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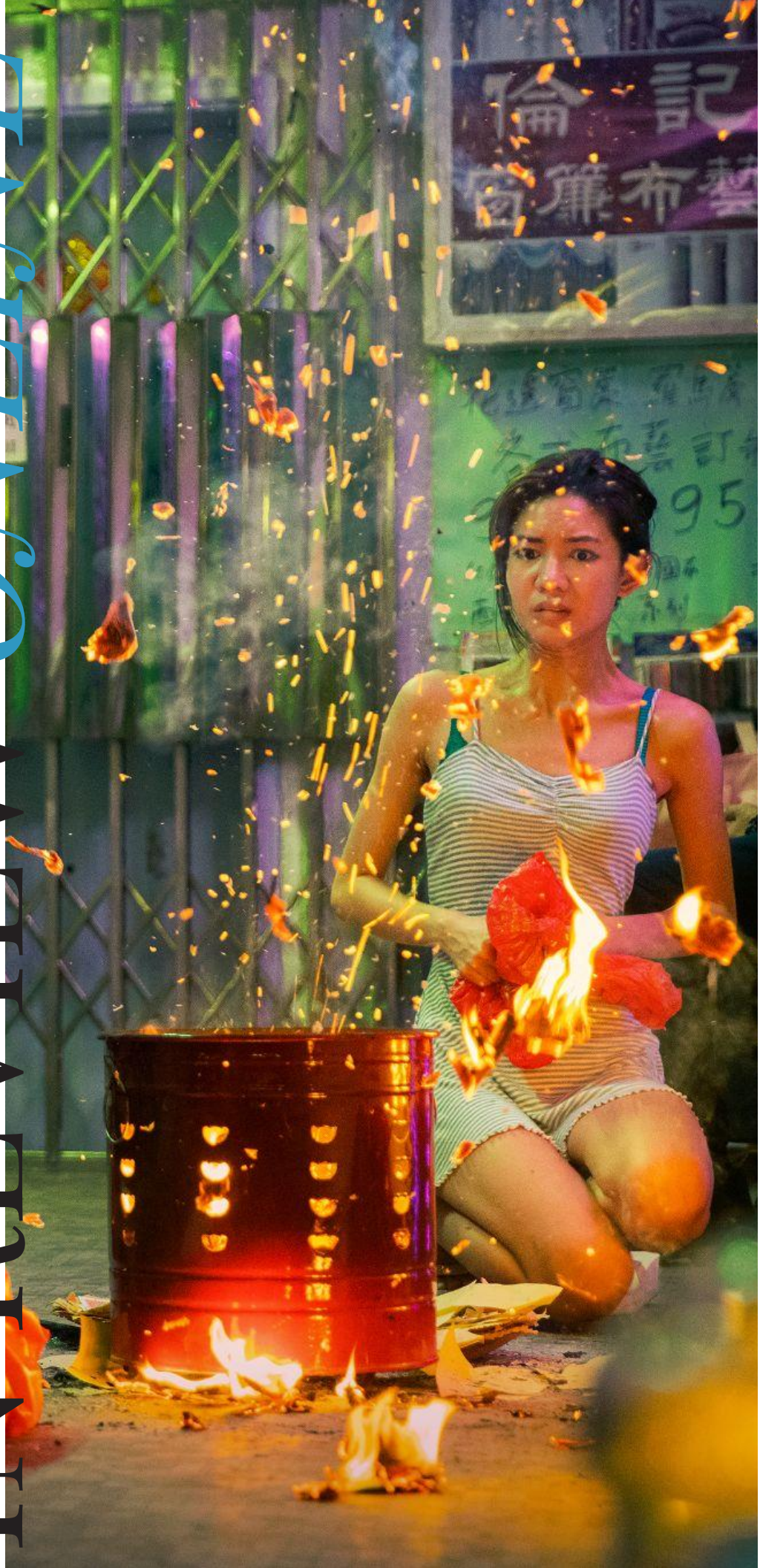

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A Synthesis of Different Ideas

An Interview with Lois Patiño

Lois Patiño began his career making landscape films—a cycle of shorts that reframe the relationship between geographic space and spectatorship. Over the past decade, his focus has grown more expansive, covering more physical terrains, a broader range of subjects, and launching increasingly ambitious theoretical inquiries. Patiño's sophomore feature, *Red Moon Tide*, is an ambient horror film about a coastal Galician village frozen in time. With the town's population immobilized in tableaux, the camera wanders through their world as the voiceover describes memories and dread. With its scarlet images, the film is a formally singular and spellbinding reckoning with Galician mythology and its embedded monsters. Yet, somehow, its ambition and originality are exceeded by *Samsara* — Patiño's third feature.

Samsara is a Buddhist triptych. It opens in Laos, where a boy regularly reads the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* to a dying old woman; after death, the woman's soul moves through the afterlife. Patiño captures this passage through the Bardo in a transcendent sequence where the audience is asked to close their eyes and surrender to a soundscape accompanied by, more or less, a flicker film: bursts of color still visible through closed eyelids. Afterwards, the woman reincarnates as a goat in Zanzibar and lives among a community of seaweed-farmers. I spoke with Patiño about visualizing the invisible, shooting in Laos and Zanzibar, reincarnation, the specificity of big-screen exhibition, and his own relationship to Buddhism.

In [*Samsara*], the transit of a reincarnated soul links Laos to Zanzibar. What compelled you to focus on those two geographic spaces?

The main idea for the film comes from its middle part, which reflects on the invisible and how to work with the invisible in cinema. I came up with this idea of making a film to be seen with eyes closed. And then I discovered *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*: a description of what we are going to see, from the Buddhist perspective, after life. I thought it was a perfect match for how I understand cinema as a meditative or contemplative experience; it's a spectral place. So, after settling on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, I needed two places for two bodies. For the first one, I needed a Buddhist country, so they could speak about *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and express the Buddhist conception of the afterlife. And then, I wanted to reincarnate in a place with a big contrast to both Laos and my own country and culture. I wanted to show the diversity of ways of living, the cultural-religious frames we live in, and also to make a political statement by showing cultures rarely shown on screen nowadays. I tried to work against the homogeneity that images from media reflect onto our screens.

How did you cast the movie?

I went to Laos and traveled. I saw these teenagers and monks living in the temples. I didn't know during this first trip that there was a temple as huge as the one I ended up shooting. I just saw ten kids in each temple. Maybe five or eight. But I wanted to make a portrait of that community in Laos. In Zanzibar, I found this community of women working the seaweed farms. I thought it would be a nice contrast. Also, I wanted the part in Zanzibar to be more feminine than the part in Laos, since the strict [gendered] rules of the temple had to be maintained. As for casting, I did it naturally. I'd been staying with the monks for some days to

understand their lives and speak to them. Some of them spoke English, so I could talk with them about their desires, their dreams, their fears. In this process of staying with them, I was secretly casting. I had a script, but it was constantly being modified. I was changing it as I was meeting new people.

