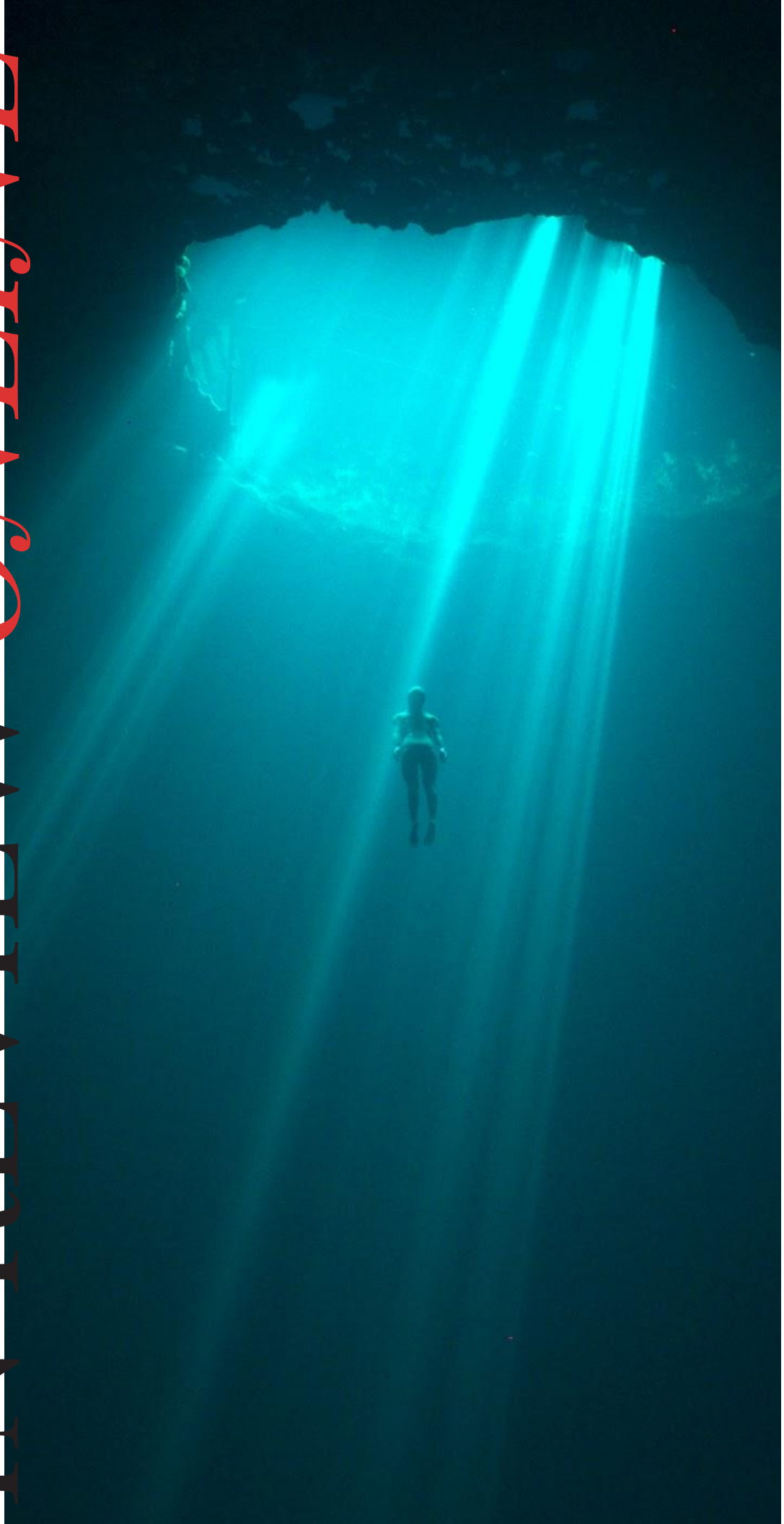
IN REVIEW ONLINE



FEATURES

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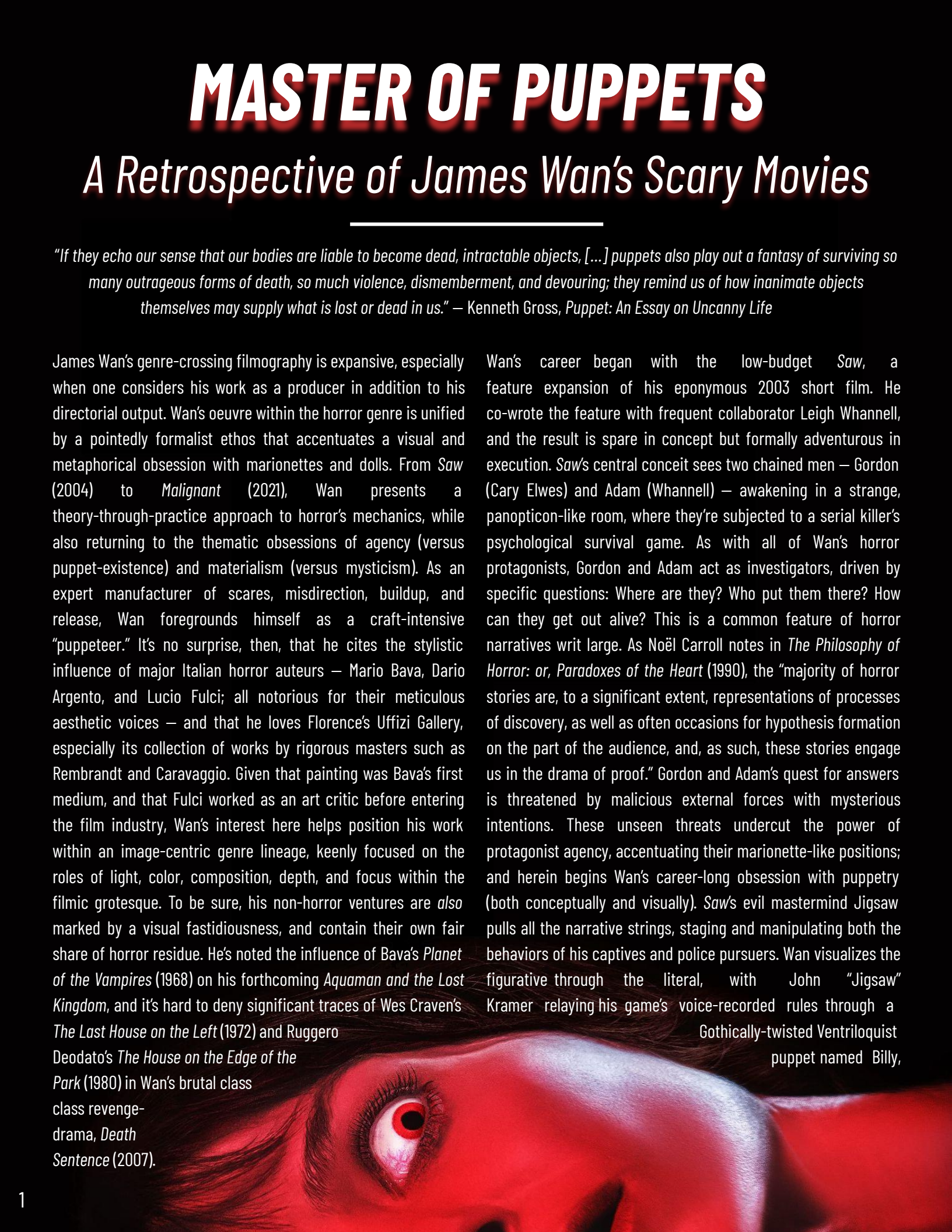
MASTER OF PUPPETS

A Retrospective of James Wan's Scary Movies

"If they echo our sense that our bodies are liable to become dead, intractable objects, [...] puppets also play out a fantasy of surviving so many outrageous forms of death, so much violence, dismemberment, and devouring; they remind us of how inanimate objects themselves may supply what is lost or dead in us." — Kenneth Gross, *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life*

James Wan's genre-crossing filmography is expansive, especially when one considers his work as a producer in addition to his directorial output. Wan's oeuvre within the horror genre is unified by a pointedly formalist ethos that accentuates a visual and metaphorical obsession with marionettes and dolls. From *Saw* (2004) to *Malignant* (2021), Wan presents a theory-through-practice approach to horror's mechanics, while also returning to the thematic obsessions of agency (versus puppet-existence) and materialism (versus mysticism). As an expert manufacturer of scares, misdirection, buildup, and release, Wan foregrounds himself as a craft-intensive "puppeteer." It's no surprise, then, that he cites the stylistic influence of major Italian horror auteurs — Mario Bava, Dario Argento, and Lucio Fulci; all notorious for their meticulous aesthetic voices — and that he loves Florence's Uffizi Gallery, especially its collection of works by rigorous masters such as Rembrandt and Caravaggio. Given that painting was Bava's first medium, and that Fulci worked as an art critic before entering the film industry, Wan's interest here helps position his work within an image-centric genre lineage, keenly focused on the roles of light, color, composition, depth, and focus within the filmic grotesque. To be sure, his non-horror ventures are *also* marked by a visual fastidiousness, and contain their own fair share of horror residue. He's noted the influence of Bava's *Planet of the Vampires* (1968) on his forthcoming *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom*, and it's hard to deny significant traces of Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and Ruggero Deodato's *The House on the Edge of the Park* (1980) in Wan's brutal class class revenge-drama, *Death Sentence* (2007).

Wan's career began with the low-budget *Saw*, a feature expansion of his eponymous 2003 short film. He co-wrote the feature with frequent collaborator Leigh Whannell, and the result is spare in concept but formally adventurous in execution. *Saw*'s central conceit sees two chained men — Gordon (Cary Elwes) and Adam (Whannell) — awakening in a strange, panopticon-like room, where they're subjected to a serial killer's psychological survival game. As with all of Wan's horror protagonists, Gordon and Adam act as investigators, driven by specific questions: Where are they? Who put them there? How can they get out alive? This is a common feature of horror narratives writ large. As Noël Carroll notes in *The Philosophy of Horror: or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990), the "majority of horror stories are, to a significant extent, representations of processes of discovery, as well as often occasions for hypothesis formation on the part of the audience, and, as such, these stories engage us in the drama of proof." Gordon and Adam's quest for answers is threatened by malicious external forces with mysterious intentions. These unseen threats undercut the power of protagonist agency, accentuating their marionette-like positions; and herein begins Wan's career-long obsession with puppetry (both conceptually and visually). *Saw*'s evil mastermind Jigsaw pulls all the narrative strings, staging and manipulating both the behaviors of his captives and police pursuers. Wan visualizes the figurative through the literal, with John "Jigsaw" Kramer relaying his game's voice-recorded rules through a Gothically-twisted Ventriloquist puppet named Billy,



whose cheeks are eerily rouged with red swirls — a motif that reappears in the spiraled mirror of a cursed music from Wan's later *The Conjuring* (2013). And like that trinket, which reveals supernatural presences, Billy is a mesmeric object, a stand-in glamor for the invisible puppeteer (Kramer), a harbinger of darkness. As with all of Wan's films, *Saw* is rife with homage, a study of visual design's role in horror — flashes of crime scene photos recall the gruesome effigy flickers spliced throughout the opening credits of Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), while David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995) is echoed in *Saw*'s staging of its brutal death traps through stylized montages of pronounced color grading, mood lighting, fast editing, and frame rate manipulation. These subjectively heightened depictions of violence oscillate between character interior and authorial exterior, which connects with Wan's broader interest in the dissonances between visual grammar as "objective" (behind the camera) and "subjective" (within the frame): *Saw* is filled with "objective" images, such as high-angle shots of the captors' filthy bathroom game stage and Jigsaw's grainy black-and-white CCTV footage of the same, but the stylized depictions of trapped human prey capture the individual characters' frantic psychological terror. Here, then, begins James Wan's obsession with the relationship between puppeteer and puppet.

It's worth noting that Wan admits how budget and schedule restrictions necessitated many of his creative choices for the first *Saw*. Mark Bernard's *Selling the Splat Pack: The DVD Revolution and the American Horror Film* states that the film's production limitations forced Wan to use "a makeshift, multimedia approach" to cover directorial shortcomings, inserting still photographs "to tie some scenes together and, to cover some shots that he missed, pulling shots from a video camera that was originally meant to provide a few shots from the surveillance camera monitoring Gordon and Adam as they are chained in the bathroom." Despite these obstacles, *Saw* succeeds as a significant work of cultural mythology and a conceptually novel genre picture.

