

VIFF

Vancouver International Film Festival

dir. Bas Devos

Here (2023)

Here (2023) opens with the glass-free window frames of construction sites. This immediately recalls *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983), where characters stand in an unfinished, empty building overlooking the city, likening its window to a coloured, big-screen television. With the city in motion and the spectators stilled, *Here* eloquently captures the immigrant's hesitation to move.

The film exists in a timeless realm, set entirely during the holiday time before Stefan (Stefan Gota), a Romanian construction worker, departs Brussels to return home. This period of unsettling purposelessness signifies the perpetual transitional period for an immigrant, a constant, soliloquising “nowness”. Narrative functionalities are replaced by cross-sectional slices of plants and life. We see Stefan “here and there” in the largely unpopulated city, handing out soup to friends as goodbye gifts.

Here also explores a space beyond the physical, where the city acts as a vacuum punctuated by serendipitous exits: the gate to a city garden, the tunnel leading to nocturnal wanderings, or the heavy rain that brings Stefan and Shuxiu (Gong Liyou), a doctoral student studying mosses, together. Through these exits, Bas Devos reveals a fluid narrow rupture where the fabric of modern city life dissolves into sensory experiences and the dichotomy of work and life fades away. From such, *Here* proposes a form of poetic agency that stands apart from the neoliberal paradigm.

In *Here*, conversations unfold but seldom reach completion. People talk to themselves, issuing compliments, forgetting the names of things, and drifting off to dream of gatherings or the luxuriant greenery. *Here*, in the enclaves of the European city, mosses quietly breathe, a romance grows and melts into a smile.

Review by: Chuiwen Kong

Ryusuke Hamaguchi's return of *Evil Does Not Exist* (2023) takes a while to digest. At the heart of the narrative is a fear and rejection of capitalist contamination as it intrudes into and offsets the balance of a quaint countryside town. Obfuscated by the snowy landscape and a sleepy slow pace, the film deals with a deeply troubling moral dilemma which only fully reveals itself in the end. And by playing with dichotomies of man versus nature and city versus countryside, the act of violence becomes increasingly confused. Is the economic gentrification of a peaceful ecosystem an act of violence? Is it the same violence as a predator killing its prey? Can either be justified? Can either be evil? Neither human or animal-like, the sentiment and style of the film hints at something more ambiguous, interpolating human into animal and animal into human through love and bloodshed alike. Though not Hamaguchi's most ambitious projects, particularly following the success of *Drive My Car* (2021), it is certainly one of the hardest to grasp, a genius which takes a day or two to materialize fully. Perhaps it is because what is evil precedes our anthropocentric understanding, and to truly comprehend it requires its destruction to open gateways of a porous being, transcending ontology and morality all together.

Review by: Jasmine Sanau



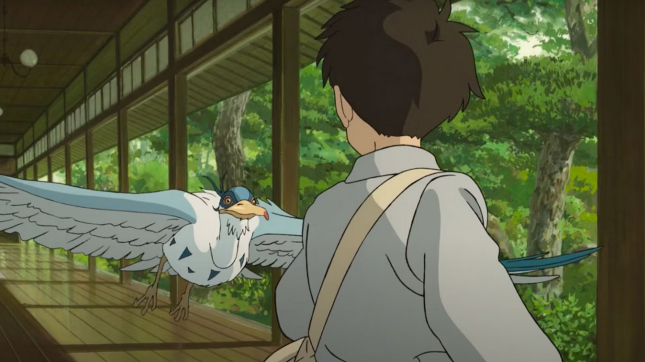
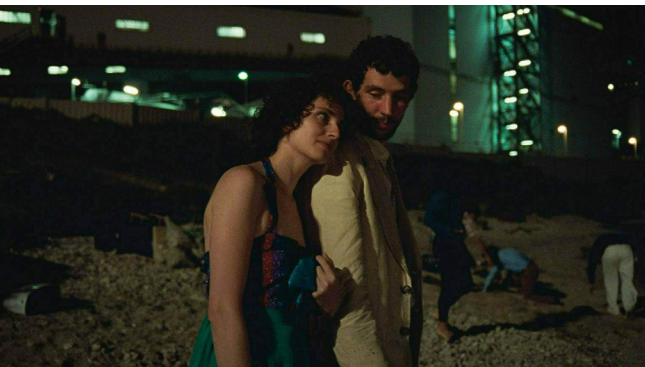
Evil Does Not Exist (2023)

dir. Ryusuke Hamaguchi

2024 Reviews

dir. Alice Rohrwacher

La Chimera (2023)