There's a moment where we have an intimate encounter with an elephant. Was that a pre-planned shot or something you just captured in the moment?

I wanted to start focusing a bit on the animals to break up the anthropomorphism and see life from the perspective of an animal, as we do in the Zanzibar section with the goat. Laos was known once as the "Land of a Million Elephants." Nowadays, there are far fewer. When we were traveling to the waterfalls, along the way we were seeing elephants. Not wild ones — they're not wild in the jungle. I don't know if they were just there for the tourists. Sometimes you see them walking with a guide. And I thought it could be a nice encounter. An elephant appears in the film's superimposition images. It becomes an introduction to what will happen in the country.

How rigorously do you pre-plan the shoots? Is there a lot of spontaneity when you're filming?

I used to have a preconception of the language that I was going to use, which I'd follow. Here, as I'm working with two DOPs [Mauro Herce and Jessica Sarah Rinland], it's different. Each of them has their own sensibilities. The film is about reincarnation. I also wanted to reincarnate the movie into another look and another way of looking at the world. I wanted the part in Zanzibar to be much more tactile, with more textures, and more connection with the matter because we're coming from this part that's very ethereal and not tangible at all. I wanted to come back to a very sensitive aspect of reality. Something very sensorial. The language of the film changes from something more classic in terms of composition into the second part, which is about close-ups and touching.

The first shot in the Zanzibar section is even a close-up of a sleeping hand.

Yes, yes, it is a hand. I knew that would be the first shot since the beginning. The film is very connected to a somnific aspect. People are often sleeping; there are three or four or five moments where someone is asleep. The Bardo — the Buddhist conception of the afterlife — also refers to other states of mind like dream or meditation. I wanted to focus on that. I wanted the Zanzibar part to start with the girl sleeping because it suggests the eyes-closed section as part of the girl's dream, making it more polysemous. We know it's the woman's trip [through the Bardo]. But it's also the meditation of the kid with the old lady. And it can also be the dream of the girl we see wake up.

That middle portion in the Bardo is such a moving experience in the theater because the screen is so bright and expansive. And it's so dark everywhere else that, even with your eyes closed, you see the light through your eyelids. Have you watched the movie on small screens and do you consider that big screen projection integral to the film itself?

The first time that I saw it on a bigger screen was yesterday. [*laughs*] I have to say that it depends a lot on how big the screen is and how far you are from it. It can be much brighter just in a [domestic] room because the cinema is light reflected, but the [home] screen is direct

light into your eyes. I think the experience will change a lot but both can be powerful. The powerful thing about the cinema is, I think, the collective experience that you know there are people around you. Yesterday in the cinema, there were maybe seven-hundred people doing a collective, meditative experience. The cinema transforms into something different when working with very essential elements: just sound and light. But the intimacy of a house, and switching off the lights in the room, can also be really powerful.

Could you talk about your own relationship to Buddhism?

I'm interested in different perspectives of how different religions relate to death, its mystery, spirituality, how they create beliefs, myths, legends, and stories. *The Bardo Thodol* [*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*] is a very rich and complex story that tries to bring calmness while drawing a possible scenario of what can happen [between death and rebirth]. I'm very interested in that aspect of religion. I think I'm a spiritual person and a mystic too. I don't connect strictly with any religion. Also, I do something similar to the character of the old lady in Laos. She's Buddhist and wants to be reincarnated as an animal. That's something that movies think is a punishment. But she has her own beliefs, and I'm more aligned with her. I try to catch different ideas and find my own beliefs. I believe in a synthesis of different ideas.***— INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY RYAN AKLER-BISHOP***

MAD FATE

Soi Cheang

Hong Kong auteur Soi Cheang is a modern B-movie master whose works have dipped into an assortment of subgenres. Cheang's aesthetic language is in constant flux, and has undergone drastic reformulation across his filmography. For instance, his early horror masterwork *New Blood* (2002) and more recent martial arts hit *SPL II: A Time for Consequences* (2015) share a passion for visceral and audacious images, yet their means to this end are completely different. In *Limbo* (2021), Cheang's Hong Kong is an inner-city swamp built from overflowing heaps of garbage and disembodied limbs. The city becomes a festering wound, shot in ghostly, digital black-and-white, and jam-packed with visceral olfactory imagery. Now comes *Mad Fate*, which reteams Cheang with frequent Jonnie To collaborators (To himself also produces) for a film that's semantically similar to *Limbo* yet syntactically antithetical. Inevitably, *Mad Fate* steps into the shadow of *Limbo*; both films are violent serial killer stories, assembled with a crossover cast and crew, and both premiered at Berlinale, two years separated. But while *Mad Fate* offers some tonal revisions to Cheang's aesthetic approach, those come almost entirely in support of a less singular and nuanced work.

Mad Fate begins (and peaks) with an Argento-esque narrative set-up: Two protagonists witness the latest in a string of sex worker killings, and by either coincidence or fate (an ambiguous duality the film foregrounds), arrive at the victim's door simultaneously. One is a young delivery driver (Lokman Yeung), given to a nascent inclination towards violence which he mostly unleashes on street cats. The other is a middle-aged fortune teller (the great Gordon Lam), tumbling deeper into delusion as he wages war against the finality of fate. Inside the victim's apartment, the two men find the woman stabbed to death and suspended, via chains, under glowing purple lights. However, all pretense of a standard serial killer mystery evaporates as the delivery driver proceeds to giddily splash about in the puddles of

blood left behind by the deceased, like a sadistic Gene Kelly. From here on, *Mad Fate*'s serial killer narrative becomes mostly backdrop; instead, Cheang centers the dynamic of his plot around his two unstable protagonists, who band together to confront the reality of their uniquely deteriorating psyches.

> While Mad Fate offers some tonal revisions to Cheang's aesthetic approach, those come almost entirely in support of a less singular and nuanced work.

Continuing *Limbo*'s portrait of a tormented Hong Kong full of hapless souls, each character in *Mad Fate* grapples with past traumas. Cheang's movies recognize a universal suffering that unites an otherwise incongruous cast of characters around a shared abyss of misery. That said, while *Limbo* is relentlessly grim — really, the bleakest of genre filmmaking — *Mad Fate*'s anguish is punctured by an unexpected kookiness. The two men here descend into increasingly idiosyncratic states, soundtracked by baffling needle drops including "Colonel Bogey March" and Beethoven's 9th, twice each. There's even an uncanny, recurring CGI cat that seems better suited to *The Monkey King* series (Cheang's foray into Mainland blockbuster filmmaking). And the violence in *Mad Fate* (of which there's plenty) is imbued with head-scratching levity; there are so many wounds and there's so much bloodshed in the film, but it's by-and-large dramatically inconsequential. While the sadness which permeates most of Cheang's films usually feels genuine and sincere, here it's primarily a catalyst to an inconsistently funny and absurdist scenario.

