling doofus than heir to the Greek tradition he so subscribes to (and cribs from). And much is mined from the account of Seneca's difficulties at death: while his wife, who attempts to duplicate his efforts, fountains blood and falls into unconsciousness, his "sawdust" veins leak little. He then attempts hemlock, but that too results only in fatuous, drug-addled ruminating. And finally he plots to lobster himself in a boiling hot bath, but his lone remaining adherent finally balks.

But while this tilt into po-faced absurdity results in some genuinely funny moments — watch a flustered Malkovich in Roman-era garb drop a "whatevs" after 45 minutes of high-brow pontificating, and try not to crack a smirk — this is also where the film becomes most annoying. Malkovich's masticated monologues become even more halting in delivery and on-the-nose in content: "For how can anything exist when I'm dead." And if contemporary American analoging and musings on the upper crust within a stealth totalitarian state weren't enough, Schwentke also regrettably decides to skew even more of-the-moment, channeling the social media age's innate solipsism as subject matter. We cycle through the admittedly clever line, "Perhaps I can be my best Seneca by becoming Socrates," to the Senator's incessant ballyhooing about his legacy, to the actual line uttered in a Roman Empire-set film: "I must have my followers." (The camera even adopts a TikTok aspect ratio at one point during this stretch.) By this point, whatever weirdo novelty originally existed in the film's premise, and whatever grace Malkovich brings to the film — you can't deny the casting; few people can spit either nonchalant vitriol or pretentious bullshit in the same way — has been subsumed by the utterly gauche treatment Schwentke has subjected the material to. It's frustrating because the conceit is fine enough on its own to build a kitschy flick from, but, much like the presentation the film offers of the man it takes as both subject and stooge, *Seneca* is a blowhard endeavor carried forth only by its own hot air. ***— LUKE GORHAM***

OUR BODY

Claire Simon

Premiering in the Berlinale's Forum section, Claire Simon's documentary *Our Body* follows her 2021 docudrama *I Want to Talk About Duras*. The title of that previous film, as well as its approach, with its screenplay directly taken from transcripts of the interview it depicts, suggests clarity. However, there's an opacity inherent both to Yann Andréa as an interviewee and Duras as his subject that renders such clarity impossible. *Our Body*, filmed in the gynecological wing of a Parisian hospital,

quickly charts the opposite trajectory. After a prologue in which Simon explains how the film came about at the suggestion of producer Kristina Larsen after being treated in the hospital for several years, the film's first patient appears shot only from behind as she speaks to an abortion counselor. Despite the visual obstruction not only of her face, but partially of the counselor's behind a mask, their conversation is stunning both in its humanity and precision. It's exceptionally clear that the counselor's only goal is to attain the best care for her patient, and the patient's to accurately provide the information necessary in interest of her care.

Eventually, we come to realize this first patient's face is most likely hidden in order to protect her privacy; she is a teenager, and though she has told both her parents and her partner that she is pregnant and says they support her decision to receive an abortion, she is concerned by their reactions and unsure of her own decision (though that precaution will not again be necessary in the film, and Simon most often situates herself on the side of *doctor* and *patient*, panning between their faces, masks, for the most part, remaining in place). This is clearly felt by the doctors, as one who oversees the hormone treatment of trans patients often asks them to briefly remove their masks in order to see and remember what they look like. This desire to connect, to know who they are caring for, defines *Our Body*. It's seen perhaps most directly in what may be the gentlest birth scene ever put to film. Barring the two-person camera crew, only the mother and a single doctor are present, as her husband is taking care of their other children, and the cliché chaos of birth is almost entirely eschewed. The scene ends with doctor and patient thanking each other, comparing the experience to having sat down to tea together. The following scene's C-section may fall closer to the chaotic expectations of birth, but it is still punctuated by clear and compassionate communication.

