

VIFF

Vancouver International Film Festival

2022 Reviews

Aftersun



Powerfully understated, Charlotte Wells' debut feature hits as hard as any film this year. Paul Mescal and Frankie Corio star in the Scottish filmmaker's sensory deep dive into the archive, forging new memories out of old ones and asking its audience to look back at the warehouses of memory that form the fragments of their past.

Calum, a young man trying his best under pressure, and Sophie, his 10-year-old daughter who doesn't quite get it yet, embark on a Turkish vacation mediated through miniDV recordings and the young Sophie's impossibly fractured memory; *Aftersun*'s true triumph is in its unflinching compassion for everyone involved. The spectre of tragedy haunts most of the film's run time, yet Wells' thoughtful and subdued direction helps her find poignant moments of beauty and sentimentality along the way. Evocative and expressionistic sequences that point to memory's fluid leakage across space and time work in concert with a realist aesthetic that captures the temporary stillness of young life alongside the confused anger of adult life, all building towards one of the best gut-punch endings of the year.

Review by Liam Riley

Corsage



Corsage—the latest film from Austrian filmmaker Marie Kreutzer—opens on the backs of two maids. They whisper to each other about their employer Empress Sissi of Austria, who is preoccupied attempting to hold her breath under the bath water as long as possible. If ever there were a Princess Diana-esque figure of the German context, it'd would be Sissi. Married young amidst scandal, stunningly beautiful, and tragically unhappy, Sissi is the perfect material for cinematic recreation and cultural obsession. We aren't unsure whether to feel frightened for her, for we see how the strictness of 19th century monarchy suffocates her slowly, or frightened of the systemic issues she reveals. "She scares me so much," says one of the maids. Why would a woman who has everything be feel so unhappy?

Unlike the other adaptations of Sissi's story, those from the 1970s with Romy Schneider—who proclaimed that she was the princess, not just playing her—and Netflix's latest adaptation, *The Empress*, *Corsage* takes place later in Sissi's life, after the dramatics of her engagement. By avoiding the spectacle of her wedding and the scandal that followed, *Corsage* allows us a deeper and more nuanced view of Sissi's mental health. Even in that first scene, it isn't not immediately clear that Sissi is just playing and not trying to drown herself. As the film progresses we get numerous instances of this shaky line between play and pain, which progressively delves into the latter as everyone around Sissi tries to stifle any liveliness

left in her. In a tragically ironic turn of events, the film ends with a callback to the opening: Sissi throwing herself off of a boat and into the water for good.

In its venture to be a new exploration of a famous figure in Germanic/Austrian history, *Corsage* succeeds with few bumps along the road. Vicky Kreips in the leading role is equal parts hilarious and heart-wrenching. She and Kreutzer guide us into considering a more empathetic and tragic lens on Sissi's life outside of the glitz and glamor of her early years, and present us with a critique of a male-dominated world that remains as relevant as ever.

Review by Lily K. Evans

EO



Robert Bresson envisioned the titular donkey hero of his 1966 drama, *Au Hasard Balthazar*, to be a symbol for Christianity, and many writers have conceived of the donkey's tragic death at the end of the film to be representative of the death of Jesus in scripture. Throughout this film, we are encouraged to empathize with the tragedies of Balthazar's life: a sweet, unassuming donkey who has no control over the cruelties inflicted upon him by humanity.

Jerzy Skolimowski's 2022 film *EO*, which was nominated for Best International Feature Film at the 95th Academy Awards, takes great inspiration from *Balthazar*. We see the same pitiable, helpless donkey, suffering cruel treatment at one set of human hands after another; and at the end of the film, we see his dreary demise that already seemed imminent at the start of the opening credits.

Where *EO* diverges is that we as viewers are not asked merely to empathize with the donkey, but rather to become the donkey. The camera frequently holds at EO's eyeline-level, shooting his surroundings in shallow focus that blurs all but whatever is directly in front of his face. Further, the camera follows the wandering

donkey in numerous long takes; many of these takes are so long, in fact, that less than halfway through the film, the viewer begins to perceive the scenes with people as more strange and disorienting than those focusing on the donkey.

In this way, Skolimowski performs a feat rarely seen in cinema: asking viewers to empathize with an animal not simply by focusing on human cruelty, as in *Balthazar*; or by making the animal seem more human, as in many animated features tailored towards family audiences; but rather, by making the viewer take on the perspective of the donkey himself. In this, *EO* is not a Christlike figure working to remind us of our higher purpose as human beings. Instead, he is just a donkey, reminding us of how much life and vitality exists beyond the narrow scope of human-centric perception.

Review by Tamar Hanstke

Falcon Lake



Sunlight creeps above the horizon, shimmering against a lake of death. Summertime nostalgia haunted by lost adolescence. Charlotte Le Bon unearths fundamental rifts between young and old, French and English, and fleeting first love in her debut feature film *Falcon Lake*.

This coming-of-age summer vacation film broods with a submerged horror that oozes from the edges of its achingly beautiful images like its halation, the fog of light that spreads beyond its proper boundaries in the crystalized lake. Le Bon troubles the fond gaze we cast on our collective youth, acknowledging its fatality. The camera lingers, anticipating and recognizing a tragedy to be; a tragedy that is always already there.

Le Bon captures the despair of teenage love, pitting Bastien against older adversaries and (in)visible histories in his vying for family friend Chloe, who is three years his senior. Through this, Le Bon finds true sen-

ality by exercising exceptional care and restraint, ultimately understanding the violence and pain first love brings.