Mad Fate's projection of its world — a spiritual Hong Kong, ravaged by apocalyptic climate eruptions — isn't without creativity. The movie is most dialed-in when its gaze wanders away from flesh-and-blood characters, capturing surrounding dramas that span from the minuscule to the cosmic—from ants writhing in a single raindrop to the brooding, warping skies overhead (which stand-in as a perceived barometer of God's will). Indeed, the sky is a constant presence in *Mad Fate*, often frenzied and roaring behind the action via green screen. And DP Cheng Siu-Keung — whose work last year on Wai Ka-fai's *Detective vs. Sleuths* was staggering — seems uncharacteristically uninspired; his compositions lack depth and, despite the increasingly extreme material, fail to deliver suitably explosive energy. *Mad Fate* is admirable as another stark reinvention for the ever-changing Cheang, though this time it's not an entirely welcome one.**— RYAN AKLER-BISHOP**

ALLENSWORTH

James Benning

Since moving from 16mm to digital nearly fifteen years ago, James Benning's films have become more and more stringent, foregoing surface incident in favor of intensive examination of the outside world. The freedom to make the films he wants, whenever and wherever he wants, has led to a profound paring-down of cinematic language in which fixed-frame images of mostly nonhuman subjects — landscapes, buildings, trains — are offered to the viewer for minutes at a time. By temporalizing space in this manner, Benning's films seem to ask us to look beyond the placid surface of these shots, and to consider the unseen social relations that brought them into being, as well as the power structures that keep them in place.

Even by Benning's minimalist standards, his new film *Allensworth* addresses the viewer with a radically reduced palette. Composed of twelve shots, designated by the months of the calendar and

lasting five minutes each, the film examines what remains of the titular California town, established in 1908 by Black Americans in order to live and prosper outside the reach of Jim Crow. The town is now a state park, standing as a monument to its own defiant history.

But as Benning shows us building after building, there is a funereal stillness pervading this place. Benning's films often play with sudden motion within a relatively static visual field. But it takes a full eight minutes before we see any obvious movement in *ALLENSWORTH*, in this case a car speeding by in the background. And it's nearly seventeen minutes before we hear a distinct noise, with a train going by outside the frame of the third shot. In fact, despite the occasional drifting of clouds or leaves blowing on a tree, most of Benning's images in *Allensworth* resemble snapshots, in particular the works of WPA photographers like Walker Evans and Gordon Parks.

Even the month-by-month organization seems designed to avert any disruption of the film's placid surface. After all, California isn't exactly known for having seasons in the conventional sense. It's as though Benning is aiming for a time-based presentation of a state between the living and the dead, between the immutable past and its present-day reverberations. The lone exception is "August," which features a young girl (Faith Johnson) standing in front of the blackboard in a schoolroom reading poems by Lucille Clifton. Again, there is a contradictory element at work here. (For the most part, school isn't in session in August.) But this performative intervention brings the film to life. *Allensworth* may be asking us to look at what remains of the town in much the same way we listen to Clifton's poetry, activating the words of the past and demanding that we observe not just their distance from us, but also their constant proximity. **— *MICHAEL SICINSKI***

TOMORROW IS A LONG TIME

Jow Zhi Wei

Subtlety isn't Singaporean cinema's strong suit, as year after year of mainstream slop, indie darlings, and *enfant terrible* flops (having largely been banned back home) have uncontroversially demonstrated. Whether the result of selective state coddling and censure, or an outcome tethered to the clumsy collective tightrope act between humanism and political critique, much of the nation's international presence has been curiously muted, with the occasional anomaly making headlines for usually ideological reasons. So when a filmmaker hailing from Singapore makes, even debuts, a film about Singapore set in Singapore, the critical instinct is to situate this fledgling work within an existing binary of unabashed pathos (typified by Anthony Chen, Eric Khoo, and — God forbid — Jack Neo) and overt social commentary (usually the jurisdiction of Ken Kwek and Royston Tan). It's a cause for celebration, then, that Jow Zhi Wei's first feature, *Tomorrow Is a Long Time*, challenges this stale binary with fresh eyes, crafting a thoughtful, and lyrical, if occasionally sentimental, portrait of generational change and continuity.

> [The film's] threads... depict through painterly camera pans the socio-cultural imaginaries of contemporary Singapore.

Tomorrow Is a Long Time hones in on a father-son duo as they navigate a desaturated and seemingly endless urban landscape: Chua (Leon Dai), the fifty-something single father, labors night and sometimes day as a pest controller, whereas Meng (Edward Tan), his teenage son, slinks to and from school. Stasis permeates their daily rituals, flattening their lived reality yet heightening the faraway anxieties of a looming future. Meng's grandmother rests in a care home, an unexplained illness eating away at her; his father wears a stoic veneer in the house, eluding Meng's hesitant questions about the past. "I hear stories from Grandma, but you never say anything," the boy protests. If his troubles seemed so far away yesterday, they are back with repressed, inarticulate vengeance in the present. At school, Meng wordlessly gets inducted into a neighborhood gang, lounging around an empty swimming pool by day and targeting

unsuspecting students at night with fists and kicks. Chua drags him away, admonishing him with pithy curses, but both of them know — and realize — their helpless postures amid an airtight and unrelenting working-class environs. The father struggles to take on overtime shifts, battling the toxic fumes of his job; the son awaits some reconciliation with who he is and will be.

There are possible subtexts to this reconciliation, and Jow admittedly imbues his narrative with a uniquely masculine ennui that recalls, at times, the homoerotic threads of Tsai Ming-liang. But these threads, if any, are subtle and ambivalent in their characterization; rather, they depict through painterly camera pans the socio-cultural imaginaries of contemporary Singapore as delimited by its economic (and perhaps geopolitical) prerogatives. Against convention, *Tomorrow Is a Long Time* charts out this tomorrow in broad, abstract strokes, relocating Meng to the jungles of Taiwan as he, now enlisted in the army, partakes in a military exercise with his newfound band of brothers. A personal tragedy breaks the film apart midway, bifurcating time into two complementary but contrasting dimensions: yesterday as time atomized, centered around regimes of work and school, and tomorrow as time fluid, rendered asynchronous with reality. Within this fluidity, Meng is permitted greater expression, his solitude accepted, his future suddenly unfettered from the otherwise banal possibilities of recidivism and wage labor. "Become a singer," he says in response to Kishod (Lekheraj Sekhar), his section mate and fellow adolescent.