Being set in a hospital and featuring, though in far lesser quantity and sense, graphic surgery footage, *Our Body* is sure to recall the recent festival hit from Lucain Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*. But though this film's focus on communication sets it apart from *De Humani*, it's also different both from that film and Frederick Wiseman's similarly marathon institutional documentaries in its lack of strict adherence to observation. Though Simon is generally content to let conversations play out on their own, in quieter moments, she asks patients about their experiences and doctors about their methods. And so, as the film continues, its observational distance increasingly collapses; as a woman prepares to go under for surgery, she thanks Simon by name for filming the process so that other people will know what to expect. Most startlingly, in the film's final hour, Simon becomes a patient, allowing herself to exhibit the same level of vulnerability as her film's other subjects.

In one of the film's few jaunts outside the hospital, Simon films a protest staged by women who were sexually assaulted by doctors. Though this protest appears to be in opposition to the scenes of tremendous compassion that precede and follow it, the conclusion cannot be that it negates the experiences of the women speaking. One possibility is that the observation of the camera precludes such violations. Though this may be too simplistic a read — even if Simon had captured such a traumatic moment, it's almost unimaginable that she would have included it in the film — as well as an inimitable antidote, it does add to both the film's emotional and practical heft. Besides functioning as an encouraging artifact for future patients, which is to say nearly everyone, as the woman who thanks Simon for filming her surgery hopes, it may at least be able to serve as a more holistic model for a right relationship between doctor and patient. **— *JESSE CATHERINE WEBBER***

REMEMBERING EVERY NIGHT

Yui Kiyohara

Director Kiohara Yui's last feature, *Our House* — which debuted in 2017, and which this writer briefly reviewed here at *InRO* when it played the New Directors/New Films Festival in 2018 — was a kind of a mellow haunted house film that interwove the lives of different women who happened to occupy the same space, though at different times (or in the same time but in different dimensions — it's ambiguous). Her long-awaited follow-up similarly charts the lives of not-quite-interconnected women sharing the same space, though this time, her world has expanded from a single home to encompass an entire neighborhood. Three women go about their business over the course of a single day in a Tokyo suburb called Tama New Town: the oldest is unemployed, and after finding an old postcard from



a friend, decides to go visit her despite having trouble finding her place; the middle is a gas meter reader who helps find a lost elderly man and return him to his home; the youngest is a college student who hangs out with a friend as they visit a museum and commemorate the anniversary of the death of a friend.

Kiohara herself grew up in Tama, and in her Director's Statement notes the importance of its manufactured environment: "At a glance, there is an artificial uniformity to the city's scenery that lends it the impression of a manufactured movie set. Apartment blocks and parks seem to extend infinitely, with no way out of the surroundings in sight." Indeed, the town's housing complexes, enmeshed in rolling hills and parks and winding roads, form a kind of labyrinth, one that doesn't so much trap the women as lead to seemingly infinite avenues of discovery. It's a bright, sunny summer day, one that makes even the oddest or saddest moments feel warm and inviting. An unusual score punctuates it all: odd percussive beats and single notes plucked on a guitar or struck on a keyboard, accompanied by electronic bleeps and bloops contrast fruitfully with the natural environments we see. It all looks like a beautiful park: trees and lush green grass, the constant hum of insects and chirping birds. But in fact, it's all a creation — a manufactured world.

While superficially similar to the 2023 Berlinale's *There is a Stone*, in that both films feature not much in the way of plotting or genre familiarity, but rather focus on people hanging out in and walking through a (more or less) natural space, the experience of watching *Remembering Every Night* is totally different. *There is a Stone* is defined by the elements it leaves out, the dangers alluded to but which never come to pass, leaving us to resolve in a space somewhere between dread and relief. *Remembering Every Night*, however, is exactly itself: a walk through a neighborhood, inviting us to peek in on a variety of small comedies and dramas along the way. Like a slow-motion, mostly non-verbal Richard Linklater's *Slacker*, we get a portrait of a community. Like Sylvia Chang's *20 30 40*, we see women navigating the world at different stages of their lives. Maybe they're all the same woman. Except, of course, they aren't: but it's the kind of thing you could imagine would make sense while you're sitting under a shade tree on a warm afternoon as you drift off to sleep while the birds sing. ***— SEAN GILMAN***