Wan's second horror feature, *Dead Silence* (2007), clarifies — with a budget at least 20 times larger than *Saw*'s — the director's defining auteurist trademarks: not only his fascination with puppets, dolls, and the subtraction of human agency, but also his engagements with horror cinema's history of signifiers, atmospheres, and visual grammar. Again co-written with Whannell, *Dead Silence* begins with Jamie (Ryan Kwanten) and Lisa Ashen (Laura Regan) receiving a mysterious ventriloquist's dummy at their apartment shortly before Lisa is brutally murdered, her mouth torn wide into a permanent, doll-like yawn. Suspected of committing the murder, Jamie undergoes an investigation that leads him to a local legend surrounding murdered ventriloquist Mary Shaw (Joan Heney), whose dark legacy and spectral presence linger over the small town of Raven's Fair. Wan describes *Dead Silence* as an homage to classic Universal horror films, presumably the likes of Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) and James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), but perhaps most obviously *Dead of Night* (1945), which features an infamous spooky doll entry. The director also cites the influence of Hammer horror pictures, likely the classicist and sumptuously colorful works of Terence Fisher, such as *Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), *Dracula* (1958), and *The Devil Rides Out* (1968). *Dead Silence*

thus situates itself in the narrative and visual territory of the Gothic; the literary tradition's "return of the repressed" emerges within its fog-soaked, decrepit setting, color timed to foreground contrasts between cadaverous gray-blue and sanguinary red.

Though the film draws most explicitly from the literary and cinematic Gothic tradition, its blurring between puppet and human might have more in common with contemporary fiction writer Thomas Ligotti, an influential figure of pessimistic weird horror. Of course, like most (if not all) weird and horror fiction authors, Ligotti is a creative descendant of the Gothic, but of specific interest here is his pessimistic analysis of horror symbolism in *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (2010). The author describes puppets and dolls within the horror genre as "backdrops or bit-players, imitations of the human form [that] have a symbolic value because they seem connected to another world, one that is all harm and disorder — the kind of place we sometimes fear is the model for our own home ground, which we *must* believe is passably sound and secure, or at least not an environment where we might mistake a counterfeit person for the real thing." *Dead Silence* illustrates this horror-codified notion of people-as-puppets most expressly with the revelation that Jamie's young stepmother, Ella (Amber Valletta), has convincingly reappropriated the corpse of his wheelchair-bound father, Edward (Bob Gunton), as a human ventriloquist's dummy. Like *Saw*, *Dead Silence* draws on legacies of horror imagery (in the former, serial killer procedurals; in the latter, Gothic and Weird traditions) while advancing figurative and literal articulations of the human as marionette. Wan fills the film with atmospherically expansive deep-focus compositions and elaborate crane shots that dwarf his human characters, even utilizing black-and-white flashbacks to lock the proceedings within the filmic alternate reality of horror history.

> Like *Saw*, Dead Silence draws on legacies of horror imagery... while advancing figurative and literal articulations of the human as marionette.

Wan expands on the supernatural stylings of *Dead Silence* in his first official duology, *Insidious* (2010) and *Insidious: Chapter 2* (2013). In the first film, parents Josh (Patrick Wilson) and Renai Lambert (Rose Byrne) discover that their young son Dalton's (Ty Simpkins) coma is a consequence of demonic possession. WhenJosh learns that Dalton has astral-projected into a dangerous other-dimensional space called the Further, he unearths his own long-forgotten ability to do so, in order to save his son. The second film sees the family grappling with the demonic residue that leaked from the Further into their world: this time, it is Josh who has been possessed. The *Insidious* features advance new renditions of the human puppet via the genre trope of demonic possession, and they initiate the formally precise, elaborately staged execution of scare sequences that later culminate in Wan's haunted-house picture, *The Conjuring* (2013). Notably, *Insidious* also marks Wan's focal shift toward the middle-class American domicile, a space well-trod in horror literature and cinema, maybe most noteworthily in Stephen King's fiction (although American literary heirs such as Richard Matheson and Shirley Jackson also warrant serious recognition).

Drawing on King's *The Shining* (1977) as a means for using horror to study abusive fatherhood and ambiguating the division between "inside" and "outside" evil, Wan's *Insidious: Chapter 2* accords Josh his own Jack Torrance moment, when the membrane between his reality and the other-dimensional world of the Further splits, releasing a demon that inhabits both his body and mind. The notion of puppetry, then, serves both narrative and metaphorical functions: Josh is subservient to demonic forces, but he is also ensnared by the tendrils of patriarchal violence and the temptation for dominion. Wan employs a matter-of-fact visual style, bringing the Further's mythological demon-figures into full focus, and this direct representational strategy recalls William Friedkin's theological horror classic, *The Exorcist* (1973). By visually literalizing the Further's supernatural denizens and bringing mythic noumena into the stark actuality of phenomena, Wan collapses spiritualism with materialism. That is, the director depicts spiritualism as something tactile and physical, grafting this openness onto some of the seemingly opposite mechanics of classical haunted house movie scene-building — there is a marked reliance on misdirection, obfuscation, and ambiguity in

the likes of the *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* (1943-5), *The Innocents* (1961), and *The Haunting* (1963). With regard to the age-old binary that has haunted the literary and cinematic horror genre, and between science and religion writ large, Wan's *Insidious* pictures firmly station themselves in neither category.

Wan's *Conjuring* films further embody this binary-defying approach to spiritualism and materialism; both *The Conjuring* (2013) and *The Conjuring 2* (2016) are replete with scientific methodologies for identifying and combating supernatural forces. Allegedly based on actual events, as recounted by paranormal investigators and demonologists Ed (Patrick Wilson) and Lorraine Warren (Vera Farmiga), *The Conjuring* is Wan's first directorial work not written by him or Whannell (penned instead by Chad and Cary Hayes, scribes for the films *House of Wax* [2005] and *The Reaping* [2007], among others). Still, Wan's formalism and aesthetic preoccupations loom large. Set in 1970, the first film follows the Warrens on assignment to cleanse a ghost- and demon-infested farmhouse belonging to Carolyn (Lili Taylor) and Roger Perron (Ron Livingston). The Perrons, and their five daughters, are subject to escalating forms of physical and psychological torment which crescendo with the uncovering of the house's horrific Gothic past and, ultimately, the demonic possession of Carolyn. The film's centerpiece is a sprawling nighttime sequence following Carolyn and her daughter, Cindy (Mackenzie Foy), through an intensifying series of supernatural encounters. This series of scenes is the quintessential showcase for Wan as a craftsman of cinematic scares and a consummate puppeteer of viewer affect; the director applies his signature well-rounded formal strategies, synthesizing audio lulls and spikes with visual information (compositional distractions, proximity between viewer and object-of-terror, and tactical misdirection). *The Conjuring* also introduces the leering haunted doll Annabelle (now a star of her own spinoff franchise), which the Warrens claim is a "vessel" for demonic entities. Its narrative thus expressly closes the gap between doll and human, with Carolyn's possession echoing the film's introductory Annabelle doll sequence. Wan cites Hooper's *Poltergeist* (1982) as a major influence, but *The Conjuring* is most deliberately and notably steeped in the textures of '70s American horror cinema, e.g., *The Exorcist*, *The Omen* (1976), and *The Amityville Horror* (1979).

Set seven years later, *The Conjuring 2* brings the Warrens to the London borough of Enfield, where single mother Peggy Hodgson (Frances O'Connor) seeks help after her children's Ouija game leads to the possession of her daughter Janet (Madison Wolfe). Where its predecessor was set in summer-drenched Rhode Island, *The Conjuring 2* is a Christmas feature with a muted gray-white palette, and the way it capitalizes on the dissonance between festive coziness and spectral invasion owes something to the wintry supernatural fictions of M. R. James, Henry James, and Charles Dickens. This is Wan's closest cinematic approximation of a haunted house theme park attraction, populated with multiple villainous forces: in addition to Janet's croaky spectral parasite Bill Wilkins, the Hodgsons are terrorized by a demonic nun named Valak and a monstrous being entitled the Crooked Man, the latter easily summoned through a haunted zoetrope toy. *The Conjuring 2* is noteworthy as an aesthetic and tonal variation on the first film, showcasing a more maximalist approach to horror sequences, privileging spectacle over the quieter incremental shifts in affect that had defined its predecessor.

Wan's most recent directorial horror feature, *Malignant* (2021), collapses the marionette and puppeteer into the same body. The film's investigator-protagonist, Madison (Annabelle Wallis), is thrust into her own Giallo-esque mystery that commences with the death of her abusive husband. Throughout the film, Madison experiences repeated, vivid visions of gruesome murders at the hands of a black-gloved, longhaired unknown. She ultimately locates the horror-codified manifestation of the unconscious within herself when she discovers that her mutated, sentient-tumor twin brother literally lives inside her head, puppeteering her body to murder those who have wronged him. This is Wan's response to the classic doppelgänger horror trope, which Fred Botting discusses in *Gothic* as an important metaphorical vessel: "An uncanny figure of horror, the double presents a limit that cannot be overcome, the representations of an internal and irreparable division in the individual psyche." The doppelgänger plot has a long history, whose major literary permutations include Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson" (1840), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and Thomas Tryon's *The Other* (1972), among numerous others. *Malignant*'s cinematic doppelgänger ancestors, meanwhile, include Christian Nyby's *The Thing from Another World* (1951) and its 1982 remake by John Carpenter, David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988), David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997), and Brian De Palma's *Sisters* (1972) and *Raising Cain* (1992). In short, *Malignant* is a palimpsest of extratextual references and homages along with the rest of Wan's oeuvre. Wan the formalist is on full display, revisiting the visual grammar of a "subjective" versus "objective" perspective that originated in his debut,. He demarcates Madison's subjective experiences with handheld camerawork, zoom lenses, and 360° perspectives of green-screened scene transformations; in turn, he exemplifies the 3rd-person omniscient observer through elaborate, overhead tracking shots and deep focus compositions to suggest the potential presence of unseen threats within the frame.

Wan is also genre-savvy enough to summon certain familiar components from Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993), which — broadly speaking — challenge horror's recurring, restrictive, and stigmatizing depictions of femininity. He brazenly tackles the problems that Creed identifies, locating his film's object of horror in the male parasite leeching off Madison's mind and body. The titular "malignant" threat, then, is a masculinist monstrosity with a penchant for violence, vengeance, and destruction. In this exuberant genre exercise, Wan quotes overtly from the aforementioned De Palma, applying formal bombast to a coyly disruptive genre commentary.

To read all of Wan's horror features as parts of a cumulative directorial statement is to identify a consistent, rigorous, and distinctive authorial perspective. Wan engages with horror specifically for what it is and does, for its incumbent interests in investigation, limitations of the self, compromised agency, and above all the non-linguistic power of affect. James Wan is, above all, a specifically *cinematic* artist whose style is marked by formalist impulse: cohering his thematic fixations is a fastidious attentiveness to the relationship between images and aural designs, and perhaps that is what makes his work so special. Horror is not a slogan or a catchphrase or an ironic joke: it is the tingling lift of hairs on the backs of our necks, the tension of our muscles preparing for incoming threat, and the cathartic release of our screams followed by nervous laughter. Wan understands all this, and he respects the bottomless artistic potential endemic to horror's truth. **— MIKE THORN**

THE MARINER

Yohei Yamakado

Soundtracked by a recording of John Cage's minimalist piano piece "Dream," a rocky terrain sits next to a sprawling seascape. Cyclists cruise beachy pathways as sailboats drift toward the horizon. Tides dance under the garish sunlight, with a distant lighthouse on the other side of the shore. These opening wide shots from Yohei Yamakado's *The Mariner* feel like establishing shots. But what exactly are they establishing? Yamakado then cuts to an adjacent interior where a woman calmly mixes a layer of blue paint. She prepares to paint a landscape, translating these imagined/remembered opening shots onto a canvas. Later, she sits silently and eyes a peeling, two-part photograph hung on her wall: swirling tides above, a coastal landscape below. As if summoned by the aesthetic representations of nature on her wall, Yamakado then cuts to a clear blue sky, followed by the top of a towering green tree, its leaves swaying gently in the wind.