The future never quite arrives in Jow's film, but what does sing, arguably, is the film itself, its lyricism conveyed both by Russell Adam Morton's lush and mellow panoramas as well as an all-too-casual sense of magical realism, sparsely but strikingly infused. Shifting focus away from urban hums to the perils and shadows of a foreign jungle proves playfully reminiscent of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Tropical Malady*, although — queer subtext aside — Jow indulges less in his supernatural conceit than he does in concocting something akin to a spiritual antidote. Lensed with pristine deliberation, *Tomorrow Is a Long Time* imagines the life and times of someone searching for his identity, still unmoored from the vast and alien streetscapes of

deadening routine. It's also a tender critique of loneliness and its institutional backers to the degree that Jow unfurls the unseen social pressures (immigrant labor, machismo, the nuclear family) alongside his humanist observations of Chua and Meng in their quiet, solitary moments. Perhaps they see in the film's title a double entendre: tomorrow as that eternal struggle to survive, to make meaning, but tomorrow also as that which, amid today's joyless hours, struggles to arrive. ***— MORRIS YANG***

ABSENCE

Wu Lang

The first feature from Chinese filmmaker Wu Lang, Absence shares a title and cast with the director's second short film, which played at Cannes in 2021. The distributor of this film's synopsis for said short hints at the relationship between the two, suggesting that both are about two former lovers reuniting after some time apart. The short follows a road trip that the two take: "On the way back to Ying Ge Hai, [they] remain discrete regarding their respective life and tacitly restrict everything to the present." It's not immediately clear what that means, but it sounds like a good excuse to set up a lot of moody shots of Lee and Meng looking melancholy in the rain. Not that there's anything wrong with that

The feature builds a bit more of a story. Again, Lee has returned to his former lover Meng. He's been away from home — the island of Hainan, Yinggehai from the short is an area of southern China near the Vietnamese border and Hainan — for 10 years serving a prison sentence for some kind of a crime, probably covering up for something a friend's dad did, or at least taking the fall for them. Meng is a hairdresser with a daughter whom she says is not Lee's, but neither Lee nor us believe her. Meng is attempting to buy an apartment in the city, but the developer (Lee's old

criminal buddy) disappears along with her deposit. So the reunited couple and the daughter move into the apartment anyway, even though it's nothing more than a concrete ruin flooded and overrun by sheep.

At every turn, *Absence* appears like it's going to turn into a kind of a movie we've seen before. Its opening half hour or so is told in the static, minimalist style of the Taiwanese New Wave, with Lee giving yet another performance where he moves slow and barely talks (he *is* capable of acting like a normal guy: see Ann Hui's 1999 *Ordinary Heroes* for proof). He's wonderful, of course: he doesn't need dialogue — he has a face. His romancing of Meng is patient but determined, though she only comes around when she needs to marry him in order to get the apartment. In this section, where the two come together, the movie shifts to something else entirely. The shots are more expressive, less frontal and tableaux-like, reflecting the characters in mirrors, or isolating them in a single green window pane of an abandoned beach shack. There's a lengthy sequence where Lee trails her as she leads him out of town wearing a stunning red dress; it recalls Wong Kar-wai as filtered through Bi Gan's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

But just when we think we're set up in some kind of romantic noir, with a femme fatale leading the guileless Lee into some kind of revenge scheme against the developer who stole her money, possibly in response to them setting him up to take the fall again, the movie shifts once more into something much more special and original. Lee and Meng, innocent victims of forces larger than themselves which they have no control over or ability to oppose, simply refuse the terms of their oppression and remake their world to their own specifications by reclaiming the complex and turning it into a home. Wu's images never lose their beauty, but they become more functional, less obviously stylized and systematic, instead finding striking images naturally arising from his environments. He has a particular gift for making the ground look unnatural: undulating mounds of earth at the construction site covered by green mesh, or stalagmitic tendrils of mud looking like frozen waves on a tidal flat Lee wakes up on one morning. The unfinished complex is partially flooded, with squares of concrete filled with rain water which the family must carefully navigate to make their way into the building. Somehow these artificial pools even become home to fish and tadpoles, just as Lee and Meng make their home in the ruins. Life finds a way. ***— SEAN GILMAN***

ALL THE COLOURS OF THE WORLD ARE BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE

Babatunde Apalowo

Babatunde Apalowo's feature debut, *All the Colours of the World Are Between Black and White*, is a moving portrait of gay desire, class, and masculinity. Set in present-day Lagos, Nigeria — which passed the Same Sex (Prohibition) Act in 2013 — the film's sensitive depiction of queerness mourns the futures lost to systemic homophobia and makes a courageous statement on the precarity of gay existence. It follows a young man, Bambino (Tope Tedela), as he navigates his blossoming affection for a freelance photographer, Bawa (Riyo David). We're first introduced to Bambino asking for a promotion; it is a blatantly one-sided conversation, one which presents an image of Bambino quite literally speaking to a wall. With the camera positioned at the doorway — never quite letting us see who Bambino is speaking to — Apalowo cleverly sets up Bambino's struggle for recognition as a working-class gay man in Nigeria. Many of Bambino's most

mundane interactions are framed similarly: this is a man who is unable to make his demands heard. Apalowo, however, also makes clear that Bambino is not alone in his struggle; all around him are unhappy wives arguing with their husbands over failed

arranged marriages, men who cannot pay the rent, and lonely women who feel crushed by their bleak futures. Bambino's sexual repression is a displacement that has roots in an environment that's not amenable to change.

Bambino's sexual curiosity peaks when he chances upon Bawa, whose ambitions as a photographer are derailed by his circumstances. Like Bambino, who wishes to be an office manager instead of working the streets as a delivery rider, Bawa desires to work in a gallery but lacks the financial means to do so. The two's desire for one another, while palpable, is perpetually bogged down by their grief over what could and should have been. These intimate conversations about their ambitions, which occur in expansive and bright places, offer a subtle and momentary glimpse of hope for queer men in Nigeria. Bawa's loving photographs of Bambino, too, paint a richer future where artistic creation, which is crucial to imagining a better world, is freed from the confines of bigoted hatred and social cruelty.

The significance of photography in the cinematic portrayal of queerness is also present in Todd Haynes' *Carol,* which uses Therese's (Rooney Mara) passion for photography to highlight the inherent boldness of lesbian desire. Set in an era where a career in photography is seen as a frivolous pursuit for women, Carol's (Cate Blanchett) genuine interest in Therese's artistic passion is stunningly subversive; her desire for Therese actively brings a better world into being — one where women are not only allowed to be photographers but are also loved for who they are. In Apalowo's film, Bawa's dreams of becoming a photographer runs contrary to his actual dead-end job at a betting shop. Yet his affection for Bambino, fueled by their photo taking sessions together, re-ignites a passion that was once relegated to the margins. The two men never quite consummate their relationship, but it is precisely the realization of gay desire that makes all the difference between liberation and oppression. Apalowo's *All the Colours of the World Are Between Black and White* is a striking and politically vital debut for what it dares to represent — the possibility of freedom. **— *SHAR TAN***

THE CEMETERY OF CINEMA

Thierno Souleymane Diallo

The idea that cinema is dying, or perhaps already died, is certainly popular in a time when digital spectacle has all but consumed any other kind of moviegoing; during the age of the MCU. But *The Cemetery of Cinema*, Thierno Souleymane Diallo's debut documentary feature about the state of cinema in his native Guinea, makes those cries seem hysterical and petty. Here, digital has killed cinemas in a very literal way: people now only see movies on television and bootleg DVDs; a middle-aged man wonders if his child even knows what a cinema is. As Diallo travels across the country in search of Mamadou Touré *Mouramani* (1953), the first film made in Guinea and the whole of French-speaking Africa, he visits theaters and cinematheques that were once on par with their European counterparts, all of which have turned totally to ruin. Like Touré's film, this history has been lost, long since decayed beyond the point of any potential restoration, like a reel of film turned totally by vinegar syndrome.