THE BEAST IN THE JUNGLE

Patric Chiha

It's arguably a Sisyphean task to adapt Henry James' late work to the screen, and in particular his 1903 novella *The Beast in the Jungle*. With erudite intellect and an esoteric tongue, the novelist's enigmatic tale of life, death, and the indelible touch of desire on both resists interpretation as much as it philanders around the realm of exegesis and explanation. John Marcher and May Bartram meet one mysterious evening at a party, and they discover they had met before, some years ago. A secret had been spilled then, one so potent yet impenetrable, of "the sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen." Years pass since the two are reacquainted, and she, having agreed to keep vigil over his fate, does so with conviction and discretion, until he suspects her of knowing something he doesn't. The Beast has pounced, or it is pouncing, or it soon will; haunted by this indeterminacy, as well as the futile reminiscing of a life gone to waste by its hands, John lives out the rest of his days a broken, defeated man.

> "... one can't help but be beguiled by the mise en scène sensuously lensed by Céline Bozon, an aesthetic miasma that aches even as the languorous camera itself doesn't.

And yet, several adaptations have been spun: one in 2017 by a Brazilian directorial trio (Paulo Betti, Lauro Escorel, and Eliane Giardini), another in 2019 by Dutch filmmaker Clara van Gool, an upcoming scenario simply titled *The Beast*, helmed by French maestro Bertrand Bonello, and — at present — a lush, hypnotic, if sometimes impassive rendition of a Parisian nightclub as liminal, timeless space. Patric Chiha's follow-up to *If It Were Love*, his 2020 documentary on the lives of dancers in Gisèle Vienne's touring piece *Crowd*, retains the latter's magnetism and trains it on the ecstatic but equally fatalistic landscape of which John (Tom Mercier) and May (Anaïs Demoustier) now find themselves a part. Spanning a quarter of a century, from 1979 to 2004, *The Beast in the Jungle* has the trappings of a museological survey, gazing coolly across the throngs of hot-blooded sensuality and youth, witnessing their dynamism in stasis. Epochs change, but time stands still. All around the duo, sound and color alternate, fluctuate, as time's arrow moves with indescribable finality toward the black hole of the future, cautious in practice but consistent in its ambition for something to transpire and shake the world.



The many interpretations of James' novella, spawned over a century, tend toward the repressed and the psychosexual: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, points to male homosexual panic as bestial emblem, while other readers and literary scholars alike have examined the gaping negativity at the beast's heart, of desire deferred, consummation feared, communion unrealized. Strikingly Kafkaesque in its conceit — with a keen paradoxical parallel in the Bohemian author's parable "Before the Law" — and adorned with dysfunctionally ornate expression, the tale of John and May both enthralls and frustrates; or rather, enthralls *precisely* because it frustrates. To adapt it, then, would entail a denial of finality, the better to receive, with open arms, the clarion call of the void. Chiha recognizes this, and his oneiric venture is quick to immerse its participants and onlookers into an irresistible torpor.

There are some faults to this. We, for one, aren't privy to the interiority of our doomed lovers, one who loves with indecision and one who loves himself so that he may not confront the insurmountable fear of loving another. The magnetism on the dance floor, in other words, is an exhibit sealed off from us and the world, its hedonistic reveries left to significations to be borne and breathed within Chiha's tableaux vivants and not by the outsider. As periods shift, their costumes and cultures change: music flits from disco to techno beat, crossdressing —

women with pencil mustaches, men in lipstick sheen — turns toward modern garb, and the festering orgiastic tension marking John and May's fateful encounter shifts, ever so subtly, in the direction of cool, casual neon. History, too, is dutifully transcribed into an otherwise ahistorical locale by means of reportage, a televised montage of AIDS, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the Twin Towers as some of the markers that persist in spite of the collective longing for escapism.

