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FILM TRaC*

*teen reviewers and critics



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REVIEWS

Mad Bills to Pay (or Destiny, dile que no soy malo)

(2025, dir. Joel Alfonso Vargas)

Rico, a nineteen-year-old who lives with his single overworked mother and little sister Sally, makes a living selling homemade alcoholic beverages—“nutty”—on the beaches of New York City. In the start of *Mad Bills to Pay*, a raw, coming-of-age film that feels like a testament to New York City youth, we learn about Rico’s life as an amateur hustler. The audience is immersed into his immature behavior and overall dysfunctional home life through cramped camera work and scenes of constant arguing, petty dialogue, and Rico checking his phone or smoking weed.

The party-filled, grainy, musical background of inner-city life creates a feeling of authenticity, leaving the viewer hoping for the best. We root for Rico to get his priorities straight, but from the first shot of Rico’s sister, Sally, we get a foreshadowing of Rico’s overprotective and hypocritical nature.

Rico has a baby on the way with Destiny, a younger, easily manipulated girl he met hustling the beaches, and after Destiny moves in, their arguments feel constant and somewhat improvised, further pushing the authentic vibe.

As the film progresses, there isn’t ever a point where Rico, or the people he affects, are truly in a good position or happy in their decisions. We get to see how one person’s ego can pull another into their orbit—especially the women surrounding him, constantly cleaning up a man’s mess, making up for a man’s emotional unavailability, or letting them win for the sake of ending the fight.

However, as the viewer witnesses petty arguments, Rico’s arrest, and impulsive choices like cutting his hair or his unattended alcoholism, there isn’t an

overall lesson to be learned or a specific message to be delivered. The film becomes stagnant, leaving us waiting for the ending we’re looking for, but in life there isn’t necessarily an end to the chaos or positive growth of a person or their situation.

-Nehemiah Cooley

■

A candid, immersive portrait of the Bronx in the heat of summer, *Mad Bills to Pay* follows snapshots of Rico, an adult teenager who sells vibrant alcohol/juice mixtures at the beach. We feel the hot sun on our forehead, we sit in on an argument between his mother and sister, watch him dance with the jug of juice as he refills his wares and sing his mother happy birthday while she blows out a wish.

When he admits to getting a girl pregnant and brings her to stay in the house, the tension that escalates is raw and compelling. The stress for the audience, watching Rico’s irresponsibility and lazy confidence spiral into exasperation, fury, disappointment, and resignation for everyone around him, is vivid. His girlfriend, a sophomore in high school who is the only one proposing plans for the future, and who is constantly on the edge of leaving him and giving up the baby he wanted, relapses back to him time and time again.

The shots are crisp and clear, angling characters in unconventional ways, into the corners of the screen and away from the camera. This serves to highlight the performances, which, along with a script that masterfully creates the ebb and flow of arguments and authentic conversation, form a story made up of genuine moments.

-Belle Greenberg

■

Mad Bills to Pay, the visually striking and emotionally engaging feature length



Bonnie uses a spell to get back at a bully but wonders if it goes too far—but I wish we went deeper: Why did Sarah attempt suicide? How did Nancy, Bonnie, and Rochelle become friends? How and when did they get into witchcraft?

-Jem Bryant

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Venus in Furs

(1969, dir. Jess Franco)

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A giallo-adjacent film centered around a woman who returns from the dead to enact revenge in increasingly erotic ways, *Venus In Furs* is an entertaining watch that makes extremely little sense upon any sort of close inspection, especially the out-of-nowhere ending. Still, the movie twists and shimmers with a sort of late-summer heat that can be hard to find.



The long shots of empty Italian beaches under midday sun, extended jazz club sequences, and the delirium of the male protagonist's confused yet pervasive horniness are perfect for a day when the heat is too intense to think straight.

Plus, the fashion—and the makeup, the eye looks in particular—is to die for, pun intended.