> There is no way to hold onto [cinema] history, any history, forever... If film only has value as preservation, then it only has limited value.

A village elder talks about digital as a corrupting force, as a debasing and vulgar replacement to the wholesome center of the cinema. But Diallo — or perhaps his *character* — starts the movie a little resistant to a political reading. He asks many of his interview subjects if they think *Mouramani* is a myth, but almost all of them laugh it off with some variation on "of course not." *Mouramani* does have a relationship to myth: The film is said to be about the titular great patriarch who founded the Muslim kingdom of Batè, the pre-colonial predecessor to Guinea. But, moreover, something more concrete than a people's myth has been lost: their history. The consequences of this are quite

shockingly expressed by a French writer who says that "if *Mouramani* isn't considered the first African film, it's because it had no cultural impact." *Afrique-sur-Seine* (1955) fits more comfortably into a historical narrative – and was shot in France, the colonizer of its native Sénégal and Guinea – and so has for many become the first African film, the start of African cinema, despite being made two years after *Mouramani*.

The Guinean cinematheque didn't have the means to store their collection well, so most of the films degraded. There was an idea of cooperating with France to save what was left, but nothing came of it and everything was thrown into a hole in the ground and burnt. *Mouramani* was on the list of that collection, though whether or not it had rotted by that time is unclear. A former cinema owner calls the people who did this criminals, asserting that they attacked their own history, while others seem to have faith that France would have taken better care of it. Diallo soon finds that not to be the case — they can barely keep their own film culture alive. He visits La Clef — the occupied cinema which had stayed open since 2019 despite the banking firm owners selling off the property — where a worker argues that without the collective viewing experience, which is so tied to and is given so much value by material film over digital, then film has all but died. Not too long after this scene was filmed, in March of 2022, the cinema was raided and the collective who democratically ran it were evicted.

If that's how France's own films are treated, then you can only imagine how the culture of a former colony would fare. *La Monde*'s review of *Mouramani* not only calls it "less a film than a clumsy, naïve attempt," but most patronizingly, most pointedly, concludes that it's "not devoid of charm." It's a moment that hit this writer particularly hard; it makes one conscious of the role of the critic, and how the idea of a "review," a judgment on how "successful" and "well-made" a film is, can be a crushing colonial force — it's not much of an exaggeration to say that this review of *Mouramani* meaningfully contributes to the perception of a lack of "cultural impact" that lead to it probably being lost forever. Diallo doesn't find *Mouramani* in France; of course he doesn't. Diallo is searching for the film not because it's great, but also *not* because it *isn't*. He's trying to reckon with a part of history.

And so, *The Cemetery of Cinema*'s final scenes, where Diallo tries to recreate *Mouramani*, might seem strange, even a contradiction. But as a woman from one of the French

cinematheques points out, "the material [film] has a life cycle [...] like us, the films ultimately die." There is no way to hold onto this history, any history, forever, even if, as in this case, it was destroyed by political forces both internal and external. If film only has value as preservation, then it only has limited value. When teaching a class of students who can only name a handful of Guinean directors, following from an exercise by Dutch documentarian Joris Ivens, Diallo hands each student a cut-out of a camera and tells them to go make a film. Like *The Cemetery of Cinema* itself, where a second camera always films Diallo as he films his journey, it draws the process into focus, making that process the essential subject. Some of the students give quite beautiful descriptions of their films because cinema is a means of looking, more than any material that's recorded: it's an act of engaging and interpreting the world and history for oneself. And so, the final shot that reveals Diallo is filming his version of *Mouramani* on a fake camera isn't an image of loss at all — it's a call to action. When the camera turns to look at us, he hopes we look back. ***— ESMÉ HOLDEN***

SILVER HAZE
Sacha Polak

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

Franky, a twenty-something nurse who (like Knight herself) survived a fire and wears her burn scars in almost punk-rock defiance, lives with her mom and sister in a cramped council flat. One night during her shift, Franky treats Florence (Esmé Creed-Miles), a brash, bitter woman who has just attempted suicide. They bond, quickly becoming friends and then lovers. "I'm a bad person," Florence warns Franky early on, and while *Silver Haze* refrains from judging its deeply damaged characters, Polak is also sending up a warning flare. For Florence, forming an emotional connection offers her a way to externalize her self-hatred, punishing anyone who risks caring about her.

Franky and Leah live in the shadow of the accident that nearly killed them, believing it to have been done deliberately by their father's new wife. They stalk dad's new family, furious that he has abandoned them, although as we learn, the situation is a bit more complex. Ultimately, *Silver Haze* is a tough film to evaluate, because Polak's narrative structure moves in fits and starts, just like the borderline personalities of its subjects. People suddenly move in with other families, or torpedo their relationships for no

apparent reason, or (in Leah's case) convert to Islam, seemingly on a whim. The disgusting behavior of young men is taken to be a fact of life, as immutable as the weather. In a way, *Silver Haze* confounds traditional notions of characterization and cause-and-effect, because its working-class heroines are seldom able to rise above the chaos that engulfs them. It's an unstable film *about* instability, and as such it is gripping and maddening in equal measure. **— MICHAEL SICINSKI**

THERE IS A STONE

Tatsunari Ota

A young woman from Tokyo finds herself in a strange town. In the beginning, she is looking for a tourist site, the ruins of an old castle perhaps, but all she finds are empty fields. Wandering around, she's invited to play soccer with some kids, but soon they all go home. Walking along the river, she meets a man who is perhaps too eager to hang around with her, skipping stones, playing with sticks, stacking rocks. They have fun, but there's an uneasiness to their interactions: no personal information is exchanged, they don't talk about anything other than the games they're making up. Eventually, they part, she gets lost (her phone dies) and spends the night in some kind of an office. In the morning, she finds a dog and takes it for a walk. Then she takes the train home.