Yet one can't help but be beguiled by the mise en scène sensuously lensed by Céline Bozon, an aesthetic miasma that aches even as the languorous camera itself doesn't. The chronological presentation recalls, somewhat unexpectedly, Annie Ernaux's autobiographical novel *The Years*, which recounted a collective bourgeois history through the post-war decades in France; the central threat lurking, however, remains an object of anxious neurosis throughout, even to those well-acquainted with James and his other adaptations. As the years now spiral toward an inevitable horizon, the retroactive veil soon peels free and uncovers its shrouded contents. Béatrice Dalle, as the club's bouncer (styled the "Physiognomist"), remains as others come and go, like a watchful omen in service of the titular Beast that never comes — or does come, only too late. She guards the night, but lets it loose when the time is up; the nocturnal odyssey of *The Beast in the Jungle* thus chases its mystical tail like an ouroboros, eternally confined to the ghosts of lovers past, forever destined for a spectral, forgotten grave. **— *MORRIS YANG***

20,000 SPECIES OF BEES

Estibaliz Urresola Solaguren

Set in the rural Spanish countryside, Estibaliz Urresola Solaguren's *20,000 Species of Bees* centers on a transgender eight-year-old girl who happens to be visiting family over a weekend for the occasion of a christening. But while all others find themselves caught up in their own problems, this young girl is trying to find a way to articulate to them that she isn't the boy they all think she is, but rather a girl named Lucía who wants to be understood as the person she knows herself to be.

It's uncommon indeed to see a trans coming-of-age story so acutely in-tune to the subtle realities of growing with an understanding of your differences but not being able to put such variance into words. Lucía is often sullen, bristling at the use of her deadname or the more gender-neutral nickname "Coco" often employed by her family. She longs to be seen as Lucía, and while she may not know what the word transgender means, she knows that she's a girl. Spending time among multiple generations of women in her family over the course of a few days helps her put this profound and essential femininity into focus.



But *20,000 Species of Bees* wisely doesn't focus on the struggles of facing bigotry so much as it does the struggle of understanding and articulating one's self — to make others see you for who you are. It's clear that her family doesn't understand what she's going through — some are even resistant to it ("We overindulged him," sighs her father) — but the film focuses on Lucía's own inner conflict in ways that are remarkably incisive. Just look to her anxiety over being called out in a women's locker room, for example, or wearing a dress for the first time only to have the experience marred by her own worry over being judged, as evidence of the intuitive addresses of the film's core concerns. Solaguren handles these moments with a disarming grace, in effect delivering one of the most sensitive, honest, and easily recollectable on-screen portrayals of gender dysphoria and growing up trans.

Young Sofía Otero recently won the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival for her work here — and it's easy to see why. Although cisgender herself, as a performer she seems remarkably in tune with the material and her character's journey, displaying an impressive talent for a girl of only nine. While the film itself is at times almost too understated for its own good, there's something quite lovely about the way it allows its young transgender protagonist to learn about womanhood in its myriad forms and

struggles from the older women in her life. It is, if anything, a testament to the resilience of unadulterated womanhood, separating the idea of femininity from any physical characteristics or understanding of it as a state of being. Other filmmakers who want to explore what it means to be transgender, or indeed even what it means to be a woman, would be wise to take note of Solaguren's nuanced and empathetic portrait. ***— MATTIE LUCAS***

THE ECHO

Tatiana Huezo

Classified as a documentary in the Berlin festival catalog, Tatiana Huezo's new film *The Echo* is more accurately clarified as a scripted film shot on real locations with actual people performing staged or otherwise choreographed variations of their daily lives. It's not as heady as that might sound — Huezo isn't interested in a post-modernist exploration of narrative vs. nonfiction conceits a la Kiarostami or Jia, but instead seems content to mimic the formal contours of a traditional art film. Thankfully, *The Echo* is a charming, frequently beautiful movie, whatever its specific genre provenance.