-Harper Tetzloff

debut of Bronx native Joel Alfonzo Vargas, centers around a summer in the life of nineteen-year-old Rico as he makes a half-hearted attempt at financial stability and rides the highs and lows of his relationships with his pregnant teenage girlfriend Destiny, his mother, and his sister Sally.

Rico's capacity for character growth makes his arc feel frustrating and the development of his relationships feel stagnant, but the acting felt incredibly immersive: characters spoke and acted like real people. Each performer nailed the mannerisms and speaking habits of their character, the small quirks that make them people. The small cast is so vibrant that it wasn't until I checked the cast list that I realized that the film is centered around just four main characters.

The relationships between the women in the story are layered and emotionally complex in a way that many other films don't achieve with twice the screen time; I wanted to see more of them.

Sally and Destiny are the same age, but whenever they interact, there's a divide

between them: Destiny is "adultified"—nose ring, tattoos, not in school, not with family, pregnant, cleaning up after Rico, forced to manage her own life a lot of the time—in a way that Rico is trying to protect Sally from. Destiny aspires to go to college and major in business, she is more capable of logistical thinking than Rico, believes science, considers abortion, she is not a total idiot, but the focus is placed on Rico, whose emotional expression is comparatively opaque.

Having a character who always says what they feel, or even just what they want the other people in a scene to think they feel, is not always the best, but as Destiny tells him—finally—in the film's emotional climax, not everything is about Rico.

When Destiny's mother comes to apologize, after Rico leaves the room, the camera stays as the four women hug and promise to support one another. Rico does not need to be there for them to grow emotionally.

The location scouting really helped the visual appeal of the film and the movie



feels very authentically New York, full of banal landmarks of city living: a New York Public Library magnet on the fridge, a grimy public grill, overgrown grass gently shifting in the wind behind all-too-familiar pebbled concrete benches—*Mad Bills To Pay* is the first time I've ever seen those ugly OMNY tap-to-pay screens committed to film.

The very intentional choice to ground the movie in these lived-in locations is partially a result of the guerilla-style filmmaking, and that authenticity pays off majorly: the colors and composition of the film were incredible; at times it almost felt like a renaissance painting, with characters in grand dramatic poses.

Never encouraging or inviting the viewer to treat its protagonists as idiots, *Mad Bills to Pay* does not romanticize the situation they are in. There is a sense of real empathy in the filmmaking. Their lives are not lessons, Destiny is not a public service announcement.

-Harper Tetzloff

■

Based in Bronx, New York, and about Rico, who is involved with Destiny, a teenage girl, this very entertaining film is eye-opening, as it shows the perspectives of a struggling Dominican family that faces lots of obstacles, like constant arguments, financial struggles, police activity, consumption of alcohol, and teenage pregnancy.

This can be a sensitive topic for some, but this film is good at conveying the feel of real life in the Bronx and what it may feel like to be in this complicated situation that is becoming more common. Overall, this film is relatable as it includes struggles people face and makes it more understandable.

-Daniela Velazquez

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Pompeii: Below the Clouds

(2025, dir. Gianfranco Rosi)

In broad terms, a film about natural disasters, emergency hotline operators, excavation, and human connection, *Pompeii: Below the Clouds* follows a variety of different plots that share a common theme: the emotional effect of Pompeii. It depicts individuals in seemingly constant distress, searching endlessly for answers and, mainly, simply living.

The viewer can feel the constant looming dread that this natural disaster seems to have impressed upon Italy; it has a dark and eerie aura about it.

A mostly silent black-and-white film, *Pompeii: Below the Clouds* comes across as pretentious. Dialogue and music were not used as effectively as they could have been to create the dreary atmosphere that director Gianfranco Rosi was aiming for. It is essentially a series of photographs.

They are incredibly beautiful, strong photographs that truly invoke emotion in the viewer, but when a director pushes past the boundaries of the “rules” of filmmaking, it must be done with genuine intent. This film feels like a regurgitated version of what an inexperienced artist thinks a ‘good black & white movie’ looks like.