That's what happens in *There Is a Stone*, but the experience of watching it is something else entirely. Conditioned by narrative — news stories, films, television shows — we keep expecting something weird, or dangerous, to happen to the woman. And she seems to expect that as well. Who is this man? What does he really want? Does he mean her harm? The two walk along the river for a good hour of this 100-minute movie, and for most of that time, we are waiting for the familiar plot to kick in: An act of physical aggression if this is a drama or horror narrative; a bit of awkward dialogue or maybe some joking if this is a romance or a comedy. But director Ota Tatsunari never gives us those expected moments. *There Is a Stone* doesn't conform to any recognizable genre, and it doesn't fit into any preconceived form — aside from the flat, telephoto images he captures in a 1.33 frame, constricting space yet distorting the relations within it such that things that appear close together are in fact very far apart. Instead, we're forced to reevaluate what we've seen on its own terms, as a simple series of discrete actions that, like life itself, doesn't alway match the fictional structures that we've invented in order to explain and simplify the world.

> *There Is a Stone* doesn't conform to any recognizable genre... Instead, we're forced to reevaluate what we've seen on its own terms.

Our uncertainty is paralleled by the woman's own. (Neither character here is given a name or any information outside of their interactions with each other.) She repeatedly tries to separate herself from the man, but usually goes back to him to play some more games. We can't really know, but we can assume that she's afraid of him at times, attracted to him at others. The attraction isn't romantic or sexual, but rather something like the freedom of children, who can simply walk up to a stranger and ask if they want to play and then just as simply walk away when the sun goes down and it's time to go home. After they part, we see the man return to his home. Here we think, "Aha! This creep's perversions will finally be revealed!" But no: he has a nice, normal house. He has a lot of books. He drinks tea out of a glass he keeps in a china cabinet. He keeps a diary. In it he describes

his day, including the interactions we've just seen. All he records are the facts: he met a woman, didn't get her name, they played games by the river, he went home. That's all there is to it. There truly is an innocence to their relationship, but only in retrospect. While watching the film, we're always in dread of what horrible action will come next. That it never does is a lesson to us to take things as they are, experience each moment in life as its own thing, and pay attention to what is in front of our face. Perhaps that's what the woman learned, and thus her smile on the train ride home, as she sees the man in the river once more. But then again, maybe not. Who can say what comes next. **— SEAN GILMAN**

#MANHOLE

Kazuyoshi Kumakiri

There is little build-up in the opening of Kazuyoshi Kumakiri's latest thriller, *#Manhole*. Within the opening five minutes, after a night celebrating the eve of his wedding, unfortunate salesman Shunsuke Kawamura (Yûto Nakajima) awakes in the bottom of a decrepit manhole. Not only is his leg bleeding profusely from a deep wound caused by the fall, but the ladder to exit the hole is rusted and partially collapsed. At first, he believes he drunkenly slipped into the uncovered hole, but over the course of the film it is slowly revealed something else might be at play. While the notion of a man simply being stuck in a manhole might seem threadbare for a 100-minute film, in execution it presents as a surprisingly riveting and economic thriller that manages to inject a pleasant level of satire into its absurdist conceit.

Despite the film's single location, which feels rather contained for a thriller — but hey, phone booths and coffins have been done, so why not — the plot is packed full of drama and tension. Unlike the remarkably straight walls of the manhole Kawamura is stuck in, the film's narrative is an altogether more spiraling affair. There are a suitable amount of plot twists, which range from the tepid to outrageously left-field, with the latter being far more successful in ratcheting the stakes by leaning into schlock. While the first half of the film feels like a farcical comedy exploring the ineptitude of police bureaucracy, plus reconnecting with an ex under less than desirable circumstances, the latter half is steeped in paranoia as it becomes clear that somebody

Kawamura might have upset could be behind his seemingly hopeless situation. To that end, both Kumakiri's claustrophobic direction and Nakajima's fantastic, shifting performance allow Kawamura's slow descent into madness to feel like a natural, earned character evolution.

> Where [*#Manhole*] does excel is in its aesthetic and tonal precision, relying on a goopy visual design to distinguish its particular character.

But it's the film's visual design that proves its greatest strength. Thanks to the film's (mostly) single location, Kumakiri is able to craft an incredibly detailed and highly textured environment that feels palpably disgusting. With montage sequences that highlight creeping insects, spewing liquids, and metal spikes that seem to protrude with genuine malice. Dimly lit walls are made to seem like they are gradually shrinking in on their inhabitant. And the film progresses, an ominous viscous liquid (alluded to being the remains of dead animals) pours into the hole, slowly filling up the empty space around Kawamura. Watching Kawamura move around in this putrid juice or shriek in anger as he lumbers around the space is effectively wince-inducing, and the pit's griminess is tangible — plenty of viewers are likely to be convinced they can even *smell* it.

Much of the film's story is propelled forward by interactions on social media. Kawamura sets up an account on Pecker (essentially Twitter) and eventually finds his posts — in which he seeks help from people online — going viral, leading him to interact with a myriad of odd, eccentric, and sometimes deeply creepy anonymous accounts that follow his situation with a strange intensity. The saturation of unseen people tuning in to another's crisis feels nightmarish, but when imagined as a real life scenario, the film's depiction of a social media circus seems eerily accurate. An example: a man comes to rescue Kawamura, but there is a caveat — the man is a streamer and broadcasts his attempted rescue live in front of hundreds of people. Kumakiri makes use of a split screen, with one half showing Kawamura drowning from rising water in the manhole and the other showing us the live streamer fumbling around an abandoned factory attempting to rescue him. It's a sequence that nicely reflects the film's dark humor, which frequently pokes fun at the current state of modern Internet culture, though without ever skewing too abrasively cynical about it.

Ultimately, *#Manhole* isn't pushing any cinematic boundaries in the thriller genre, instead simply transposing a new setting onto the single-location thriller template. But where it does excel is in its aesthetic and tonal precision, relying on a goopy visual design to distinguish its particular character. And while it starts to feel stretched a bit thin at its current length, it remains a nominally lean thriller punctuated by a multitude of wild twists which, providing you are dialed-in to the film's frequency and can suspend disbelief at their ludicrousness, add up to a compelling and playful watch. ***— OLIVER PARKER***

LOVE TO LOVE YOU, DONNA SUMMER

Roger Ross Williams, Brooklyn Sudano

"I have a secret life. You're looking at me but what you see is not what I am." Who was Donna Summer? This is the question at the center of *Love to Love You, Donna Summer,* HBO's new documentary exploring the life of the icon born LaDonna Adrian Gaines. Donna Summer was "The Queen of Disco," but that's not all she was. Described by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as "the *Diva De Tutte Dive*, the first true diva of the modern pop era," Donna Summer helped lay the foundation for the thing we call pop stardom. She was the first artist to reach No. 1 with three consecutive double albums. She was the first female artist to have five top 10 singles in one calendar year. And after helping define disco in the '70s, she reinvented herself for the '80s, creating some of her best-known hits in the process. She was "The First Lady of Love," arriving on the scene overflowing with a sensuality of which the world couldn't get enough. But that, too, is not all that she was. *Love to Love You* goes to great lengths to

show that, in private, Donna struggled with the sultry public image cultivated around her; in fact, she wrote her breakout hit and this film's namesake, "Love to Love You Baby," as a reference track, never expecting to release it herself. From the very start, she was playing a role.