Working with cinematographer Ernesto Pardo, Huezo documents a family residing in the titular village, located in Puebla, Mexico. Huezo reportedly spent 18 months in the region, capturing the changing seasons and waning fortunes of the local farmers. Focused primarily on women, the film begins with Luz Ma and two of her younger children rescuing a sheep from a muddy embankment. Luz Ma then delicately bathes her own elderly mother with the help of teenage daughter Montse. It's three generations under one roof, each tasked with their own labor. Youngest daughter Sarahi and her brother Tono are still learning the ropes about how the farm runs, allowing Huezo to capture footage of animal shearing and food preparations; Sarahi spends her free time playing school teacher to her stuffed animals while Montse talks with a friend about joining the military for the money or taking her horse-riding skills to the city (we are told that Mexico City is only a couple of hours away, but it feels like it might as well be on another continent, so cloistered is this community).

Given all this, *The Echo* can sometimes feel shapeless, not so much structured as arranged in a loose (presumably linear) manner. Instead, Huezo allows events to transpire with varying



degrees of emphasis; key dramatic elements like Montse's departure from the home and death in the family happen suddenly and with little accentuation, while languid landscape shots occupy almost just as much screen time. But key ideas still unfurl along the margins, as we gradually gather that money is tight, the family patriarch is absent for long stretches of time, and a slowly encroaching drought is threatening the livestock. It's never bluntly stated, but Luz Ma is clearly worried about her children growing up without their father, as well as his retrograde ideas about what constitutes "women's work." When her husband (in one of his very brief appearances in the film) complains that he needs a day off, Luz Ma calmly explains that she never gets a day off, even on the weekends. Another moment finds the father's offscreen voice instructing Tono to leave his dirty dishes on the table, as cleaning up is "a woman's job."

But these interludes are just part of a larger tapestry; the landscape, wind blowing through trees and grass, and other poetic longueurs are equally as important as food prep, building a fire, or birthing a calf. One long sequence finds the family skinning and gutting a dead sheep, hoping to make some much-needed money from selling the meat. There are also frequent scenes of little Sarahi at school, emphasizing a kind of pedagogical urge that suggests at least the possibility of a brighter future (Sarahi teaching kids even younger than herself about the Zapatistas and the Mexican Revolution is a contender for scene of the year). The implication is clear enough — the future is not written, minds can be expanded, and social roles can change. Huezo ends the film with footage of a coming storm, ominous-looking but also a bringer of much-needed rain. Sometimes a harbinger of doom and a sign of hope can look startlingly similar. ***— DANIEL GORMAN***

NOTES FROM EREMOCENE

Viera Čákanyová

With *Notes from Eremocene*, experimental documentary filmmaker Viera Čákanyová rounds off her informal "post-human trilogy" comprising 2019's *FREM* — a futurist meditation on the Antarctic landscape — and 2020's *White on White*, which documented her filmmaking and artistic processes while shooting *FREM*. This third entry, like its predecessors, examines the potentials and pitfalls of humanity's tenuous relationship with artificial intelligence, while integrating into its conceptual framework the subject of blockchain technology. Čákanyová hits on the cryptocurrency fervor that blew up and out in the last decade, albeit indirectly; her explicit focus is both phenomenological and political. Phenomenological, because of how the film envisions a reality of vector spaces within which amorphous, disembodied consciousness dwells; and political, given the many said and unsaid implications such a disjointed world portends for society at large. How people work, organize, and live is thus central to *Notes from Eremocene*, whose titular epoch denotes — as coined by E.O. Wilson, an American biologist — an "age of loneliness" and speaks, more than ever, to civilization's yearning for connection in a time ironically characterized by its networks, social and digital.