Teen anxiety mirrors the French-Canadian fear of Anglo domination and culture loss in Falcon Lake. The dialectal opposition between the two colonial forces refracts the conflictual genesis of a country that not only exists in opposition with itself but against its indigenous population, which figures as non-existent in this nostalgic view of childhood past whose Canadian history wishes to forget its colonial heritage. Yet a sense of melancholic dread bubbles beneath the surface and through the cracks of this rose-tinted vacation world, pointing to violence that pervades Canada's colonial history.

Review by Will Riley

The Novelist's Film



The novelist, Jun-hee (Lee Hye-young), walks into a series of encounters. She travels to see an old friend and runs into a director she almost worked with, then meets an actress, Gil-soo (Kim Min-hee), and her nephew, and even a little girl who stares in awe at Kim as they eat. She moves from past to future with blunt ease. She asks her friend why she didn't call after reading her novel and shuts up the director for calling Gil-soo a waste. She tells Gil-soo how much she wants to work with her, even tells the young bookstore employee how much she likes meeting her. This could be called charisma.

Lee Hye-young continues to be a great collaborator with Hong, her characters adding something sharp and opaque to each movie. Like *In Front of Your Face* (2021), this is a spiritual movie in how it is searching for something, maybe affirmation. All the conversations move gently around artmaking. The first two are about stopping, then with Gil-soo about starting again, then over drinks, a combination. The novelist's film exists

only as a proposal for most of the runtime, and the movie's faith banks on whether or not it will exist. It must be shown to affirm all the hope for the future and the talk about art, and it eventually is, a lovely release from the structure of the rest of the movie slipping into a mundane documentary.

Kim walks with flowers, the camera walks with her, and finally colour. A voice offscreen, presumably Hong, her partner, talks to her. Quick and quiet, the camera captures two of the best statements of love I've ever heard. "I love you." "I love you."

Review by Harrison Wade

Until Branches Bend



The ethereal gloss and dreamlike textures of the 16mm film stock provide audiences with only the slightest distance from the grotesque in *Until Branches Bend* (2022). Director and writer Sophie Jarvis' debut feature film is a feverish psychological drama vis-à-vis body horror that blossoms beneath the isolated landscapes of the Syilx territory. Set in the fictional, rural small town of Montague, Robin (Grace Glowicki), an industrial peach grader, is exiled from her community after discovering a rare invasive beetle species burrowed into a peach at the town's packing facility. Simultaneously, Robin must cope with an unintended pregnancy in an area where women's healthcare options are intentionally scarce. Robin's ostracization for speaking up against her employer (Lochlyn Munro) satirizes the moral dilemma of 'doing the right thing', an action that plays on the veiled religious fanaticism and fiscal conservatism of a town biblically plagued by ecological catastrophe.

Jarvis tethers a critical eco-consciousness unique to the narrative that urgently asks us to question the consequences of complacency in a diegetic world that closely resembles our own. Or rather, a dystopian, *inhospitable* post-world marked by environmental degradation—forewarned in the scholarship of Jennifer Fay.

Previously titled *INVASIONS*, *Until Branches Bend* is, at its core, an oppositional text that critiques the precarity of industrial labour, capitalist agriculture, and the literal invasion of settler-colonialism in the Okanagan region. The director contrasts harmful methods of industrialized orcharding practices against indigenous modes of cultivation and land stewardship through moments of historical reflection. Jarvis self-reflexively emphasizes the consequences of capitalist agriculture against a backdrop of actual environmental deterioration, through capturing the region's fast-burning wildfire season. The wildfire, itself a character within the film, oscillates between proletarian and bourgeois spaces of Montague to historicise the lineages of indigenous enous populations affected by agricultural runoff and pesticide pollution.

Review by Orrin Pavone

When Time Got Louder



While watching *When Time Got Louder*, you find yourself faced with a question: how do you express love when struggling to speak?

For sister-and-brother duo Abbie (Willow Shields)

and Kayden (Jonathan Simao) Peterson, this has never really been an issue, even with any difficulties their family has to adapt to when it comes to Kayden's non-verbal autism. But things change when Abbie gets into university in pursuit of her dream to one day start an animated series with Kayden, and her family has a hard time adapting in her absence.

For the film itself, it *shows* rather than *tells* an answer to the proposed question. It is intimate even in its primary use of longer shots and muted colours, creating an understated yet tender portrait of the Peterson family. By cutting between each character's perspectives, it's easy to connect to everyone as they try "taking it one day at a time." Even when communication fails between them, their love still *shows*.

And as things take a turn for the worse for Kayden while Abbie tries to balance fun and guilt in her newfound independence after she begins dating Karly (Ava Capri), you teeter with the nuances. Yes, you may think, *Abbie does deserve to enjoy more of her own life!* But Kayden does too. That's what the film does so well—exploring these complexities. Even when the father, Mark (Lochlyn Monroe), tips close to a slightly antagonist role, viewers can understand. Despite his occasional pushiness or mother Tish (Elizabeth Mitchell)'s emotional state over Kayden's future, it's clear they simply want what's best for their son.

Jonathan Simao's portrayal of Kayden is also amazing—it really does convey so much. I'll admit I'm a teensy, *tiny* bit biased since I did go to elementary school with him, so it's one of those happy, "it's a small world, after all" moments of pride and excitement, hearing of him again after all these years! But *When Time Got Louder* has plenty to offer regardless.

I'll admit I teared up multiple times throughout it. Truly, it's a heartfelt film.

Review by Jenny Yang