When we return to the woman's studio, her eyes slide shut as she imagines. This interior of her mind, captured as an all-black screen, consists of a reading of a segment from Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa's play, also titled *The Mariner*. The passage comprises the bulk of the film's runtime; it's a dialogue among three women, delivered by one static voice, unshifting between characterizations. This voice speaks about dreams, memories of the sea, oceanic feelings, self-invention, etc. One line stands out in particular: "The sea we're looking at always inspires nostalgia for what we'll never see." *The Mariner* is a film about visibility and invisibility, a self-reflexive exploration of cinema and the substitution of imagined images for perceived ones. The film's cryptic relations — the sea, the woman, her pitch-black recitation — form its core, and it makes associations between dreams and waking life, aesthetic representations and material forms, perceptions of nature and imaginings of it. It's a movie that generates questions about the ontology of film, the complications of medium specificity, and the role of visual negation in a medium that sets out to literalize. These questions find no concrete answers.

The instinctive comparison is Derek Jarman's *Blue*: a movie consisting of an autobiographical voiceover and soundscape set to an unchanging blue screen, completed shortly before Jarman's own death from an AIDS-related illness. Like *Blue*, *The Mariner*'s black screen initially seems like a negation of representation: an embrace of static minimalism. Yet this observation is false in both cases. *Blue* and *Mariner*'s unchanging screens reflect a character's subjectivity. For Jarman, it's the blueness which subsumed his own vision as AIDS ravaged his eyesight. For Yamakado, it's the darkness which engulfs the woman's perception when her eyes close. The spectator is forced to share her vision of darkness, to follow her experience of vision with extreme fidelity.

At first, it seems *The Mariner* poses questions over where we draw the boundaries of cinema as a medium. Can a black screen be cinema? Of course, the sound and images which bookend *The Mariner* nullify any uncertainty about whether or not it qualifies as "film," but *can* there be a film without images? (Walter Ruttmann's sonic "film" *Weekend* would stand at the crux of this debate.) On closer examination, *The Mariner* isn't the appropriate work to launch this debate. Characterizing the screen as "pitch-black" is inaccurate. It's a filmed blackness; faint scratches on the film betray a material presence, and it's as visually-inclined as any Hollywood blockbuster. It simply adopts the most stripped-back minimalism conceivable: a procession of frames so restrained they almost don't read as constructed images. But the visual dimension is nonetheless crucial.

This *almost* pure blackness functions as a blank canvas for the spectator's mental images. The latter's absence, corresponding with the dialogue (especially jarring considering how the words evoke such striking visual imagery), puts the onus on the viewer to conjure their own representations. How is this different from literature? Written words are pure signifiers without any sensory detail on their own; they spark imagined perceptions in their reader's mind. Is there any difference between a page of text, a spoken monologue, and *The Mariner*'s abilities to evoke images? Yamakado's film leans into an expectation of cinema — a changing visual domain corresponding to other sensory material. The breakdown of this relationship between sound and image (and the imperceptibility of its image) prompts an inward examination. Because we enter the film with the expectation of *looking*, we foreground the dialogue visually. We are forced to look and see nothing but darkness. The absence of (expected) visual stimuli becomes a playground of infinite possibilities. In nothingness, anything may spawn. **— RYAN AKLER-BISHOP**

THE NIGHT DRAGS ON
Mathilde Girard

In 2020, French director Mathilde Girard released *Episodes — Spring 2018*, a half-hour film that played like a fictionalized diary and was notable for its energetic depiction of a group of young adults meeting up in various configurations and practically vibrating with possibility and confusion. It's not just that the short is fast-paced; Girard succeeds at communicating the frantic uncertainty of being in Paris in your early twenties, and for this reason, *Episodes* is both inspiring and a bit exhausting. Girard's feature debut, *The Night Drags On*, could hardly be more different. Shot during the pandemic, when Paris was under curfew, it's a formalist disquisition on loneliness and isolation.

At times, *Night* is a bit too much to bear, as Girard cycles through three different strands of material which, apart from time and place, seem to have little to do with each other. One line of continuity involves a nighttime cab ride in which a woman (Anne-Lise Broyer) describes a mysterious ailment that kept her hospitalized for weeks, explaining that her work as an artist has suffered because of neurological damage. She relates her experiences to the driver (Michaël Bejaoui Evans), who politely questions her in order to keep the conversation going and the meter running. The other primary motif involves an androgynous young woman (Anna Cohen-Yanay) living alone, listening to answering machine messages, making breakfast, showering, and seemingly going through the motions of a lackluster daily life.

Girard alternates these two arcs — the cab and the apartment — with a series of still shots of desolate street life in Paris' 19th and 20th arrondissements, with the same exact shot setups presented, in sequence, several times over the course of the film. This, of course, gives *The Night Drags On* a concrete temporal element, seeing a corner market close down for the night, or a busy intersection gradually empty out. To be sure, the film is haunted by the creative spirit of Chantal Akerman, as Girard moves us methodically through these data strands: streets, apartment, cab, and then repeat, in a sort of gene-splice of *News from Home* and *Toute une Nuit*. But Akerman's minimalist rigor always builds to a higher form of truth, in which details accumulate and subject positions evolve over the course of the film. *The Night Drags On* ends up somewhere very close to where it began, its intentions never really becoming clear. **— MICHAEL SICINSKI**

DE FACTO
Selma Doborac

Having premiered at the Berlinale earlier this year and going on to win the 2023 Caligari Film Award — supplemented by the almost parodic jury statement: "an extraordinary and highly

intense film that, like hardly any other before it, makes us think philosophically about destructive (group) dynamics and the inhuman in human beings" — Selma Doborac's *De Facto* continues its fairly healthy transit through festival circuitry, now finding itself snug within FIDMarseille's International Competition. One's initial question and response to this placement is, why? But we will expand on that later. A second question is this: what does a radically political film look like nowadays? *De Facto* is an attempt at disaffected formal reflexivity, a work made of shot-reverse-shot composition, which breaks this traditional logic through methods such as: cuts to black within the montage that moves us between the shifting of our gaze from actor to actor; a reconfiguring of the camera's position that emphasizes the reflective table before them — one we initially can believe they sit at opposite ends of, but is, in fact, not one they share, isolated within each actor's respective shots; and the increasingly obvious revelation that these two figureheads we observe, incessantly monologuing for over two hours, are not addressing one another.

Certainly, their anecdotal discourse is curated as a charted, responsive cognition that flows through their words and into the conceptualization at the core of the film, but it is consistently assured to us that these two men are not in dialogue. Our first talking head, Christoph Bach, takes on the perspective of those who have committed war crimes. His monologues are decontextualized excerpts of the now anonymous monsters ofour past, their speech organized as to cohere into a rising tide of passivity and horror. The second, Cornelius Obonya, addresses similar subject matter, though his texts seek to articulate a psychoanalytical assessment of the acts and perspectives being recounted by Bach. This is a dialogue of ideas, not one of diegesis. And within this strenuous, hyper-designed austerity lie Doborac's inquiries: can cinema properly embody history and, through a modus operandi of negation, manifest a specter of the contemporary? And can the horrors of our past — divorced from their context — be adapted and transposed onto our present and into our awareness of our environs through aesthetic tactics that approach the durational? The answer is generally no.

De Facto naturally comes across to anyone initiated with the filmic practices of Straub-Huillet as a riff on their central tenets of Brechtian landscape photography. More specifically, it appears to be a cross between their *Fortini/Cani* and *Workers, Peasants*. But where the Marxist duo sought dialectical investigation into the relationships among landscape, text, and image, Doborac seeks total vacuity. And where Straub-Huillet were intent on making their films out of history, Doborac is intent on fashioning hers without, as demonstrated through the banality of evil on display commingled with pedestrian

reflections on the Fascist Doctrine. A sentiment shared by one of Obonya's texts provides some perspective on the form:historically, as art became more radical, the belief of change became increasingly distant. For a film taking after Marxist aesthetic inquiry, there's a serious lacking of dialectical montage, not only in its curatorial faculties with regards to the text, but also in its image design, utilizing its frame as a tunnel, a shaft of infinite detachment — this is unmistakably Brechtian modality, but one that rejects Brecht's desire for the intellect to become an affect in and of itself. This is the disappearance of image as language and the embolization of language as abstract representation — nothing more.

But it goes maddeningly beyond that. Such a purposeful intervention into the affective realm keeps the whole fully isolated and contained, failing to rouse any substantive ideological investigation. An exercise with bravura, to be sure, but one myopic and without responsibility for its images; cinema, but refusing to engage with the material relationship of an image and its syntax, actively etching out — in fact — the divorce of these faculties. This is a work dug so far down its own tunnel vision that it has, in theory, devised a Fascist formalism not unlike Leni Riefenstahl's ode to her Führer. Where Riefenstahl's spectacle isolates the fanaticism and specter of ideological homogeneity, Deborac's anti-spectacle devises and manifests the estranged homogeneity of brutality. Only in the final image and its hilariously trite juxtaposition of sensibility — the film's soundtrack is made entirely of a near-cacophonous symphony of environmental ambience, except for the final sequence, which hurls a Krautrock needle-drop as its concluding sonic punctuation — does this sensibility of monolithic ahistoricism break down. This audible puncture in continuity leans away from rigidity, thankfully, but in a manner derivative of far superior and open works.

Doborac is in no way a fascist. But the formalism underpinning her work is intensely misguided. One would be easily predisposed throughout her film to recall the Antideutsch, a sect of German "Marxists" whose theoretical application led to a current of decontextualized, reactionary progressivism. In their contradictions, they've aligned with the fascists, unintentionally or otherwise. Returning to our initial second question, then: what does a radically political film look like nowadays? And why its snug festival placement?

De Facto is, in practice, the opposite of radical. Its reduction of political and cinematic theory into total aestheticism proves dogmatic and homogenizing. The institutional backing it has gotten thus far, then, appears to contradict the supposed ethos of an art scene seeking new perceptions, new articulations of the political present. Perhaps, this normalized process of placing "political" works in a competition is something worth reconsidering. The Berlinale jury's aforementioned statement discerns a clear ignorance many have approached the film with, quarantining it within history much like what the work does to its subjects by assigning a portentousness that lacks both basis and position. How can politics breathe when subsumed under bourgeois power structures? That old adage about films no longer belonging to the filmmaker once someone else has seen it is a lie, an idealized attempt to excuse both artists and audiences alike. A work like *De Facto* is a brilliant case for this, a film with such great walls built around it, we're nothing if not forced to perceive history through the perspective of its curator.

— ZACHARY GOLDKIND

NEW WORLD! (THE WORLD ANEW)

Nicolas Klotz & Elizabeth Perceval

Nicolas Klotz and Elizabeth Perceval's new film, *New World! (The World Anew)*, was shot on Ushant, an island off the coast of Brittany where Jean Epstein filmed his docu-fiction *Finis Terræ* nearly a hundred years ago. *New World!*, similarly, shares Epstein's documentarian instincts, especially with regard to documenting the physical land. But it also has essayistic and avant-garde elements, and even occasionally takes on a narrative form. *New World!* certainly isn't an easy film, but neither is it an especially arduous watch. It may come across as opaque at times, but even the surface created by this opacity is plenty appealing.

The repetition of visual motifs illuminates the faculty of Klotz and Perceval's imagemaking. The opening of their film is abstract, featuring pulsing lines atop colorful noise. That noise is never clarified, but the pulsing lines are in fact rotations, rendered longitudinal rather than circular by placing the camera parallel to the axis of rotation, as illustrated by shots of

lighthouses peppered throughout the film. Even more representative, perhaps, are the shots of animals, especially horses, which call to mind Moyra Davey's *Horse Opera* (2022). InDavey's film, horses are rendered vaguely horrifying and almost alien by a telescopic lens. Klotz and Perceval film their horses sometimes in closeup, sometimes in wider shots, but in both cases the equines are much nearer. Visually, this renders the movements of both the camera and horses more natural, but there's also a practical effect of filming the horses from a closer distance: they become aware they are being observed. They are therefore performers, not mere objects, and the combined effect makes them, if not quite soulful, far softer than the horses in *Horse Opera*.

Some of *New World!*'s spoken parts are unsubtitled, and though initially disorienting, this comes to feel more like a feature than a bug. The lack of subtitles comes across as diegetically motivated: though most of the text is delivered as narration, late in the film an actor reads excerpts from Leonardo da Vinci's journals, and when a farmer yells at him to cease (as he's scaring the animals), the dialogue is turned down in the mix and the subtitles cease. Even where less clearly motivated, the effect is less a general de-emphasis on the text than a focus on its aural qualities over its communicative ones. Subtitling can't entirely capture the effect of children delivering dense philosophical dialogue, and is entirely unnecessary in contrasting the sounds of a voice with nature. Klotz and Perceval also isolate other qualities of the text by occasionally delivering it against a black screen, either as narration or as captions.