So, who was Donna Summer? We get roughly half of the story here. *Love to Love You* excels in its portrayal of Summer's personal life: A family affair, directed by Summer's daughter, Brooklyn Sudano (who co-directed with Academy Award-winner Roger Ross Williams), the film presents its star as a woman in conflict, balancing the demands of fame, family, and faith. It's constructed from home videos — Summer constantly had a camera on her — from concert footage, and from interviews with family and friends. And it's not only a joy to see what Donna Summer was like with her hair down, a woman who had to constantly wear a mask for the public eye, but it's also a necessarily intimate storytelling technique, lending an air of authenticity to Sudano and Williams' portraiture.

Love to Love You tells follows Summer's life and career, eventually in chronological order — though it begins a bit jumpy. We start with "Love to Love You Baby," then jump backward to Summer's beginnings in Boston, then forward again to her on tour, buying a video camera, and then back again to Boston. The concert footage on screen during this stretch doesn't always sync up with the era being discussed at the moment, concerned less with verisimilitude than it is with connecting with the mood or topic at hand. It all feels a bit whiplash-inducing at first, especially to those unfamiliar with Summer's story. But the film soon settles into a more regular pace, with Summer's move to Germany, where her stardom and the film's narrative really take off. "Being in Germany gave me license to be myself." Being a Black woman in Germany, Summer stood out and was admired and valued for what felt like the first time. From there, *Love to Love You* takes viewers through the career highs and lows: from Summer's boundary-breaking tracks to her struggles balancing motherhood and stardom, to her often tumultuous relationships with men, her label, and to herself, and finally to her renewed faith and final years.

Sudano and Williams' documentary wants to locate the singularity and humanity of the complicated woman that history understands only as the Queen of Disco. "I was always a comedian. I was always a clown. So becoming Donna Summer, the character — I didn't feel very sexy at the time, so I just assumed it as a role." Indeed, one of this film's successes comes in exploring Summer's great sense of humor, which was always flowing from her and especially shines in the film's home videos. The homespun nature of that footage taps into the behind-the-scenes life of Summer as a mother, and the most tender moment comes from the backstory to "Mimi's Song." One

night, after eldest daughter Mimi asked her mother why she always had to leave, Summer stayed up at the piano to write a song for her daughter. During the 1979 UNICEF concert, she brought Mimi on stage (in a matching outfit, no less) after singing, "*You see I've made a spectacle of myself / And it seems that the whole world needs me / I understand when you cry alone / And mama's not there to wipe your eyes.*" It's a touching scene, speaking to Summer's conflicting responsibilities of motherhood and fame, and how passionately she fulfilled each role.

A family's proximity to the production of a film can cause reasonable stress to any fan of an artist's legacy, as it's only natural to gloss over our loved-one's flaws, oversell their strengths, and give rise to hagiography rather than a more discerning biography. *Love to Love You,* avoids this trap, and with clarity — the film is intent on not burying Donna Summer's inner demons. In the mid-'80s, after a conversion to evangelical Christianity, Summer commented at a concert, "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." This sparked a rightful fury among devoted fans — many of whom were LGBTQ and had championed her for years. This comment also led to an unfounded rumor that Summer had associated AIDS with divine punishment, but no matter — the damage was done. This unfortunate remark would forever be a blight on Summer's legacy, and *Love to Love You* doesn't try to sidestep that reality; instead, the film details the impact that the blowback from the comment forever had on her psyche.

But the resistance to idealize Summer also manifests a weakness here: Despite offering a grounded overview of her life and career, it ultimately undersells her musical legacy. We are told that Summer's impact is immense, but not much is done to bring that immensity to the screen. It's an unfortunate missed opportunity, as *Love to Love You* arrives at a peak moment of disco-revivalism, when the number one song in America is a discopop track — Miley Cyrus' "Flowers" — and superstars like Beyoncé, Dua Lipa, and the Weeknd have made themselves modern contributors to the disco genre's legacy. The family portrait nature of *Love to Love You* helps to express who Summer was at home — which logically might be the more important narrative thread to Sudano — but her impact extends so far beyond the dining room table. And instead of featuring any of the incredible artists to follow in her footsteps, the film leans squarely on friends and family closest to Summer's inner orbit to provide context for her incredible life, falling short of giving a full picture of her influence. At one point, collaborator Giorgio Moroder tells us how their revolutionary 1977 track, "I Feel Love," single-handedly changed the face of music, effectively inventing electronic dance music. But it would have been far more powerful to hear that from someone like Brian Eno, who famously declared to David Bowie that the single would "change the face of club music" — or even a modern producer who could speak to Summer's impact in a contemporary context. Society's collective memory is short, and as we move further from the heyday of our most beloved artists, we risk relegating them to the retirement homes of retrospection. Donna Summer's legacy may be firm to those who were there, but films like this are an opportunity to demonstrate to everyone else how she helped bring us from there to here.

About halfway through *Love to Love You*, Summer offers the perfect summation of the power of disco. "We have this expression in music called 'the voice within the voice.' And it's the way you hear the note. There's that cry that's in there that touches the pain in you. That sometimes even if it's a happy song, there's that cry in there that maybe touches something in you that's hidden in that groaning place." Fans will instantly relate to this notion, and it's this that makes disco such an incredible release of emotion — especially to queer listeners of the '70s who catapulted it to prominence. For all the subsequent slander of "Disco Sucks," it never truly went away, but instead transformed and spun off into genres like new wave, house, hip hop, and EDM. So while *Love to Love You, Donna Summer* fails to portray the full impact of its star and make such connections explicit, it does manage to paint a nuanced and personal portrait of one of the most important pop talents of all time. Sometimes the voice within the voice presents as only a whisper, but that doesn't make it any less beautiful to hear.**— *NICK SEIP***

BERLINALE FILMS WE'VE ALREADY COVERED

TÁR
Todd Field

"*TÁR* is in fact much closer in spirit to the lurid, manipulative, mean-girl rivalries of Brian De Palma's Passion (2012) than its cold surfaces might initially suggest. More representative than the opening scene with Gopnik is the one where Tár pets Olga in full view of her wife and the entire orchestra. To the extent that the film is really "about" anything, it is about the question of whether there is such a thing as an "objective" artistic judgment. And Field's decision to take this quandary into camp/exploitation territory, using #MeToo and "cancel culture" talking points somewhat opportunistically, is no fault in itself. (The approach yields such pleasures as the sight of Blanchett's Tár threatening a six-year-old girl in German.) The trouble is that he does not, in the end, take any genuine risks. *TÁR* features some psycho-horror tropes à la Darren Aronofsky's Black Swan (2010), but Field mainly uses these to flatten and obfuscate at every turn. " **— LAWRENCE GARCIA**