-Nick Mayne-Chang

■

An extremely visually appealing documentary, *Pompeii: Below the Clouds* creates an atmospheric portrait of Pompeii and the life within it.

The cinematography crafts each



electronic songs by artists like Kanye West and Travis Scott that directly mirror the main character's mindset. *Waves* is a perfect symbolism of how emotional consequences and trauma have a cycle of building up, peaking, and then eventually crashing, like waves do in the ocean.

Overall, *Waves* is a beautiful representation of how it feels to truly mourn somebody, in a way that may even seem a little bit ugly.

-Samantha Belford

■

Bugonia

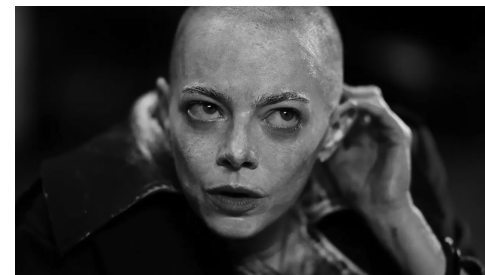
(2025, dir. Yorgos Lathimos)

Teddy, a seemingly troubled factory worker, and his cousin Don abduct a powerful CEO whom Teddy is convinced is an alien from another world.

The story is very contained and only features three principle characters: Teddy (Plemons), Don (Delbis), and Michelle Fuller (Stone). Most of the scenes occur within the same house, often in the basement.

Lathimos often makes dully disturbing movies meant to get under the viewers' skin and make them uncomfortable, but *Bugonia* is a lot more striking. The visuals are unique and unusually colorful. Robbie Ryan, the director of photography, uses sharp contrast and harsh, warm lighting to add to the tension of the already unsettling story. There is a very unique visual feeling to the entire film, shot on VistaVision.

Masterfully portrayed by Emma



Stone, Jesse Plemons, and Aidan Delbis, Yorgos Lathimos' most recent production, *Bugonia*, takes a simple story and gives it layers through striking dialogue and unique visuals.

-Tess Nicholas



The Craft

(1996, dir. Andrew Fleming)

After a horrible social life in her hometown, teenager Sarah Bailey is desperate to make friends who not only accept her, but do so “unconditionally”.

Starting anew by moving to L.A., Sarah finds herself immersed in a new world of spirituality and witchcraft by her fellow classmates Bonnie, Rochelle, and Nancy. The trio of girls welcome her with open arms, and don't judge her for her past. Even if witchcraft wasn't a factor in them becoming closer, it felt natural that Sarah would be initiated into the group.

The movie could have been better if we fleshed out each girl more. Each of their motivations and subsequent crutches are spelled out pretty well on a surface level—Nancy is at a dead end in life, but after her stepfathers death due to Nancy's spellwork, she becomes power hungry, feeling threatened by Sarah because of Sarah's power coming more innately; Sarah does a love spell on a misogynistic classmate which backfires because it works too well so Sarah becomes scared of her own magical ability; Bonnie does a ritual to fix her burn scars which after they've healed make her overly superficial,

2022, excitement was through the roof due to the fact that the film will be depicting the story of “Silent Hill 2”. Closer to the release date, the first few trailers and behind the scene footage were released to the public and the response was very mixed. The movie was finally released on January 23, 2026. Audiences sat down on their seats to hopefully experience something memorable. As the credits rolled, it can be safe to say that many moviegoers will remember this film for all the wrong reasons.

The set designs and most of the creature designs were on point to their video game counterparts, creating a sense of dread and mystery similar to the game. Sequences involving these designs are entertaining and satisfying, whether the rusted-down and moldy corridors of a hotel, or the shambling nurse with contorted faces.

Helped by the already great set design, some shots feel all the more ominous and threatening, and show the scale of Silent Hill’s corruption. Some sequences are entertaining, but fall flat compared to the game. After that, the film falls into a dark bottomless hole of butchered story and the pretentious need to be abstract.