Another bit of text that isn't quite necessary to subtitle are the lyrics from an excerpt of Patti Smith's. The film often feels rooted in the time of *Finis Terræ*, and Klotz and Perceval even propose a film prehistory rooted in the primacy of images. But alongside the Smith needledrop, the repeated motifs from Mihály Vig (composed for Béla Tarr) connects the directors' project to other film history, and a segment in which a girl dances to a Rosalía song in a bar as an older woman films on her cellphone briefly brings the film all the way into the present. These temporally disparate reference points lend *New World!* an epic scope, and increase the viewer's ease of engaging with it. In general, the diversity of Klotz and Perceval's filmmaking approach is engrossing, despite long stretches of landscape photography sans text. And though images often take precedence, the film isn't lacking in narrative or expository interest. Klotz and Perceval may not be prescriptive in their exploration of film as a medium, but the ideas they present are worth unpacking. **– *JESSE CATHERINE WEBBER***

THE BUS STATION
Gustavo Fontán

Argentinian filmmaker Gustavo Fontán has produced fourteen feature films since 2003, but still hasn't broken through on the film festival circuit in a substantial way. This is perhaps odd, given the attention that Argentina has received from the film world in the last two decades. But judging from *The Bus Station*, Fontán's films may be challenging even for audiences who have embraced Lucretia Martel, Lisandro Alonso, and Matías Piñeiro. Situated somewhere between observational documentary and experimental spatial study, *The Bus Station* often seems more like a photographic project than a film, per se.

Fontán's chief concerns seem to be more of capturing particular qualities of light, rack-focus effects, and an overall atmosphere of the given space — a bus terminal near Córdoba — than the comings and goings of the people there. The film's handheld camerawork often appears to move around a given image in order to discover the perfect angle or arrangement of forms, which means a lot of fleeting "views" of people and places, with photogenic results coming into focus and then dissipating just as quickly. Certain motifs emerge, like the distant headlights of buses arriving at dawn, or the reflective surfaces of a skill-crane

game in the corner. But mostly, *The Bus Station* regards human figures, architectural features, and ambient space as equal terms in a gray, shadowy cinematic environment. The soundtrack is fairly conventional, composed of grinding motor sounds, murmurs, and freeway noise. However, at regular intervals Fontán gives us voiceover comments by various people, remarks described as "testimonies" in the end credits. These unseen individuals are talking about love, whether they had a great romance in their lives, and whether they were able to sustain it. I'll freely admit that I have trouble seeing what this material specifically contributes to the film. Is the bus station a place of hellos and goodbyes, which for Fontán suggests the fortunes of our emotional lives? In the end, I came away thinking that *The Bus Station*, as my first encounter with Fontán's work, may be part of a larger aesthetic project to which I'm just not privy. On its own, the film seems like an honorable experiment, though one that does not entirely gel. **— MICHAEL SICINSKI**

HOW I BECAME A COMMUNIST

Declan Clarke

How I Became a Communist opens on a static shot of an elderly woman cleaning out the chimney of her rural Irish farmhouse. There is no music, and no dialogue spoken. What unfolds for the next twenty minutes is a purposefully drab depiction of this woman's life, which mostly involves farm work and cleaning, with the occasional friend coming over to visit. The film recalls *Jeanne Dielman* in how it explores the mundanity of everyday life without offering any direct social or political commentary over the images. We're given no backstory for this woman and no details about the intricacies of her life; we're merely shown a small glimpse of the toil and labor that she performs around her house. However, despite the similarities, it's worth noting that *Jeanne Dielman* spends an enormous amount of time with its central character, as we slowly see the minutiae take a toll on her life and things spiral out of control; director Declan Clarke decides to drop his social-realist docudrama early on and move into something more experimental and akin to a visual essay.

Clarke pulls from myriad sources and weaves together disparate histories, culminating in an attempted commentary on left wing politics past and present. At the center of this is a focus on the Brothers Grimm, specifically their "tale" *The Musicians of Bremen*, the only one of their works unaltered by Conservative Catholics (who often feared the Brothers' writing wasn't suitable) through numerous publications since its first in 1819. Clarke's examination of *The Musicians of Bremen* — whose narrative involves four old animals that flee and live communally in freedom after being

threatened with death for living past their purpose — is reasonably interesting, gesturing to a deep level of latent radicalism seldom seen in the era of its initial publishing, predating as it did any Marxist thought or events like the Paris Commune. So often have Grimm's fairy tales been reduced to their more Disney-fied features that it's refreshing to see them located through a more adult political lens.

That said, Clarke's film is ultimately reaching in too many different directions at once. The director attempts to weave both Irish history and personal political development into his film's short runtime, using large walls of text and images of objects, mostly consisting of a book titled *The Case for Communism*, and various newspaper clippings reporting on the death of Margaret Thatcher in 2013. Ruminating on these subjects is, in theory, not a bad thing. However, apart from both texts persisting throughout his childhood, Clarke is unable to bring the various threads together, thus failing to construct any cogent statement, his intent murky. Instead, each individual idea here feels isolated from the others, dangling with no throughline to connect them, the impression being of impatience to move onto the next.

The fundamental transformation implied by the film's title never fully comes to fruition. One might argue that there's an intentional enigmatic and fractured approach to *How I Became a Communist*, and the film does flirt with intriguing notions regarding the legacy and mythos of classic folk tales and their relevance to contemporary political thought. But it's tough to look past how rushed and incomplete Clarke's interests feel in execution. The director is clearly influenced by Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard — particularly reflecting the latter's *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*, with its blend of docudrama, narration, and inserts of objects — but *How I Became a Communist* lacks the sense of rhythm and discursive follow-through that those directors bore. In that absence, Clarke's own vision fails to ascend to something more than a mere collage of disparate images. **— OLIVER PARKER**

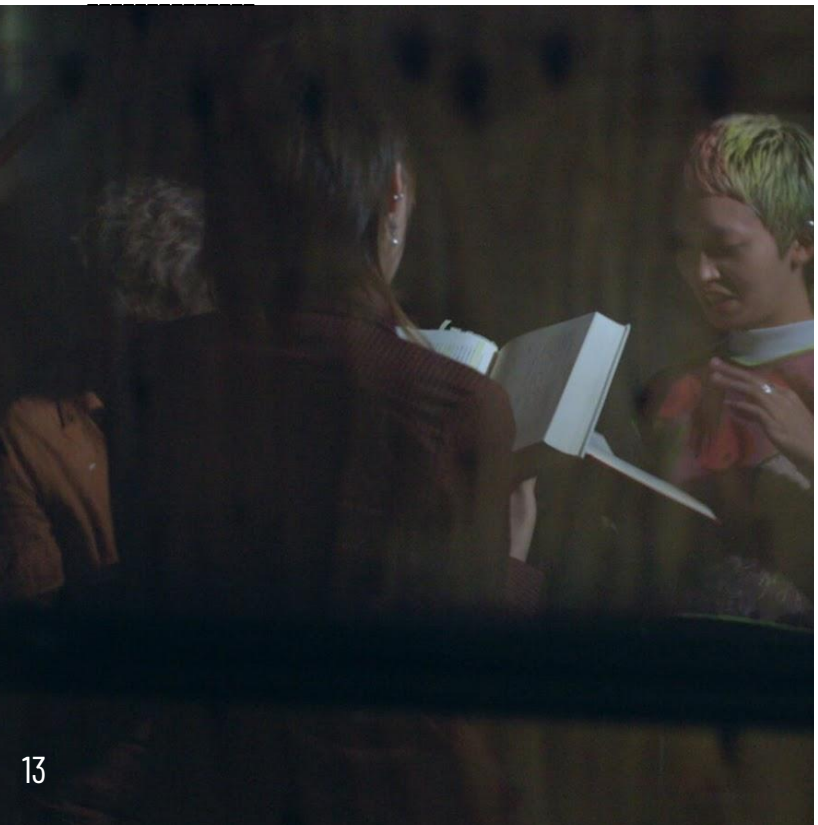
OF GIRLS

Wendelien Van Oldenborgh

Film often exists in a curious relation to the art world. Though there's no formal distinction between film and video art or artists' moving image, the movie theater and the gallery remain largely disparate spaces. Though artist Wendelien Van Oldenborgh has more frequently worked in the latter space, her

new single-channel film installation (as her website describes it), *of girls*, is her latest to premiere at FIDMarseille. Given its status as a home for some of the more innovative directors in the film world, it makes sense that FIDMarseille would also bridge this gap. Van Oldenborgh's film is still likely to stand out: at 43 minutes, it's the shortest work in this year's International Competition, and its directorial approach feels particularly academic. It's not, however, an entirely inappropriate context, the film not altogether too inaccessible.

In *of girls,* a diverse group of artists, writers, and academics read and discuss the work of Fumiko Hayasashi and Yuriko Miyamoto, two feminist 20th-century authors from Japan. Though literature is at the center of the film, a variety of disciplines are engaged; likewise, though only Miyamoto was explicitly queer, both writers' works are read through the lens of modern queer theory. Each has an important political legacy, as Miyamoto was often censored and imprisoned for her communist writing and activism, and Hayasashi participated in producing state propaganda in Japan's occupied territories during World War II. The preservation of Hayasashi's house as a museum also allows Van Oldenborgh to continue her work's exploration of architecture. All this is a bit overwhelming in the absence of prior knowledge of the two writers, and complicated by the fact that translation is both an additional subject of the film and almost a necessity to engaging with it, as its dialogue comprises both English and Japanese.



Fortunately, the film's speakers approach these subjects with humility, preventing their discussions from becoming impenetrable. The same passage is sometimes read in both languages, and the differences are a challenge to discern when the Japanese is translated back into English subtitles, but the ambiguity inherent to translation becomes almost a text in itself as the speakers disentangle the effects of the translation. Similarly, when discussing the eroticism of Hayasashi's writing about women, a queer theorist admits to lacking the historical context to know if this would've been unusual. Introducing some uncertainty into the academic rigor of the discussions presents an entry point for a wider audience.

Van Oldenborgh's primary visual conceit parallels the doubling of subjects and languages. The film is presented not quite in traditional split-screen, but with one image on the left fading into another on the right. Often, though not always, the two shots are of the same performers in the same location. The effect is unusual enough to provide consistent visual interest, which is welcome but occasionally distracting given the necessity of reading subtitles. Sometimes the shots blend into each other seamlessly until an actor in one also walks into the other. At one point, Van Oldenborgh seems to become particularly interested in one performers' striped shirt, placing her in the center of both shots so that the pattern overlaps. The two shots also allow Van Oldenborgh to transition back and forth between discourses, and again, the subtitling is foregrounded as overlapping speech becomes inherently less accessible than overlapping images.

Combining formal concerns more consistent with experimental film is going to be a challenge for audiences. Given this, it seems that perhaps the medium-length feature is a natural format for such a work; the multidisciplinary engagement would likely fill a short film to bursting, and though it could likely sustain a longer runtime, Van Oldenborgh's film as constituted offers a more manageable compromise between accessibility and discursive specificity. *of girls* is a worthy reach from the art world into that of the film festival, and although it also stretches the rhetorical limits of film criticism, or at least this film critic's, Van Oldenborgh offers ample support to meet her single-channel film installation at its level. ***— JESSE CATHERINE WEBBER***

THE GREAT ESCAPE

John Sturges

In the midst of the World War Two, Australian journalist Paul Brickhill was bored by reality; to him, war fever was a case of major hysteria, and despite his advancement from stuttering cadet journalist to sub-editor at a regional imprint, the monotonous prospects of his job breathed enough life for the Dodo to fly. The shock invasion of France was enough to induce him into the coma of adventure, and soon he found himself flying airplanes over Northern Africa for the Royal Australian air force. This was March 1941. He was 34. In March 1943, he will be shot down over Tunisia and taken as a prisoner of war. Flown to Italy, then sent by train to Germany, he is held at the Dulag Luft for a month before being sent to Stalag Luft III, a POW camp run by the Luftwaffe, 150 km southeast of Berlin. He is rounded up with mostly commonwealth prisoners, all of whom have a similar goal: to escape the reality enclosing upon them.