The Boy and the Heron (2023)

dir. Hayao Miyazaki

In one scene, Italia and Arthur take Flora to the abandoned train station because she wants to see it again. It's overgrown and empty. She tells them she encouraged her daughters to travel. Beniamina especially, perpetually curious, jumped on any train. Italia asks who the building belongs to now, and Flora says no one, then everyone. It's a public building. "Does it belong to everyone or no one?" Italia asks. This is what *La Chimera* asks of the past and of the Etruscan artefacts buried in the Italian earth and dug up by Arthur (Josh O'Connor) and his gang of tombaroli to be sold first to a fence named Spartaco, then museums. Do the artefacts belong to everyone, to whoever finds and digs them up? Do they belong to the dead, as Italia (Carol Duarte) maintains? Is the past material or spiritual, means or ends? Is it meant for human eyes? O'Connor plays Arthur with his head in the earth, wandering and looking for his love, Beniamina, who is dead. He's a man who can find anything, even Beniamina, Flora (Isabella Rossellini), believes. In the middle of the film, the group leaves a party and walks to the beach by the power plant and discovers an unopened temple. Arthur senses it (one character calls his spirits "his chimeras"), then collapses. As the tombaroli get to work opening the seal, Rohrwacher cuts, impossibly, inside, to show you the colours that leave the walls and objects as the men break in. It feels like the film's form discovers the temple, too, like a secret between me and the image. The temple is full of artefacts, but they only have time to break the head off a large, priceless statue. As the neck breaks, Arthur cries. Does it belong to everyone or no one? Rohrwacher shoots in three film formats to excavate cinema's material past, too. Rossellini's casting is part of this project. Her presence points to a recent cinema's past, and as she ages, she looks more and more like her mother, Ingrid Bergman. Another past. By the time Arthur wanders back to Italia near the end of the film, she's built the abandoned train station up into a community, a place for women and children to live. It belongs to everyone and no one.

Review by: Harrison Wade

A glowing tribute to Hayao Miyazaki's closest collaborators, *The Boy and the Heron* translates the devastating loss of a grieving child into a phantasmagorical tale of feathered spiritual guides, pyrokinetic protectors, and carnivorous parakeets.

Near the end of the Second World War, a young Mahito Maki (Soma Santoki) retreats from Tokyo with his father and stepmother, leaving the site of his birthmother's tragic death after a hospital bombing. His nightmares of her final moments and close encounters with a combative grey heron lead him to an abandoned tower, where he meets an unsettling cast of characters at once part cruel fable and rousing fairy-tale. Playful warawara float about on shimmering seas, interrupted by bloodied pelicans desperate for survival; Mahito's stepmother sleeps in a dark delivery room that floods with razor-sharp paper as he reaches out for her. Miyazaki pairs Joe Hisaishi's melancholic and buoyant melodies with a familiar pacifist's ethic as Mahito eventually accepts the precarious balance between malice and compassion in a violent world.

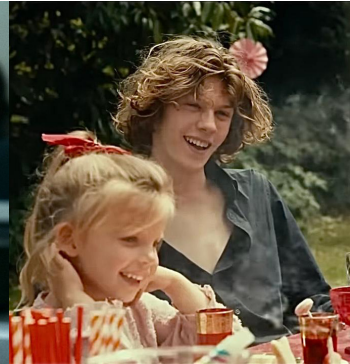
The film inspires a near-spiritual faith in the children of the next generation as forgers of an optimistic future. With corporatized animation primarily foregrounding intertextual nostalgia over sincere storytelling, viewers can grasp hold of *The Boy and the Heron* as a key reminder of the intimate alliances that surround us, to forgo the residual guilt around the love we may at times feel we do not deserve.

