

VIFF Vancouver International Film Festival 2020 Reviews

Black Bear



In Lawrence Michael Levine's dark indie drama, *Black Bear*, everyone's playing a role, if not two or three. Set in a remote cabin, the story follows a young filmmaker, Allison (Aubrey Plaza), as she takes a creative retreat in a lakeshore B&B owned by Blair (Sarah Gadon) and Gabe (Christopher Abbott). This isolated trio quickly becomes a potential love triangle, with an early flirtation between Allison and Gabe inevitably raising tensions (sexual and otherwise). Then, halfway through, things change. It's hard to describe this narrative shift without revealing too much, but it alters each character's role, while replaying the same tensions from the first half. With this move, the film makes a familiar narrative gamble, hoping that showing more of the same will reveal something more within the same. However, this is where the film struggles the most. While Levin certainly paces his scenes precisely, building an ominous mood throughout, his foregrounded manipulation of form slips into affectation more than revelation. Yet, the film's form also manages to showcase each performance with intimacy and care, and this is where the film shines the most. Aubrey Plaza's morose and aloof performance style transfers delightfully well into this dramatic setting, and Sarah Gadon lets her quiet rage build to full force here. Christopher Abbott moves smoothly between these two registers, providing both comedic relief and dramatic intensity. While the film doesn't quite live up to its ambitions, it still has ambitions, and that's always worth watching for.

Review by Michael Stringer

Call Me Human



"Je cherche l'horizon" (*I seek the horizon*) are the first words in the first poem read by Josephine Bacon in *Call Me Human*. Bacon, the subject of O'Bomsawin's attentive and collaborative documentary, is an Innu poet, filmmaker, translator, researcher, and teacher, and in the film she regularly returns to the horizon. It's in her words, when she talks of the elders she worked with who always faced the horizon, and it's in her gaze when she sees her grandfather or poetry in its line. Bacon reads many poems, in voiceover and in dialogue, in French and in Innu. But O'Bomsawin also includes other work, such as clips from one of Bacon's documentaries and recordings she took as a researcher. Across these different forms is Bacon's concern for the Innu language. She maintains its use. Throughout *Call Me Human*, she asks (her friend's mother) for the Innu word of an action or explains (to Innu-Quebecois poet Marie-Andrée Gill) the meaning of another, exchanging language. The film follows Bacon from the snowy streets of Montreal to the lichen-covered tundra as she meets friends, attends readings and prize ceremonies, and reminisces. The camera often stays close but for a few instances when it situates Bacon in the landscape of a place, as when she stands between the gas station pumps that have replaced the bathroom where she slept with a friend when she first came to Montreal. Bacon laughs often and warmly, with her childhood friend, her publisher, her family. Early in the film, a radio host asks Bacon if she hesitated before accepting to make the documentary. She says, Yes, a bit, "but the film is not only about me, it also includes the people I love."

Review by Harrison Wade

My Rembrandt



"When I'm standing next to it, it's palpable history. When I move out of the picture, it's just a painting." This quote from Jan Six van Hillegom exemplifies what Oeke Hoogendijk's documentary, *My Rembrandt*, seeks to reveal about Rembrandt van Rijn's legacy. While it is undeniable that Rembrandt's artistic prowess plays a substantial role in the continued relevancy of his work, it is the people dedicated to the legacy of a man born over 400 years ago who have solidified his position as one of the greatest painters to ever live. But who are these people and why are they so devoted to Rembrandt? What are their stories? *My Rembrandt* considers this question by offering an exclusive look into the world of high-stakes art collecting—a world that is defined by relentlessness and affection in equal measure. Due to the use of the possessive adjective "my" in the title, it is easy to assume that the relationship between the subjects of this documentary and Rembrandt's work is one built solely on the desire to possess. However, Hoogendijk instead expertly highlights the gentle longing that exists alongside the obsessive tendencies of these art connoisseurs. Perhaps most compelling of all the subjects is art scholar and dealer Jan Six. A direct descendant of the Jan Six who was painted by Rembrandt in 1654, much of the film revolves around Six's struggle to authenticate a piece he is convinced was painted by Rembrandt. As other experts in the field begin to express their skepticism, Six's pleasant yet reserved demeanor becomes more harried and the validity of his procurement of the piece comes into question. The root of this fixation—and in turn the essence of the film—is revealed when Jan Six proclaims with barely concealed mania that due to his family name, "Little Jan worked five times harder, and was [finally] proven right." The force with which these words snap Six's motivations into place is staggering. The ambition, the obsession, is all a product of yearning—the yearning to be considered worthy of the family name. With this film, Hoogendijk affirms the humanity that imbues Rembrandt's work. The history of these paintings is written alongside the stories of families, cities, and nations. And *My Rembrandt* does well to remind us that art is inextricable from each of our lives.

Review by Kate Wise

Possessor



Possessor follows Tasya Vos (Andrea Riseborough), an assassin who uses brain-implant technology to "possess" the bodies of the unwitting victims who provide her access to her targets. The film raises questions about not only the body and identity but also gender, performance, and the violation of privacy. Vos—an effective and brutal killer—finds her mission and her life threatened when in the body of Colin (Christopher Abbott), who manages to resist her influence, leaving Vos trapped while the two battle for control. Vos' ability to enter and manipulate others' bodies, a terrifying process in how it undoes one's bodily autonomy, problematizes the relationship between the body and the self. Riseborough essentially disappearing from the film when Vos first possesses Colin (around 30 minutes in) even challenges the relationship between actor and character. For a significant portion of *Possessor*, Riseborough only appears in short bursts—a specter haunting Colin. Abbott, then, simultaneously performs as both Colin and Vos wrestling for control of his body, making it extremely difficult at times for a viewer to discern which character they are watching. Notions of privacy (and the violation of it) extend beyond the possessions themselves: Vos' violent memories invade her family life via trauma-inspired hallucinations. Similarly, Colin works in data-mining and spends his days surveilling strangers in private moments and settings. Most notably, however, Vos' handler crafts narratives to explain Vos' "possessee's" motivations for murder. Like an actor playing a character, Vos then performs these narratives through the individuals' bodies, stealing not only their autonomy, but their legacy.

Review by Alec Christensen