At Stalag, working beside 600 other men, Brickhill assists in the construction of one of three underground tunnels that was designed for escape. Far from boredom, Brickill's claustrophobia prevents him from attempting to escape alongside the 77 who made it; though like all who escape death, they would only do so temporarily. At word of the execution of 50 of the men, Brickhill resolves to preserve their legacy, and in turn, take a French leave from the confines of the life he'd left when he fell into rhythm with the tune of war.

The result was a book called *The Great Escape,* which four years later became a major motion picture directed by John Sturges, and starring future Hollywood icons Steve McQueen, James Garner, Richard Attenborough, and others. Now considered a Hollywood classic, *The Great Escape* celebrated the 60th anniversary of its release in July of this year. Somewhere, a Dodo bird is flying, but please, don't be fooled: *The Great Escape* is an American film about largely British endeavors, with baseball mitts and free-flying flags on the Fourth of July appended to the corpse of one man's perspective. Let me correct myself: *The Great Escape* is more than a film, because for many, it was the first palatable exposure to a conflict that ended the world that came before it, and ushered in the new one, born from the violent recourse of its precedent.

At the outset of *The Great Escape*, onscreen text reads: "This is a true story. Although characters are composites of real men, and time and place have been compressed, every detail of the escape is the way it really happened." In the skeptical hyperreality of our simulated world, it's almost shocking for a film to begin with a proclamation so bold and arrogant, but with its success, *The Great Escape* indeed claimed command over reality. With it's goofy humor, jovial Bernsteinian score, and cool McQueen swagger, the film ropes in audiences with the appeal of its extreme circumstance; in death, the glory sown by the dead

(The Men of the War) is reaped by the living (the audience) from the cinematic stakes made fertile by very real sacrifice.

When it was released in 1963, *The Great Escape* suffered some harsh initial reviews from critics. In *The New York Times*, Bosley Crowther wrote: "I've no way of proving that a few of the wilder episodes in this over-long melodrama, which opened yesterday at the DeMille and Coronet, are so far beyond plausibility that they could not have happened anyplace. And since I've seen most of them in other pictures about cheeky prisoners-of-war — three or four in the past year — I must assume that they are derived from common lore. But nobody is going to con me — at least not the director, John Sturges — into believing that the spirit of defiance in any prisoner-of-war camp anywhere was as arrogant, romantic and Rover Boyish as it is made to appear in this film." This writer's own viewing experience was similar. We begin in a German POW camp, with a cast of grounded airmen prancing around a jail in the woods. Steve McQueen snarls and surveys the campus; in one hilarious turn, a prisoner makes mention of having measured distances on the grounds within their first walk-around. Almost laughably, the prisoners of war are reduced to schoolboys on summer vacation at sleepaway camp. They all have, as Crowther puts it, a Rover Boyish demeanor — juvenile, adventurous, pranking, and flirtatious — that seems at total odds with their context.

The irony of Crowther's criticisms, and of mine, is that these are the least contentious points of fact that paint the reality of the situation. By all accounts, Stalag Luft III was run like a summer camp, or a college: prisoners earned degrees in languages, engineering, and law, and built a theater to put on bi-weekly performances of all the chicest West End Shows. Some prisoners even broadcast a radio station called KRGY, while others published two independent newspapers four times weekly. All of these facts, and their depiction, makes one wonder: why even try to escape? In many ways, the prisoners appear in better spirits than their captors. At one juncture, the Kommandant (Hannes Messemer) says solemnly to Group Captain Ramsey (James Donald): "You and I are both grounded for the rest of the war."

But escape they must, by allegiance to their country, and so the men go about digging three enormous tunnels simultaneously in a race to get-to-the-treeline first. In *The Great Escape,* the most developed tunnel in the camp is discovered during moonshined Fourth of July celebrations, which most certainly did not happen, because in reality most American prisoners had already been transferred out of the camp by that time of the year. In fact, the actual escape did not occur in the summer; it occurred in March of 1944, one year after Brickhill was shot down and three years after he resolved to escape the harsh banality of his untextured everyday, only to find himself thirty feet underground, traversing over 100 meters of tunnel measuring two square feet.

In *The Great Escape*, there is no clear sense of time; ironically, the film is largely indebted to the pre-war tradition of the movement image — films identified by Deleuze as being concerned with perception, affection, and action — rather than the time image — concerned with optical and acoustic signs of introspection — whose introspective melody was inspired by the atrocities writ large during the war. At the camp, it is always sort-of-summer, even with Hilts' (Steven McQueen) months-long stays in solitary confinement. And, in abstracting this detail, the film scrapes away the superficial, and incidentally, the soul of the film.

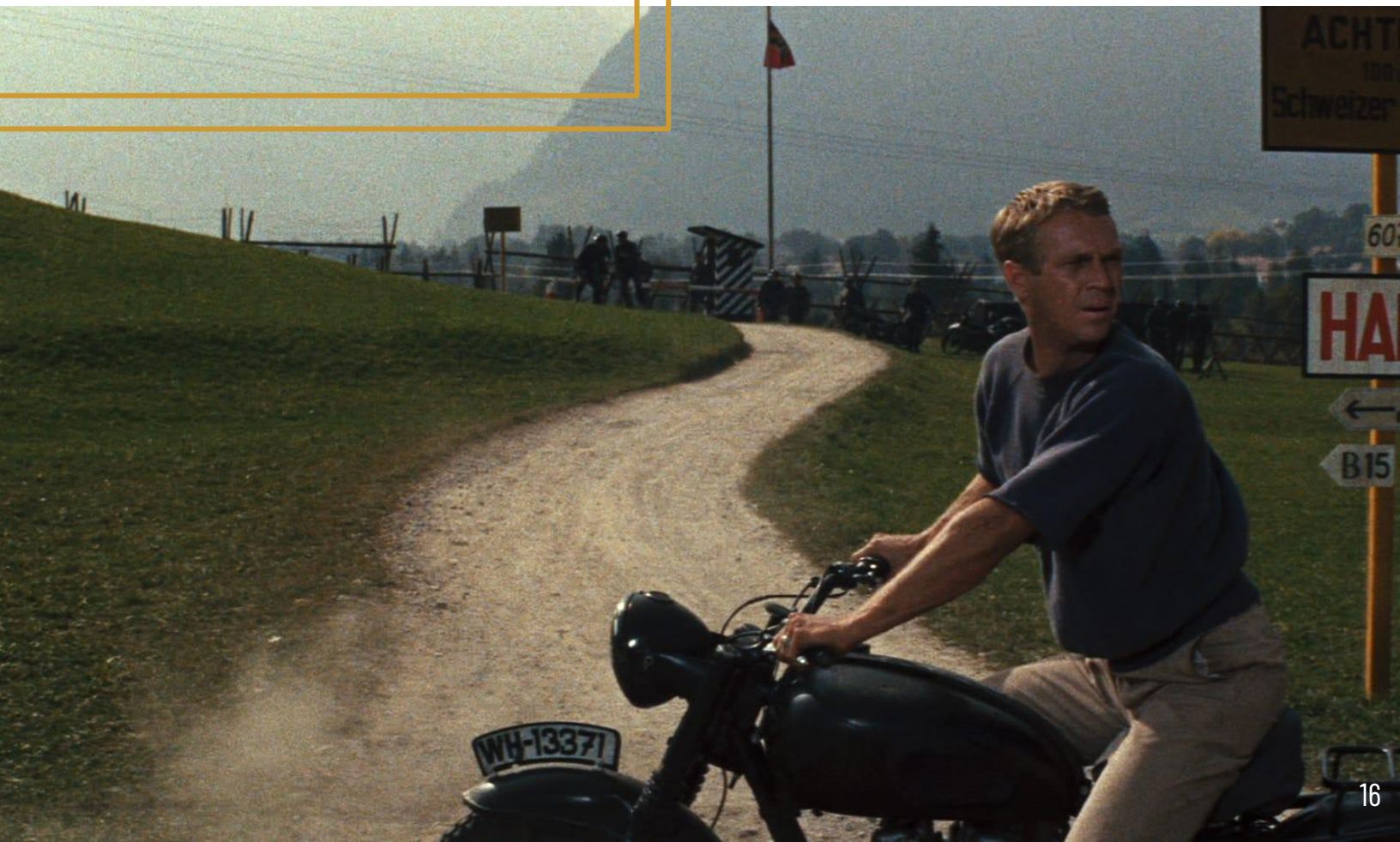
In reality, the camp was covered in snow during the escape, which made it harder to dig tunnels through frozen ground, to dispose inconspicuously of the sand that burned harshly, and to cover the traces imprinted like memories on the ground. More saliently, Sturges' abstraction of time creates an environment absent of memory, or contemplation; the result is a picture that makes light of the depth of the human experience of war, and which fails to capitalize on an inherent, desperate tension so deeply resonant to the men who were shaped into the characters of *The Great Escape* — fifty of them lost their lives, one after the other, after the other — trying to realize it. In the war-torn world shown in *The Great Escape*, there is the escape from the grating abrasion that gives life its texture. Things aren't harsh, they're hollow, and they're easy to dig holes through. Death is just an alibi somewhere offscreen, far out of frame.

If anything, there is one strength of the film's atemporality: the monotony that it captures as the sun shines, day in and out, on nothing new. This repetition is made rhythmic with the schoolboy joy of Elmer Bernstein's score, a soundtrack which

exploits military motifs in a copacetic mix with soft, humanizing brushes that makes the prisoners accessible to audiences; in the absence of our interiority that might might forward them as "complete" people, they are rendered as blank slates of projected glory. As the film's introduction reads, these are *composites of real men*, and in the depthlessness of their perennial servitude, they are composites of you, and her, and him, and me.

By the time the fifty men are dead, they've already been dead for twenty years — and eighty at the time of this writing. Still, their deaths don't *feel* real. Did Steve McQueen ever do the epic jump on his motorcycle, attempting to escape the Germans tailing him by leaping over one fence of barbed wire and into the next? Who knows. Well, we do. We know that he didn't, it was Bud Ekins. Or was it? Unit director Robert Relyea said that shots were taken of McQueen and motocross champion Tim Gebbes doing the stunt, and that the final cut could have been any of the three. Maybe this doesn't matter. It looks like McQueen, so it is McQueen, and he'll forever be remembered for that epic jump, the jump he might not have done, because from the vantage of Sturges' camera, it sure looks like he did it, and spectacularly at that.

By its end, *The Great Escape* succeeds at the distinctly American feat of dressing a pyrrhic victory as a triumph. Men died, and for what? Men went to war, and why? To fight for new realities, his or hers, ours or theirs, and of course, they won, or rather, we did. Brickhill climbed out of his cubicle and into a fighter jet, and he crashed into a scorched earth so that he could design a new world once again, one full of excitement and victory and its own history to tell. Because *The Great Escape* is full of lies; this is not the way "it really happened." But in the contour of these lies sits the truth of the story, whose essence was captured by Brickhill, a man who was there, compressed by claustrophobia like the character Danny Welinski (Charles Bronson), a King of the Tunnel who did not take his turn out of it. Instead, he stuck around to survive the winter, and in his writing and the refractions of its heritage, created a new world filled to the brim with the truth of the resilient, recalcitrant spirit of men, tenuously gripping to a false reality that grants the victims of its compromise their own place in the glory of their own temporal destiny. That destiny is one that is shared with privilege as ours, and it's one where the war isn't so bad, because every car chase and gunshot plays to the tune of a sauntering song by Elmer Bernstein. **— *CONOR TRUAX***



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.

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***

DIRECTOR: Christian Petzold; **CAST:** Thomas Schubert, Paula Beer, Langston Uibel; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Janus Films/Sideshow; **IN THEATERS:** July 14; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 43 min.

LAKOTA NATION VS. UNITED STATES

Jesse Short Bull & Laura Tomaselli

"U.S. history is a branch of a larger tree of history… but it's that covetous branch that thinks it's the tree." Proffered somewhere partway through *Lakota Nation vs. United States*, this assertion operates as a rough thesis for Jesse Short Bull and Laura Tomaselli's remarkable new film. Employing a similar lens through which to view American history as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* — that of settler colonialism; "a state based on the ideology of white supremacy… and a policy of genocide and land theft" — *Lakota Nation* is a clear-eyed and incendiary unpacking of the ouroboros logic of the country's fundamentally racist, colonizer historiography. As the title implies, this documentary is most specifically focused on the history of Lakota peoples, particularly their relation to the Black Hills of South Dakota as a cultural and spiritual mecca, but it's still effortlessly illustrative as a synecdoche of the larger Indigenous history of displacement and dehumanization at the hands of white American hegemony. It follows, then, that the portrait the co-directors present isn't only one of persecution and persistence on the part of Indigenous populations, but also a mining of the white rage — to connect this to another recent, essential work of sociological inquiry — that has existed and bloomed since the United States' founding. But the duo are also savvy enough to keep *Lakota Nation* from slipping into a purely academic exercise: platformed here are a bevy of diverse Dakotan voices, from activists to scholars to laypeople, expertly blending personal, cultural, and national histories. It's an impressively comprehensive work, yet still manages to leverage its discursive vein to emotional ends, resulting in a work that's as edifying as it is empathetic.