Shot in video-essay style and often teeming with talking points, *Notes from Eremocene,* unfortunately, remains mired in cacophony, its structure and presentation acquiring the enthusiasm of grad-school filmmaking but lacking the discipline necessary for clarity and, crucially, captivation. Much of this feature, the themes of which probably befit an arthouse installation better, numbingly throws out key signifiers without unpacking their relevance to contemporary socio-political thought. All this is in the pursuit of Čákanyová's primary conceit, of a recently uploaded consciousness (of the director herself) seeking, in the near future, to come to terms with the present now past: buzzwords appear, as in a search index, formulated as semantic clusters literalized as such on screen. But this pursuit pays a hefty price with an oft-inaccessible and self-indulgent rumination about Bitcoin and decentralized autonomous organization — the former's elusive founder, Satoshi Nakamoto, is depicted naked swimming and diagnosed as one of the first victims of the loneliness age, retreating into depressive solitude — that's also supposed to double as a cathartic representation of Covid-era anxieties.

There's something to be said about formalist bravery, and to Čákanyová's credit, she splices and conjoins image and sound in frequently unsettling, even hallucinatory ways. A black hole rendition gravitating into oblivion, synced to Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds' "Higgs Boson Blues," tempts one to issue the hauntological label. But such is the profound and oblique abstraction writ large in *Notes from Eremocene* that terms like

"hauntological" quickly lose salience, and — as is the postmodern tendency — find themselves easily substituted with hazy language gloss. Perhaps the intent is such; but it doesn't quite excuse the film's flimsy logical organization. As a commentary on humankind's "evolutionary dead end" amidst a digital anthropocene inflected largely with pessimism, it fails to intrigue, much less interest, the viewer. In contrast with, say, Michel Houellebecq's vulgarly defiant novel *Atomised*, Čákanyová merely summarizes its landscape of ideas without synthesizing them. **— *MORRIS YANG***



MAMMALIA

Sebastian Mihăilescu

In experimenting with narrative in the cinema, we take on a capacity for expression that currently has no real affinities or structures. The imagination that seethes is one's most integral collaborator during a process of constructing alternative narrativity. An expanse is opened up, a space where both association and abstraction can feed off each other as to guide us to new forms. Narrative structures within the cinema are largely indebted to the traditions of the stage, and so one often wonders where new structures will be found that position the cinema within a history of itself. *Mammalia*, Sebastian Mihăilescu's latest feature, flirts with the capacity to broach tradition, yet falls back onto a retreat into theater. Where plausibly cogent perspectives on both gender sociality and masculinity might manifest (masculinity insofar as it signifies dissonance with a truly reflexive assessment of identity — a vacancy of tangible and introspective faculties produced via the sustained efforts of the reactionary), we are instead treated to slight aestheticism, rudimentary invocations of the theater of the absurd, which cake any observation in a flattening crudeness.

To slow down just a smidge and describe what happens through the film would be to also contradict the nature of experimental narrative, which should be, in principle, elusive to synopsis and discerned more through the experiential than the expository. István Téglás (of *Malmkrog* and *The Whistlers*) plays our protagonist, Camil, a middle-aged epitome of the mediocre and dejected. His frustrations and animosity are expressed as spectacle in his interrogation of a fertility cult, slowly shifting spheres from his bureaucratic day job facility — an ornate and ridiculous space, where employees maneuver the multi-floored building with installed ladders — to the oneiric wooded lake where this cult (of which his wife is a member) camps out. Though any clear trajectory is mildly obfuscated, this journey is ultimately one of deliberate stalking, unfurling Camil's insecurity and loaded resentment in wide-scale compositional gags à la Tati. But it isn't very funny, and the texture of each shot increases in its broadness, with the most striking work consequently being fashioned in the opening ten minutes. This broadness is further emphasized in the work's handling of gender dysphoria as binary contrast to the unsettling of Camil in his positionality of the white, male archetype: think Tyler Durden exploring femininity instead of anarchism, without much of an acute sense of the complex at play beyond immediate gesticulation. Contextualizing these gestures is, about an hour in, a dialogue Camil engages in with a cult member that explicates the ennui and disconcertment we are then to project back onto him, as to elucidate characterization in the face of slightly obscured narrativity. The lack of confidence such a decision suggests is, to me, indicative of the consistently frail articulations sorted throughout the film, from opening to close.