Review by: Jade Courchense

Red Rooms (2023)



dir. Pascale Plante



VIFA

In his true crime-inspired horror film *Red Rooms*, Pascale Plante diagnoses our collective obsession with the figure of the serial killer via the ‘groupie’ and fan culture typical of its media image. Of course, the macabre has always enjoyed itself as a perverse object of intrigue – that which scares us but more powerfully draws us in. Yet, Plante, through his interest in the fold of the digital in this phenomenon, manages to unearth a specifically contemporary syndrome that plagues our popular culture. The true-crime fad has spawned in various forms: podcasts, miniseries, and feature films, among others, and perhaps offers an obvious line of shallow critique. Plante manages to avoid the easy didactic tone so many other films convey and locates something far more disturbing than shallow criticism can offer.

Plante is a true contemporary filmmaker and thus begins *Red Rooms* with a long single take of a courtroom, the setting of a high-profile case of suspected serial killer Ludovic Chevalier (Maxwell McCabe-Lokos), who is accused of filming snuff films wherein he tortures and murders schoolgirls. He later distributes them on the dark web via sites known as ‘red rooms.’ Plante is largely uninterested in the legal dressings on display in this durational oneer but chooses instead to focus on the spectacle of the serial-killer sympathizers watching the proceedings, embodied by Kelly-Anne (Julieta Gariépy) and Clementine (Laurie Babin). This is not a snappy courtroom-drama pleasure vehicle or the suspense and faux-ambiguity of *Anatomy of Fall*; instead, there’s a disturbing mystery as to the desires of Kelly-Anne and her counterpart in this twisted case.

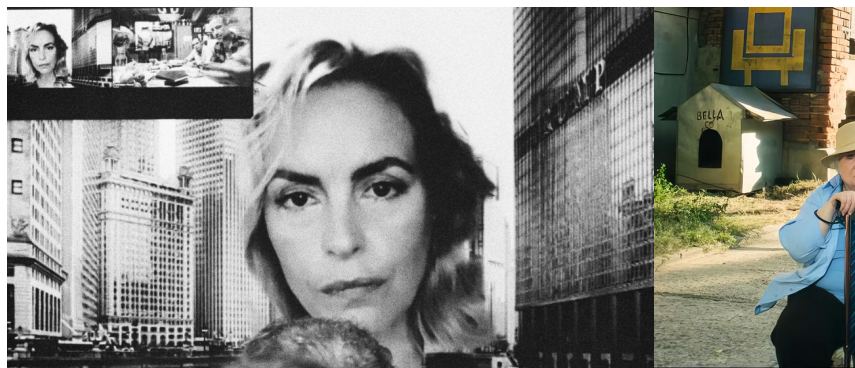
As such, we don’t overstay our welcome in the courtroom and, instead, are soon following the ritualized lifeworld of Kelly-Anne, a high-value photo model by day and a crypto-trading internet gambler by night. Kelly-Anne camps in an alley next to the courtroom overnight to secure her place in the audience early each morning, waking up to a monochrome blue, bruised image of a street. Plante constructs contemporary ex-

pressionism by recalling Weine’s somnambulist in *Caligari* through his psychological observation of our current times. Kelly-Anne’s mysterious yet clinical interest in the Chevalier case is juxtaposed by Clementine, whose unapologetic public defense of Chevalier (Clementine phones into a ‘news’ show covering the case only to be humiliated live on air) lays bare her perverted and ultimately confused love for what she sees as the wrongfully accused man. Plante finds in his two characters the archetypal coin of the true-crime obsessed: an a-type neurotic in Kelly-Anne, unfeeling and psychopathic seeking out the perverse pleasure in the morbid, and Clementine, emotionally unstable and consumed by a conspiracy-sick mistrust of the institutions that govern us. The two form a doomed kinship as their worldviews are set to collide, which offers a mirror for an audience desiring the awful.