PASSAGES
Ira Sachs

"In addition to the staid and tasteful visual approach here, amounting to some of Sachs' most anonymous filmmaking to date, the writing is also a low for he and co-writer Mauricio Zacharias — their fifth feature together. The pair have proven capable of locating small, revealing moments that expose the natures and histories of their characters and speak to broader trends in their relationships, especially in *Keep the Lights On*. But that film spanned decades, allowing its drawn-out, vignette-like structure to support the effort of isolating stray moments in time. *Passages*' love-triangle narrative is more condensed and minimally developed, which leaves scenes like the one where Tomas and Agathe sing a capella to each other feeling like a missed opportunity to better define the contours of that relationship." **— SAM C. MAC**

HORSE OPERA
Moyra Davey

"[Davey] fills the video with music, adding some vibrancy in the process, and eventually expands the piece's very loose narrative to include friends and family as well as several sequences of herself recording her narration into her phone. In this sense, the video is very much about the process of its own creation, a self-reflexive bit of commentary that suggests an endless number of possibilities for collating and organizing visual information. At a brief 71 minutes, *Horse Opera* can sometimes feel a little too loose; one can imagine a 30-minute version of the project that functions just as well, or a two- or even three-hour version that is more immersive and durational. But what shines through is her fascination with what writer Janique Vinier calls an "unwavering attention to the objects and accidents of everyday life." A curious work, *Horse Opera* in its own odd way nonetheless becomes a key reflective work of our Covid era."
— DANIEL GORMAN

HEROIC
David Zonana

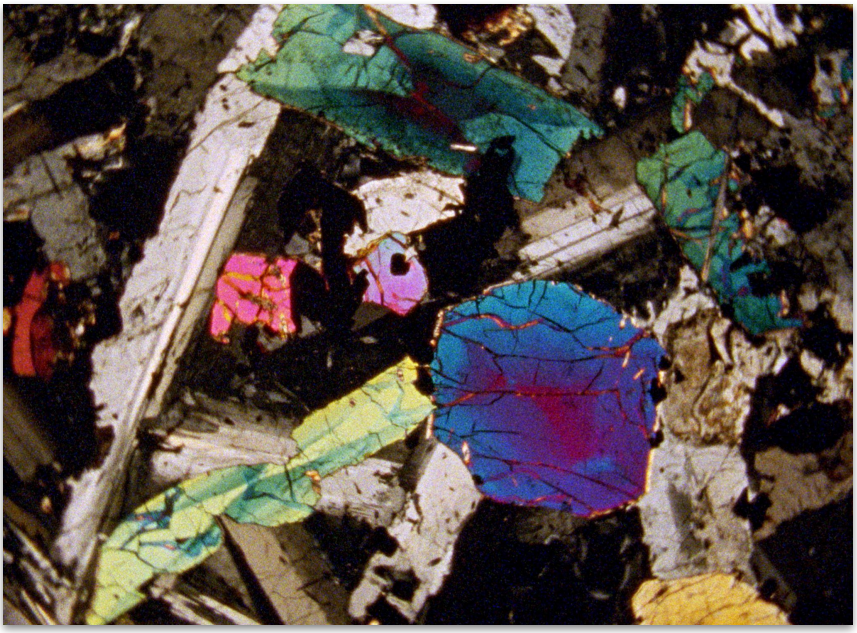
"Static shots laboriously fill the runtime, reaffirming the dour sphere Luis only ever exists in from the opening. Stagnant is this film's visual literacy, its capacity to express stifled through a deficient imagination. It's frankly all a bunch of drudgery, a tired reiteration of autofiction that enforces the conspicuous. When will this obsession with masculinity and its volatility evince introspective profundity? Being a man and its institutionalization deserves a more thorough survey than these microwaved leftovers. Loose homoeroticism can't cover for the absence of authorial incision, there must be a more intriguing insight to induce than...painfully transparent provocation... Surely we have not sunk to such dismal lows as spectators to be engrossed by the vacant, the banal, and the woefully derivative." **— ZACHARY GOLDKIND**

INFINITY POOL
Brandon Cronenberg

"With its scatological obsessions, extreme sex and violence, and its depiction of a "ruling class" degrading others to get their rocks off, the film recalls no less an act of cinematic provocation than Pasolini's Salò (lest one think this to be a reach, we even get a sequence where a nude Skarsgård is dog-walked on a leash). But the film envelopes its extremeness in shimmering surfaces, drone shots, cool lighting gels, and trippy freak-out sequences (during these scenes, viewers are likely to find themselves wondering what they're looking at and exactly how pornographic it might be). The film arouses and repulses in equal measure, leaving [viewers] feeling as unclean and compromised as the characters. In this setting, the only unforgivable transgression is leaving the party early."
— ANDREW DIGNAN

TALK TO ME
Danny & Michael Philippou

"Briefly put, *Talk to Me*'s formula consists of the same few elements circulating through Netflix and streaming more generally of late: parties, party-poopers, a group setting for the supernatural to unfold, and a tendency for the indeterminacy of group dynamics and human nature to play out in increasingly gruesome ways... What's so refreshing, at least when juxtaposed against the dime-a-dozen frat house shenanigans, is how *Talk to Me* foregrounds the complexities of social interactions and identity construction without sacrificing the dopamine zing of adrenaline. For once, it's actually conceivable that the events portrayed in the Philippous' work could have taken place; whether or not the ghoulish specificities are reenacted to a T is not so much the point as how their subsequent fallout — at the very least — confronts the viewer with the grim realization of everyday corporeal existence. This is not to say that the filmmaker twins are pioneers of cinematic realism, but that their uncanny mapping of a Gen Z-ish phenomenology of smartphones, live streams, and transactional social intercourse speaks to us way more effectively and lucidly than the plodding moralism of last year's *Smile*." **— MORRIS YANG**



LAST THINGS
Deborah Stratman

"Though cryptic and eccentric, this is far from Stratman's most impenetrable work. Much like her previous film, *The Illinois Parables* (2016), *Last Things* frequently reformulates itself, armed with an arsenal of approaches. The movie embodies a variety of perspectives, from outer space to microscope slides, as Stratman's images — landscapes, crystal and rock formations, sketches, spelunking and laboratory footage, celestial satellite imagery, microscopic forms, etc. — collectively embody an otherworldly thrill... Scientific mineral theory enmeshes with speculative fiction — fact and fiction married... The disparate sources which fuel the narration thus culminate into a singular and chaotic vision." **— DANIEL GORMAN**

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