Guiding all this through is Oglala poet Layli Long Soldier, whose 2017 collection *Whereas*, written as a response to the dubious, blanket congressional apology to native peoples signed by Obama in 2009, is perhaps *the* essential work of 21st-century poetry, Indigenous or otherwise. Operating as both screenwriter and narrator, Long Soldier's lyrical presence here is the first indication of Short Bull and Tomaselli's intent on crafting not just a forceful essay film — which it is — but also a work of commanding formalism. While mostly deferring to a roster of passionate voices, Long Soldier pops up in an interstitial capacity across the film's two-hour runtime, her decelerated cadence almost metronomical as she recites poems built on linguistic repetition, a thematic reflection of the centuries of calculated, ceaseless disregard for the dignity of Indigenous populations. This careful sonic texture is carried over to the film's soundtrack, which is largely built on sustained droning and fuzzy ambience, the past and present here engaged with fittingly enveloped in a certain ominousness, and then occasionally ruptured with colonialist propaganda like "Star Spangled Banner"

and "Home on the Range." If these choices seem overly obvious on paper, they are precisely implemented throughout, never used for cheap irony but instead as devastating reinforcements of the white American exceptionalism and evil of Manifest Destiny that the United States is fundamentally built upon.

To some degree, all documentaries must justify their existence as a visual medium. After all, there are plenty of texts that tread the same rhetorical territory, and so viewers are right to ask: why am I *watching* this? It's a question Short Bull and Tomaselli are thrillingly equipped to answer, employing a variety of techniques to tremendous effect. *Lakota Nation* takes the shape of a collage doc, accumulating artifacts and archival documents, propagandist cartoons, paintings, and maps to accompany its "text," all of which are stylishly implemented and formally legible. Elsewhere, crisp digital photography is used to capture modern reenactments of historical hostilities, articulating the implicit settler lens of such spectacles through an exaggerated artificiality, frequently shooting from low angles and capturing the saturated colors of modern costuming. These and other sequences scan like the moving tableaux of myth, and indeed the directors' often tend toward a kind of expressionism, specifically in connecting the Lakota's relationship to their land: one memorable shot features a close-up of a sunflower, slowly pulling back to ultimately reveal a massive field of them, eyes adjusting from a single locus of attention to an abstracted whole, endlessly dotted with yellow, while the narration explains the United States' systematic starvation of Indigenous populations in an effort to create a system of dependency and short-circuit Native sovereignty. (At times, the film even recalls the work of someone like John Gianvito, particularly *Her Socialist Smile*, with graceful, disembodied voiceover set to lush, thematically resonant natural settings.) *Lakota Nation*'s compositions are clean and symmetrical, largely images of Dakotan sky meeting land, occasionally blemished by settler iconography (a gas station named Custer, for instance). The directors even take care to gussy up the film's talking-head compositions, shooting from oblique angles or framing bodies within double-wide door frames.

The highest compliment one can pay a thesis-driven film of this kind is to observe that its disquisitions would be legible even if

watched on mute. In that regard, *Lakota Nation vs. United States* is an endlessly fascinating formal document, one that would indeed likely afford rich rewards on silent rewatch, the clarity and artistry of its images fairly unmatched in recent documentary filmmaking. Fittingly, then, it ends with an explosive final scene. Earlier in the film, *Lakota Nation* detailed the construction of Mt. Rushmore, its crushing symbolic weight, and Donald Trump's fireworks-heavy Independence Day celebration that occasioned the tourist spot in 2020, before later moving into its final section which details current reparational movements, environmental activist efforts, and the role of white allyship. It's a remarkably moving section, the participants' rhetoric shifting from a parsing of history to an articulation of hope for the future, a beautiful assertion of self in a country still mostly operating according to settler ideology. In the film's final shot, Short Bull and Tomaselli once again turn their focus to fireworks, this time dotting the sky over a Land Back bash, serving up a moving celebration not of something past, but of what and who persist in the present, and a clarified vision of what is still to come. **— *LUKE GORHAM***

DIRECTOR: Jesse Short Bull & Laura Tomaselli; **CAST:** —; **DISTRIBUTOR:** IFC Films; **IN THEATERS:** July 14; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 58 min.

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.

DIRECTOR: Michel Hazanavicius; **CAST:** Romain Duris, Bérénice Bejo, Matilda Anna Ingrid Lutz; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Kino Lorber; **IN THEATERS:** July 14; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 51 min.

BIRD BOX BARCELONA

David Pastor & Alex Pastor

Remember *Bird Box*? Surely you must, since it allegedly became the most popular movie ever on Netflix at the time of its release. This also proves that a whole lot of people will watch a movie — relatively quality notwithstanding — for no other reason than... it's there. Given that everyone has supposedly watched that film, no one should need to be reminded that it was a post-apocalyptic-ish horror film about a single mother of two trying to escape to some place of safety in a world overrun by never-glimpsed monsters of unknown origin. Also, minor detail: these monsters will drive anyone who sees them to immediately commit suicide.

Five years later, and we now have *Bird Box Barcelona*, a side-quel of sorts following an entirely new set of characters in a new location. Right off the bat, we meet Sebastian (Mario Casas) and his daughter Anna (Alejandra Howard), the duo searching for a moment of peace while scavenging through the titular city, where they must remain blindfolded at all times lest they spy one of the thingies. They're accosted by some naturally blind folks, who in this topsy-turvy world have a special advantage and who've apparently become marauding thugs (is this somehow ableist?). But Anna convinces her dad to not fight back and murder them. Eventually, they find their way to another band of refugees hiding in an abandoned bus terminal. The less said about what's really going on with Sebastian and Anna the better, as that twist — which comes within the first 20 minutes or so — constitutes the sole interesting and imaginative idea present in this entire affair.

Without going into any specifics, Sebastian isn't quite what you'd call a likable protagonist, and his relationship to the scary monsters is the narrative engine that drives the plot. That plot,

though, is ultimately as generic as possible, not remotely dissimilar to, say, either of the *Quiet Place* movies: the main characters seek safety but must leave their shelter; new characters appear who may or may not be trustworthy; and eventually, as it so often turns out in these unimaginative affairs, that… people are the scariest monsters of all.

In fairness, there are one or two vaguely effective sequences, one involving a bus careening through a warehouse, and also an effective climax set on a gondola. But mostly we're left to simply occupy the same space as the characters, the setting limited to dark buildings and deserted, trash-strewn city streets. You've seen literally every element of this movie before, which almost makes it refreshing that you never actually find out anything about the monsters at all, especially what they look like. Ultimately, though, it's hard to imagine that if viewers *were* treated to such a reveal, that it wouldn't just look like every other CGI movie alien. And in fact, that assumption basically works as synechdoche for the film we are given: a relentlessly generic work content to merely shut its eyes and spin its wheels. ***— MATT LYNCH***

DIRECTOR: David Pastor & Alex Pastor; **CAST:** Mario Casa, Georgina Campbell, Diego Calva; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Netflix; **STREAMING:** July 14; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 50 min.

QUICKSAND

Andrés Beltrán

Quicksand is yet another entry in the suddenly ubiquitous horror subgenre of forced couples' therapy, where a contentious pair are placed in a diabolical — and usually claustrophobic — situation that requires them to exorcize their relationship-induced demons if they want to survive. That the majority of these scripts were born out of Covid-induced quarantine isn't the least bit surprising, as the inability to shake one's mate for long periods of time clearly brought a lot of simmering rage and resentment to the fore of many a relationship. There's no denying that film functions as a reflection of the anxieties and fears facing society at the time of its creation, and countless studies will thus be conducted, and essays written, with regard to art as a reflection of the so-called "Covid Era."

Quicksand has nothing to do with Covid directly, but the main couple sure act like they've been trapped in one another's company for years on end. Sofia (Carolina Gaitan) and Josh (Allan Hawco) have been married for close to a decade and are ready to call it quits. She's presented as cold and calculating, forever wielding a withering look and a barbed comeback, while he perpetually looks like someone just kicked his puppy. Both are successful surgeons and have made their way to Colombia for a medical conference hosted by their best friend, Marcos (Sebastian Eslava). After a disastrous dinner among the three in which Sofia goes out of her way to humiliate and emasculate Josh, she suddenly decides to atone for her sins by agreeing to accompany him on a hike in the nearby rainforests, even though she literally says just prior that she would rather be waterboarded with acid than go adventuring with his pathetic ass. The sudden appearance of a gun-toting thief on the main trail sends both of them hurtling into dangerous terrain that ultimately results in both getting stuck neck-deep in the titular sludge. As they try to figure out a solution to their literal quagmire, they must confront not only the dangers inherent to the forest itself, but the reasons why their marriage failed in the first place. Is survival possible? More impossibly, what of reconciliation?

Quicksand calls to mind films like *47 Meters Down* and 2010's *Frozen*, tales of survival whose thrills are generated by their claustrophobic settings as well as the emotional and physical fallibility of their protagonists, grounding them in reality even as the events around them are so wholly ridiculous. These types of movies are the definition of "what would you do?" entertainment, the resulting conversations usually proving more enthralling than the features that engender them. *Quicksand*, however, shoots itself in the foot at minute one by introducing two protagonists so wholly unlikeable that there's never a moment where the viewer isn't rooting for the forest to take them both out. So what does the forest have in store for them, anyway? Fire ants and a snake; that's it. In fact, it uses the snake twice, because apparently screenwriter Matt Pitts couldn't think of anything else. Tension is bred into the premise itself, yet director Andrés Beltrán seems to go out of his way to ensure the proceedings are as banal as possible. Sure, you could have the snake appear out of nowhere and give the audience a good jump scare, but Beltrán also opts to use snake-cam POV for five minutes beforehand so

that once it finally appears, viewers will have practically fallen asleep. (And make sure to show the fire ants on a tree right before, so that we understand what is biting Sofia.)

It's also worth noting that the script was clearly written by a man, as Sofia falls squarely into the male-defined role of "raging bitch," presented as a woman who loves her children but resents the fact that she gave up her successful career to be a stay-at-home mom, even though her husband was willing to accept those duties himself. Josh also used to be an alcoholic, which understandably put a strain on their relationship and causes resentment to fester. But the longer the film continues, the more clear it becomes that there is no sin too small to encourage Sofia's resentment, while Josh just accepts the abuse heaped upon him, a detail the narrative doesn't have the wherewithal to unpack, choosing instead to render both characters as outdated and regressive stereotypes. It's all very distasteful, and that's even before the ludicrous ending, which takes a big swing for artsy but winds up in '80s network drama territory. If this is what survival looks like, maybe getting a hug from a giant snake isn't so bad.

DIRECTOR: Andrés Beltrán; **CAST:** Allan Hawco, Carolina Gaitán, Sebastián Eslava; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Shudder; **STREAMING:** July 14; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 26 min.

THE DEEPEST BREATH

Laura McGann

There's no denying the sheer aesthetic appeal of Laura McGann's *The Deepest Breath*. Charting the mind-boggling freediving efforts of Alessia Zecchini and Stephen Keenan, the documentary is a frequently ravishing exploration of the extreme sport in question — in which divers plunge to death-defying ocean depths without any breathing apparatuses, using only their exceptional lung capacity — capturing the deep down dark of the seas, and those who would be silhouettes against its vastness. For a while, McGann moves between Zecchini and Keenan's respective narratives, kindred souls chasing something not quite articulable — notions of free living or recognition as the world's best are bandied about, but never quite properly explored and accepted — and the early going is constructed of digressions and anecdotes of their respective lives, punctuated by awe-inducing images and acts that, in function, most closely recall the adrenaline-chasing timbre of *Free Solo*. Eventually, the two distinct threads coalesce into the film's essential narrative, one that taps into the emotional core McGann carefully develops throughout, but which also highlights the film's considerable weaknesses.