The final scene is, in itself, reticent to provide any further aesthetic inquiries to offer dimension to this investigation of gender within the reactionary mind. With the mannerisms of the stage, a troupe of actors hounds Camil in celebration of his pregnancy, something clearly unwanted as expressed through his cries. The ensemble scurries in from the frame's right and throngs him, their niceties of celebration an inaudible cacophony. With cloyingly unimaginative blocking, this scene of stupendous exhibition is both hackneyed and tedious, an apt summation of all that came prior, rendered through formal means that, in their theatrical modality, emplace the regressive sensibilities of the work writ large. **— *ZACHARY GOLDKIND***

DANCING QUEEN

Aurora Gossé

Dancing Queen, the third theatrical feature by Aurora Gossé, who has already made a handful of domestic Norwegian TV series and shorts, boasts a very simple plot. Mina (portrayed by the young newcomer Liv Elvira Kippersund Larsson), a 12-year-old ace student, soon falls head over heels for a slick, hip-hop dancer schoolmate, Edwin (Viljar Knutsen Bjaadal). And just as all the talented, groovy students decide to form a dancing crew to compete at the next summer's Mjøsa Challenge, Mina faces her own personal struggles and insecurities to join her friends despite the fact that although she may be a bright kid when it comes to regular class lessons and homework, she has absolutely no idea how to dance. Thanks to the inspirational presence of her soulful and no-nonsense-taking grandma, and on the strength of her own unceasing enthusiasm, Mina throws herself into incessant practice so that she might find herself part of a group; as her grandmother puts it, she's "a timid little straight-A student who wants to break out of her shell." It's evident right off the bat, then, that although Gossé's new coming-of-age film is certainly influenced by the better-known works from Hollywood's heyday of kid- and teen-facing films. From Spielberg's bike riding, small-town children to *Little Miss Sunshine*'s precocious youngster to even the dance-heavy late-pubescence of *Bring It On* or the *Step Up* franchise, *Dancing Queen* endeavors to scale everything to a specific measured, humble realism. And so, without littering itself with the usual larger-than-life dramatics and excessive tropes, Gossé's latest — explicitly titled after ABBA's famous hit — remains committed to documenting the mundane, even minuscule, challenges and concerns of the Zoomer generation.

To this end, *Dancing Queen* follows an admittedly straightforward and predictable approach, both aesthetically and narratively, but without ever going so far as to sketch the clichéd narrative line between good kids/bad kids, winners/losers, etc., or even pitting the *cool kids* against Mina's so-called nerddom. Although on different occasions, we do see Mina's anxious struggles to lose weight, her switch from oversized glasses to contact lenses, the bold decision to dye her hair blue, her efforts at copying the look and style of the school's popular girl, Bella (Ylva Røsten-Haga), and her choosing to ignore her supportive bestie, Markus — but any confrontational and competitive elements that arise are quite intentionally presented only as natural, day-to-day peer pressures. Filled with as much warmth and bittersweetness as it is kinetic dance and energetic music, and captured through lighthearted, age-appropriate joviality and tender images, Gossé massages her breezy story into a mildly feel-good flick about the importance of friendly collaboration over the pressures of competition, and the importance of discovering and embracing one's identity in order to — quite literally — find the right moves to make in life. It's obvious that Gossé's unassuming filmmaking instincts don't tend toward the heavy-handedly conceptual or boisterously aestheticized, but what she should get considerablecredit for is her ability to coax beautiful, convincing work from her group of underage actors. What's most applaudable is the balance she strikes, however. For the youngsters, there's a bevy of visceral entertainment woven into the film's tenderly moralistic lessons, while adult viewers should find the film's pomp an agreeable distraction at worst, with the potential to glean greater understanding of Gen-Z's particular mindsets and lifestyles. ***— AYEEN FOROOTAN***



SOMEDAY WE'LL TELL EACH OTHER EVERYTHING

Emily Atef

If the recurring discourse cycles of online spaces, namely on Twitter, are to be believed, we are in for some seriously prudish times. Every so often, a tweet will make the rounds, decrying displays of overt sexuality as unnecessary hindrances to otherwise well-running narratives. The technical descriptor, "well-running," feels appropriate, as art is increasingly flattened into "content" — a commodity to consume, stripped of its inherent ability to communicate and articulate a broad



spectrum of human (and non-human) experience, including the parts of ourselves we might find troubling. Add to that an aversion to any form of even momentary discomfort, and the widespread popularity of children's media amongst adult audiences begins to make a little more sense.