In this dual character study, Plante manages to unearth something that plagues us today, elucidating the digital’s exasperating role in this archetypal encounter. Opting not for the easy cynicism or nihilism of our times, Plante stares directly in the face of these cultural (un)realities: the trauma left by the tear between virtual and the actual (was it ever really entirely distinct?), yet still manages to locate redemption for Kelly-Anne and by proxy us. That is not to say we aren’t guilty; we are all implicated in this dynamic. The uncanny rips through *Red Room*’s form, giving way to a fantastic terror, inditing us and, more importantly, the cinema itself.

Review by: Will Riley

Do Not Expect Too Much from



Last Summer (2023)

dir. Catherine Breillat



Last Summer (L'Été dernier), as Catherine Breillat's cinematic comeback after ten years of hiatus, might appear too conventional to be interesting: the film can be easily summarized as a clichéd story about the incestuous relationship between Anne (Léa Drucker), a well-established Parisian lawyer and her 17-year-old stepson Théo (Samuel Kircher). A remake of the 2019 Danish film *Queen of Hearts*, *Last Summer* delves deep into its dramatic, predictable narrative that makes it seem like the least transgressive among Breillat's oeuvre. However, if *Last Summer* appears to be a cheesy commentary on the fragility of trust and love's destructive transfigurations, its Breillatian idiosyncrasy is maintained through the film's frustratingly opaque attitude towards its own cinematic reality.

Radu Jude's *Do Not Expect Too Much From the End of the World* pivots on moments of brilliance many will be quick to label "Godardian". That this film was produced the year following famed auteur Jean Luc-Godard's death is no coincidence, as Jude's homage is poignant and touching, and most certainly felt, as what might be the most important sequence of the film, a six minute silent montage of graves along a Romanian highway, fittingly evokes Godard's *Weekend*, itself an apocalyptic takedown of what was once contemporary.

Do Not Expect Too Much From the End of the World, though, is just that, as the film's prescient look at transnational capital amidst the disarray of a dynamistic and perverse media culture is as simple as it is profound. The homage in Jude's film works, though, because it has everything to do with the contemporary world, a world rife with empty pastiche chasing after the hopes and dreams of yesterday. The film is not interested in living in the past. Rather, Jude's interrogation of today is as earnest as it is critical. As we follow overworked gig-economy worker Angela who navigates the aimless and traffic-laden hellscape of postmodernity, played brilliantly by Ilinca Manolache, we are exposed to a milieu that is equal parts hilarious and devastating. Finally, as careful audiences will recognize, Jude's critique of the cinema itself as a tool of capital that can flexibly rework its images in service of capital's own fixity is what Godard would have fittingly appreciated most.

Review by: Liam Riley

The film's affectively ambiguous moments parallel its overall cathartic effort to thwart intellectualization of our choices as humans, foregrounding Breillat's acerbic, unrelenting account on shame, self-denial and so-called "truth" of life. The director ventures into a daring probe of morality and carnality of erotic desires by audaciously letting viewers in on her authentic lies - as she quotes Jean Cocteau's famous remark: "I am a lie that always tells the truth." Indeed, in *Last Summer*, everything is openly out there - love, lust, boredom, disgust, hate, revulsion, even the secrets, with no intentional stylistic or narrative clean-up. Sex scenes are laborious, un-erotic - Breillat's disturbingly claustrophobic close-up of faces in her portrayal of sex replaced her signature bodily transgression with a naked and more indecent portrayal of humanity accentuated by the human face. In fact, the film is not subversive at all; everything is "clichéd" to a default.

Yet *Last Summer* is a distinctively transgressive film in the sense that it fundamentally questions the veracity and power of transgressiveness in all art. Eventually, the film comments on a "symbolic reality" of the cinematic image that betrays itself - can't we lie to ourselves? Can't images lie to their own indexicality? If *Last Summer* appears to be telling a story about truth with an obsolete vocabulary of moralism, a closer look might suggest something grimmer but more interesting: that nobody is innocent or guilty, and life makes victims of us all.

Review by: Claire Cao

Do Not Expect Too Much From the End of the World (2023)



dir. Radu Jude