From a visual perspective, the primary obstacle is a problem of

scale. Individual images of aquatic splendor certainly land with some sporadic power throughout, but capturing an individual disappearing into midnight darkness doesn't hold the visual acuity of the image of someone willing themselves a speck against the grandeur of a massive rock formation in *Free Solo*; the ocean's magnitude, meanwhile, remains mostly an intellectual exercise in *The Deepest Breath*. There's no denying the power of what we see — the POV footage of dives lending a necessary, magnifying element to the film's reconstructions — but it hits the ceiling of visual spectacle early and too often. This deficiency is supplemented via the film's narrative construction: Zecchini's storyline centers around her efforts to touch Natalia Molchanova's freediving world record, while Keenan's is more that of a wanderlust wunderkind who redirects his efforts to safety measures within the sport. There's also a delicate love story between the two prominents that develops through this all, which indeed manages to add a bit of texture to the habitual documentation of deep-sea dives, although it doesn't quite generate the emotional force a film of this character necessitates.

Still, the primary frustration present in *The Deepest Breath* is one of edifice. The narrative ultimately proves to be fairly straightforward, but as realized by McGann, it's massaged into a will-s/he-won't-s/he docu-thriller, with the film's voiceover narrative adopting a past-tense posture with both of the primary operatives' storylines, essentially forcing viewers to engage with the text at the level of "who will survive?" From the beginning, we're instructed to wonder which — if either, if both — storyline is set to endure after the end credits. In *Free Solo*, as a continued point of comparison, there's a real-time appeal to the documentation, a quality that would have certainly redefined the final product under different circumstances, but which rings organic to the film's documentation. Here, there's a retrospective quality to the entire affair, one that leaves the narrative presented feeling somewhat manipulative, teetering on the line of good taste in its effort to mine drama from *The Deepest Breath*'s efforts at pulse-pumping spectacle. In *Free Solo*, there's also the implied question of pathology, as the film consistently interrogates what motivates the man at its core. In McGann's film, all such investigation is set aside, with the players' explicit action prioritized as of more interest than their mystifying psychological motivation. Which means that, unlike the abyss that Zecchini and Keenan frequent, *The Deepest Breath* only flirts with a depth it should outright explore.

DIRECTOR: Laura McGann; **CAST:** —; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Netflix; **IN THEATERS/STREAMING:** July 14/July 19; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 48 min.

THE YOUTUBE EFFECT

Alex Winter

Kids these days don't even know what film, this emulsive material, is, as a talking head insipidly points out in Alex Winter's strained and self-serious documentary *The YouTube Effect*. While it's clear that Winter has made an effort to understand the rough shape of this new medium, with only a little smudging around the edges, there isn't much talk of the way that YouTube has changed the culture of images. The difference between film and YouTube has less to do with the material they are made of and method of viewing than it does with their context: a film, for example, no longer exists in the isolation of the cinema, but is intermingled within a huge collage of every other content type that people are bombarded with all the time.

There's almost a sense of this gooping — of everything losing shape, meaning, and distinction when crushed together, something even Bo Burnham noticed — when Winter cuts from the Arab Spring to the high-pitched, low-rent comedy videos of FЯED. But he's far too interested in YouTube's "dark side," so much so that once he gets the chance to talk about it, he never looks back. This seriousness is projected in all of his closeup, distorted, pixelated images, sometimes of explosions. Even some of the highly conventional talking-head interviews are handheld.

In fact, these interviews are so chopped up, switching between voices during these vaguely stylish montages, that they almost merge into a single voice: the film's. Yet their numerous and porous contradictions aren't harmonized — in an attempt to capture something unimaginably large — so much as they are ignored. Winter is interested in the big, general picture, so he (to his credit) doesn't quite luxuriate in the gory details; he takes them seriously and tries to show the institutional incentives that lead to the kind of dangerous content that almost anyone familiar with the platform will already know about: from

conspiracy theories to incels to those strange, algorithm-exploiting Spider-Man and Elsa clips.

It's possible the director is trying to make a movie for the totally unaware, but in that broadness he allows too much to fall through the cracks. He's right to put the fault, ultimately, in the hands of the eponymous platform — though his interview with CEO Susan Wojcicki is rather gentle — but he's far too unquestioning of creators. He prints the scrappy amateur legend of Ryan's ToyReviews/Ryan's World — listening passively to the Mother's story of using a green tablecloth, that they just happened to have already, as their first green-screen — despite the fact we see the parents prompting their child, who became a YouTube star at the age of three, with clearly pre-planned answers to the questions about his choice to make (and continue to make) videos.

Underneath this incoherence is an insecurity that's reflected in Winter's previous collaborator, Anthony Padilla, who talks about moving away from his comedian roots in the channel Smosh to produce more serious and important interview videos (though just a few weeks before this review, he announced his return to Smosh). Winter is so eager to engender a sense of hurtling toward the unknown, to give his unexceptional documentary a sense of prestige and import, that he obscures so much else. He all but ignores the way that the content YouTube has incentivized, and the ideology therein, has transformed over time. There really is no reason for him to show GamerGate after, and separate from, the Alt-Right. Either he was unaware of this well-documented link, or he was trying to create this sense of chaos artificially, revealing it, along with the film's overall style and ideas, as totally forced. ***— ESMÉ HOLDEN***

DIRECTOR: Alex Winter; **CAST:** —; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Drafthouse Films; **IN THEATERS:** July 7; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 39 min.

HAVE YOU GOT IT YET? THE STORY OF SYD BARRETT AND PINK FLOYD

Roddy Bogawa & Storm Thorgerson

On July 7th, 2006, Roger Keith "Syd" Barrett died of pancreatic cancer and complications from diabetes at the age of sixty. Although he was the founding member and vocalist of legendary British rock group Pink Floyd, not many people today, outside of

the band's die-hard or older fandom circles, may know exactly who Barrett really was and to what extent his contributions were the driving force and guiding light for the band's seminal artistic visions. It's also true that ever since Barrett's departure from Pink Floyd, the group's music, indeed, has drastically differed from what listeners found in their most well-known records like *Dark Side of the Moon* and *The Wall*, which means Barrett hasn't been remembered as much as he should have been. And while such an outcome certainly isn't fair, it's understandable to some degree: Syd Barrett's story is one of those tragic tales of a talented young rock artist who burned out too quickly, and his stardom subsequently waned far sooner than anyone could have expected. Barrett's legend has become something of a ghost story, and Roddy Bogawa and Storm Thorgerson's biopic documentary *Have You Got it Yet? The Story of Syd Barrett and Pink Floyd* is an admirable effort that intends to explore the life and career of the charismatic, enigmatic, and psychedelic rocker, an assemblage of diverse materials that seeks to shed light on the dark side of Barrett's psyche.

Roughly structured around five chapters — titled after Barrett's rock poetry: "Set Control," "Interstellar," "Obscured by the Clouds," "Divided Self," and "Make Your Name Like a Ghost" — plus an intro and outro, *Have You Got it Yet?* faithfully chronicles the musician's biography, from his childhood and teenage years as an "emotionally and intellectually curious" Cambridge fellow, including his initial influences and practices as a guitar player and painter, to his days as a young art student in London where he met classmate Roger Waters and formed Pink Floyd along with Roger Wright and Nick Mason. Typically performing at the famous UFO Club until Barrett's LSD-induced psychotic breakdown, Pink Floyd was quickly billed as a groundbreaking, multimedia act of rock psychedelia, even as Barrett was subsequently entirely unavailable during the group's live performances and had to be replaced by his childhood friend, guitarist and vocalist David Gilmour. The film broadly covers all this, along with the stories behind Barrett's later two solo albums (*The Madcap Laughs* and *Barrett*) in 1970, before culminating in the lost and confused rock saint's final years when he sought complete reclusion and anonymity.

Have You Got it Yet? relies on a bevy of various new talking head conversations: with Barrett's sister Rosemary Breen, his former bandmates (Waters, Gilmour, and Nick Mason), Pink Floyd managers, other musicians — including The Who's Pete Townshend, Blur's Graham Coxon, and The Mars Volta's Cedric Bixler-Zavala, among others) —and even a couple of psychiatrists (whose function here is to detail the effects of psychedelic substances on one's mind and the relationship between madness and artistic creation). This approach allows Bogawa and Thorgerson to form a kaleidoscopic biographical portrait and comprehensive tribute to Barrett's legacy. The talking heads are interspersed with old footage of Barrett, a handful of solo and group performances, and a few surrealistic and "re-imagined" interval sequences. Indeed, given that Syd Barrett was a free-spirited and freedom-seeking loner who rarely explained himself, it's expected that a documentary like *Have You Got it Yet?* will ultimately lead further into existential questions the more it searches for absolute answers, and this is where the film proves most evocative. In this sense, Bogawa and Thorgerson remain faithful to that which defined Barrett's iconic cult status, undefinable lyricism, and odd artistic reveries: his ability to find the unusual connections between various ideas to expand one's psychic capacities and indescribable wonderment in the face of the great unknown. ***— AYEEN FOROOTAN***

DIRECTOR: Roddy Bogawa & Storm Thorgerson; **CAST:** —; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Abramorama; **IN THEATERS:** July 14; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 34 min.

THE JEWEL THIEF

Landon Van Soest

Audiences hankering for a new James Bond film can tide themselves over with Landon Van Soest's *The Jewel Thief*, an engaging true crime documentary and character study of the criminal prodigy Gerald Daniel Blanchard. During his long career, which began as a teenage fraudster in small-town Nebraska, Blanchard dabbled in bank robbery, international credit card fraud, and, yes, the brazen robbery of a priceless diamond-and-pearl hairpiece known as the Sisi Star. Adding an additional layer to the presentation of *The Jewel Thief*'s built-in spectacle, Blanchard's spectacularly unreliable narration is repeatedly undercut by more grounded interview subjects, including his long-suffering mother and the unassuming police officers who eventually apprehended him.

Born in Canada and raised in Omaha during the late 80s, the nerdy and electronics-obsessed Blanchard took the unique approach of carefully documenting his criminal activities with a video camera. Consequently, much of the documentary's first half is grainy VHS footage of him and his buddies robbing gas stations or boosting Radio Shacks. Using phony receipts, he would return the merchandise back for cash, eventually making enough money to buy his own house at age 16. His reedy appearance was at odds with his overflowing confidence, which allowed him to talk his way out of most situations — and when that didn't work, he proved to be a singularly slippery suspect. In one memorable sequence, he managed to elude police custody multiple times in a single night.

After getting caught and then deported to Canada, he progressed from grand larceny to bank robbery, targeting branches that were under construction so he could slip on a hard hat and undermine their security systems from the inside. This tactic valued patience and subtlety over the guns-blazing MO of typical bank robbers, and even the local cops were impressed by his sophisticated methods. His first hit, of a CIBC branch from whose ATMs he stole $750,000, kicked off a prolonged cat-and-mouse chase that can't help but echo the relationship between Frank Abagnale Jr. and Carl Hanratty as detailed in *Catch Me if You Can*.

Flush with success (and cash), Blanchard continued targeting under-construction bank branches across Canada. But when he married a beautiful and wealthy German woman, a family visit to Austria in 1998 would cement his reputation as a suave and romantic figure worthy of what he craved most: international fame, notoriety, and respect. When he pocketed the Sisi Star, a priceless bauble commissioned by Empress Elisabeth of Austria, he did so with less than 24 hours of preparation. His motives were, as always, strictly self-serving: the star was nothing more than a bargaining chip against future crimes. His prescience paid off when he was finally apprehended several years later — but not before getting involved in an international crime syndicate that featured a tough from London (literally called the Boss), a stack of blank debit cards, and Blanchard and an associate robbing ATMs in Cairo while wearing burqas.

As with many career criminals, Blanchard was obsessed with the thrill; material gain was merely a perk. His compulsion is aptly described as an addiction, a label that he doesn't bother to deny. As an interview subject, his commentary is equal parts unreliable, self-aggrandizing, and calculating, as well as surprisingly self-aware. Meanwhile, his tone is often matter-of-fact to the point of absurdity as he relays his often-ingenious methods. Like many extraordinary people, Blanchard's genius was marred by a fatal flaw: an ego the size of the superyachts on which he often partied with his ill-gotten gains. Filming his escapades as a teenager is a dumb but understandable bit of bravado, but as the scope and severity of his crimes progressed, why go through the trouble of saving deeply incriminating evidence? Perhaps Blanchard was fueled by his ego, believing he'd never get caught. Or maybe it was a sign of something more interesting — a desire *to* get caught, and to finally extricate himself from the suffocating web of lies

that he'd spent his entire life constructing.