Far beyond the zoomers calling for the reinstatement of the Hays Code, though, exists *Someday We'll Tell Each Other Everything*, German-French-Iranian filmmaker Emily Atef's adaptation of Daniela Krien's 2011 novel of the same name. Dripping with sensuality, the film chronicles the May-December romance between Maria (Marlene Burow), a bright but directionless girl in her late teens, and Henner (Felix Kramer), a charismatic farmer more than twice her age, all set against the final days of the German Democratic Republic and early days of German reunification. If *Someday*'s myriad sex scenes weren't enough to turn off the new puritans, then the age gap — an issue regularly brought up in discourse that is no less tedious — is sure to keep them away.

Given the dismal state of eroticism in film, it would be nice to have nothing but good things to say about a drama as unapologetically sexual as this, and indeed there are things to praise. Firstly, Afet's use of sex scenes is a prime example of how valuable eroticism can be, even in the most narrow narrative sense. The character dynamics shift, their relationships deepen and deteriorate with every encounter they share — or are deprived of. Maria's first encounter with Henner is a rather carnal affair, while her first on-screen tryst with boyfriend Johannes (Cedric Eich) is striking in its tangible intimacy. Watching the two young, giggly lovers playfully undress each other, grins spread wide across their fresh faces, it's clear that the scene reveals a lot more than just their naked bodies. The couple is young, optimistic, and in love, making plans to spend the rest of their lives together — at least until desire gets in the way.

Secondly, Burow and Kramer both deliver surprisingly nuanced performances which are somewhat at odds with the languid melodrama that surround them. The first meeting between the two is already charged with tension, their inaugural physical contact loudly signaling their coming libidinous entanglement, even as Maria quickly pulls herself away from Henner's advances. Conflicting desires permeate *Someday*: while Maria is torn between the rugged but troubled Henner and the good-natured, occasionally inattentive Johannes, the characters around them either long for the decadent pleasures of the capitalist West or for a return to the stability the socialist East afforded them.

Sadly, issues do come to the fore, usually whenever the film shifts away from Maria and her sexually aggressive inamorato's passionate hookups. The drama the pair's star-crossed romance is couched in crawls along at a snail's pace — the 133-minute runtime is definitely felt — only to arrive at an expectedly tragic conclusion. The narrative predictability might have been less offensive had the film managed anything in the way of absorbing characterizations, but for all the bold physicality of Atef's direction during the frank love-making sequences, most of what isn't a sex scene feels oddly lifeless. For one, the intended weight of the central love triangle never quite manages to come through amidst Maria's inscrutable dreaminess, Henner's vague trauma, and Johannes' nice-guy blandness. For another, *Someday* is riddled with plot threads that go nowhere, most notably Maria's complicated relationship with her unemployed mother, Hannah (Jördis Triebel), which punctuates the main storyline but ultimately delivers nothing else.

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At its best, *Someday* plays like an alluring antidote to an increasingly chaste cinema landscape, of a piece with Hadas Ben Aroya's recent, unflinching and even more brazenly sexual, *All Eyes Off Me*. But while Ben Aroya's erotic drama supplements its exploration of youthful lust with intriguing psychological opacity — as well as some dark humor — Atef's take on the subject is ultimately too conventional, broad, and, apart from a few moments of unexpected rough sex, nowhere near provocative enough to meaningfully linger in anyone's mind. **— *FRED BARRETT***



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