At the same time, the international press that surrounded the recovery of the Sisi Star — not to mention this documentary itself — has undoubtedly played right into his hands. Why would a career criminal want to give up global attention and flattering comparisons to James Bond? His shockingly lenient sentencing did similarly little to quell his criminal impulses; an epilogue notes that he was arrested not long after release for stealing PlayStations from a Best Buy. Low-hanging fruit for a "criminal mastermind," perhaps, not that it mattered: for the second time in his career, he was busted thanks to a car at the scene of the crime rented under his real name. This crucial moment of carelessness is fascinating, and Blanchard's complex psychology is well worth a documentary of its own, but it seems we'll have to wait until the next priceless jewel goes missing. ***— SELINA LEE***

DIRECTOR: Landon Van Soest; **CAST:** —; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Hulu; **STREAMING:** July 13; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 40 min.

THE FLOOD

Brandon Slagle

Hard Rain meets *Crawl* in *The Flood*, director Brandon Slagle's ultra-low-budget creature feature that would feel right at home in the 11:00 PM Tuesday night slot on the SyFy Channel, where its subpar special effects and laughable dialogue could be enjoyed in the proper, inebriated/drug-induced state. Not that *The Flood* is interested in becoming some modern-day cult classic à la *Sharknado* and its copious sequels. Indeed, Slagle and co. take the material so seriously — and not in a way that results in appealing camp — that there is barely any fun to be had here, period, regardless of the number of brewchachos consumed during its mercifully brief runtime.

The Flood opens with a diverse range of stock footage featuring inclement weather, informing viewers that Louisiana is about to be pummeled by a storm "worse than Hurricane Katrina" (also, maybe don't name-check that real-life tragedy for your D-movie shenanigans). Two strangers seek shelter and are promptly attacked by an alligator so cheaply rendered that one imagines a few twos somehow got sucked into its all the ones and zeros. We then cut to a busload of inmates being transported to a new facility, their names and various misdeeds introduced through on-screen text that instantly brings to mind *Con Air*, as if this movie could withstand another comparison to something actually entertaining. They end up taking refuge at a small-town precinct presided over by Sheriff Jo Newman (Nicky Whelan), who spends most of her time staring at a picture of her dead father that sits on her desk. Meanwhile, a group of vicious career criminals — headed by the ruthless Rafe Calderon (Louis Mandylor) — waits outside, their sights set on freeing one of the inmates, "cop killer" Russell Cody (Casper Van Dien).

> Slagle's ultra-low-budget creature feature that would feel right at home in the 11:00 PM Tuesday night slot on the SyFy Channel, where its subpar special effects and laughable dialogue could be enjoyed in the proper, inebriated/drug-induced state.

What follows is a whole lot of slow-motion shootouts, which ultimately lead to Newman and her fellow deputies being held hostage. But wouldn't you know it, the flooding has caused four hungry alligators to somehow make their way into the precinct, leaving viewers to ponder the truly profound questions, like, "Who are the real beasts here? The criminals, or the blood-thirsty reptiles intent on ripping all of these individuals to shreds?" Viewers better wear a hat, lest their minds be blown. It's too easy to make fun of a film like *The Flood*, but the thing is, everyone both in front of and behind the camera — minus the VFX artists and the editors — are fully committed to the material to the point that they earn more goodwill than should be afforded something this bargain-bin. It's nearly heartbreaking after a while, watching everyone desperately try to elevate material that couldn't be lifted with a crane. The central premise, while derivative, isn't entirely terrible, with Slagle far more interested in the random shootouts and scenes of hand-to-hand combat than all of the

up again, and everyone is forced to scream and scurry before becoming a sudden spurt of red dye beneath the water.

In fairness, the CGI beasties look far better in the murky water, where their deficiencies can be properly masked; frankly, they should have remained there. Yet for all of the hard work and dedication on display — seriously, all of these actors know their way around a low-budget set, God bless 'em — there's nothing to redeem a film so lazy that it can't even be consistent with the time of day in its endless establishing shots, or how the B-roll storm footage works tirelessly to bridge its disparate scenes together. The ending is especially pathetic, as if the production completely ran out of money and couldn't afford working jet skis stitching in some stock footage as the credits roll. *The Flood* is all wet. ***— STEVEN WARNER***

DIRECTOR: Brandon Slagle; **CAST:** Casper Van Dien, Nicky Whelan, Louis Mandylor; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Saban Films; **IN THEATERS & STREAMING:** July 14; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 31 min.

GIRLFRIENDS AND GIRLFRIENDS

Zaida Carmona

"Girlfriend" — whether the companionship implied is defined via romantic means, as a partnership, or via an external projection of friendship, the term is more often mistaken for whichever suggests a bond closer to heterosexual "normalcy." Between girlfriends, the line between the two meanings can grow thin,stretching to encompass different forms of affection. Such is the conceit of Spanish director Zaida Carmona's debut feature. Carmona's character, named after herself, must re-learn how to navigate friendships with her girlfriends — present and former, friends and lovers — after a breakup. In this queer reinvention of Éric Rohmer's *Boyfriends and Girlfriends*, she explores the different facets of relationships, from flat-sitting for a stable couple with kids to entering the social network her friend Rocío (Rocío Saiz) has built.

Cinema-goer friend Lara (Alba Cros, who shot the film) openly remarks to Zaida about the Rohmerian nature of their predicament. This isn't to say the film has queered Rohmer; there's nothing different in the structure of these loosely-tied summer flings that hasn't been already done in a lighter Rohmer picture, with all couples limited to male-female pairings within the web of lovers. The lines between the relationships — at what point in the intensity of the individual romances, with the web of five or six on-and-off lovers, do they merge into a collective; or do they get to linger as they are? — aren't drawn, beyond some ground rules Zaida is beginning to unlearn. She acts on her desire for Lara, who is new to her relationship with Rocío, who is having an affair with Julia (Thaïs Cuadreny), who just broke up with Aroa (Aroa Elvira). To close the circle, Lara and Rocío try to set Aroa and Zaida up, with some success. This ever-shifting web of girlfriends is a symbol of queer unity, of building a community beyond black-and-white statuses. But more than that, it's a fact of life. As she kisses her way through Barcelona's lesbian art scene, a book from a past lover on polyamory acts as a guide for Zaida. More accurately, this book is a set of rules to discard while learning the pace at which relationships can run, like the speed of dialogue layering so quickly that subtitles give out (an effect here that, if intentional, offers a sublime analogy).

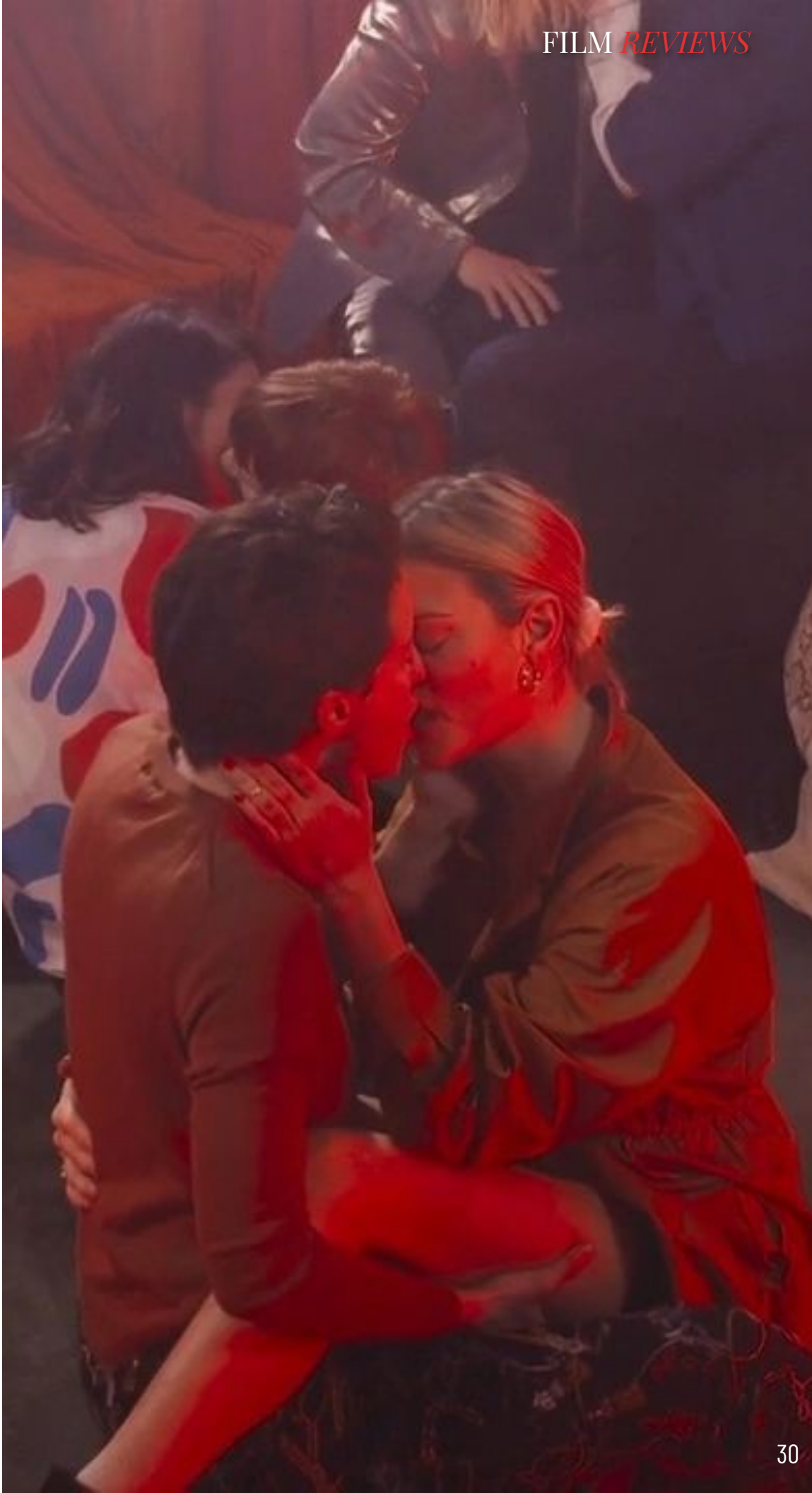
> Where [*Girlfriends and Girlfriends*] does succeed in Rohmerian pastiche is where the reality behind the characters pays tribute to the friends who made it.

Unabashedly slight, it becomes increasingly difficult in the film to discern fact from fiction in these characters' lives. Zaida, Lara, Rocío, and the others bear resemblance beyond their namesakes to the faces behind them. Zaida, for instance, is an aspiring filmmaker, not quite artistically ready and in the purgatorial state of reentering the dating world. Indeed, the thinning line between acting and life itself is often found within the territory of low-budget filmmaking. Some flat or odd-sounding sections do significantly decrease the technical competence of the finished product, but the use of the cast members' own music does polish this up quite a bit: French New Wave-inspired tracks by indie musicians Julie Et Joe and Band À Part are among the highlights of a bright (and fittingly twee) soundtrack.

Girlfriends and Girlfriends doesn't exactly invent anything new by

alligator bullshit. Indeed, this aspect could be completely removed and would be all the better for it. A scene where Whelan is forced into one-on-one cage matches with a few of the various inmates is legitimately executed, proving the director has some filmmaking chops, even as the digital photography remains as garish as ever. And then those stupid alligators show fictionalizing the actors' queer day-to-day lives and interactions to portray a section of young society. It's not even the only Spanish-language indie to do so this year (Ruth Caudeli's *Petit Mal* went for more artistic experimentation than it could handle, and ultimately felt lost in it). Where it does succeed in Rohmerian pastiche is where the reality behind the characters pays tribute to the friends who made it. Film is a collective act; an art that finds us reinventing experiences before we become conscious of the process, and nothing is more collective than the joy of reinventing your own lives into ones you want to see projected on a screen. ***— SARAH WILLIAMS***

DIRECTOR: Zaida Carmona; **CAST:** Zaida Carmona, Rocío Saiz, Alba Cros, Aroa Elvira; **DISTRIBUTOR:** MUBI; **STREAMING:** June 28; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 25 min.



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