Trying to reach the level of thought the original game provoked, the character of James Sunderland has been completely overhauled, now being portrayed as a drunk, hipster artist.

The story is the biggest problem. This film never leaves anything up for interpretation. Instead of trying to adapt the original—already a masterpiece of



storytelling, game design, and dialogue—Gans creates his own spin, making the story of James Sunderland more empathetic by revealing, in flashbacks, his falling out with his lover Mary. The reason behind their eventual falling out is so ridiculous it will also turn off major fans from the video game series.

Return to Silent Hill is an awful representation of a groundbreaking story, matching none of the true flair of the original and providing an experience so frustrating and pretentious that it is a genuine shame that this may be people’s first introduction into this world and the story of James Sunderland.

-Gael Guadarrama

■

Waves

(2019, dir. Trey Edwards Shults)

A high school wrestler named Tyler (Kelvin Harrison Jr) and his girlfriend Alexa (Alexis Lopez) are struggling with family pressure and emotional stress when a major tragedy occurs. Visually striking, neon-saturated, and heartbreaking, *Waves* is a film about a boy who is trying to be perfect.

The acting in *Waves* is very naturalistic and emotionally intense, making the film feel more raw and real. Kelvin Harrison’s performance as Tyler gave the character many layers that were revealed throughout the movie in such a beautiful way.

One of the things *Waves* does especially well is the soundtrack, mixing R&B, and

location—the police dispatch, the classroom, and the museums that preserve the history of the city—into something familiar and yet otherworldly, but the documentary did not follow a consistent subject and story, only the beginnings of development of each perspective before the shift to the next, resulting in a disjointed experience.



Instead of providing the resonant and intimate moments director Gianfranco Rosi intended, this choice impedes the viewer’s connection with the police officers, students, and professors that should be at the heart of the story.

The effect of ignoring the narrative arc of all of these characters is a shallow and unsatisfying portrayal of lives held in such delicate balance near ancient disaster, and prioritizing the black-and-white aesthetic, paired with the sluggish pace of shots that linger pretentiously long, quickly loses the attention of the viewer. *Pompeii: Below the Clouds* is a film that could have been a coffee table book of photography, as good cinematography alone cannot make a good film.

-Belle Greenberg

■

Beautifully made, *Pompeii: Below the Clouds* is a film about the modern people who live in Pompeii—the place that had its famous volcanic eruption—focusing on different lives of people, shown in black and white.

The cinematography and videography captured many scenes so nicely: the emergency man in a call with a lady, and you can hear the distress coming from her, and also the man’s face, where you can see his expression, where he feels worried for her and her kids; a lady that works at the museum for nearly 30 years talks about the sculptures and their stories.

A documentary about a volcano, it was calm but also loud.

-Flora Farkas

■

The documentary film *Pompeii: Below the Clouds* showcases the lives of modern-era people living in Pompeii beneath the shadow of their rather eruptive past.

Due to people not looking directly at the camera and no cutting to one-on-one interviews, the documentary feels more like a fictional film. Large prolonged silences are followed by sounds of people calling the fire department, crashing waves, and children studying in a bookshop.

The constant cutting back to Mount Vesuvius was almost as if the filmmaker was foreshadowing something: this ominous and silent thing towering over everything around it.

Though nothing seems to happen—just regular people continuing on with their



everyday lives—you have a strange feeling of anticipation.

-Izzy Miranda

■

Modern people live in a place where a massive volcanic eruption once destroyed the city.

The civilians in *Pompeii: Below the Clouds* are portrayed as ordinary individuals—teachers, emergency responders, archaeologists and historians—living their daily lives. The documentary showcases their different perspectives and ways of life to represent how the past connects to the present and how fragile human life is around Mount Vesuvius.

Pompeii: Below the Clouds tells this story through black-and-white cinematography, which was an interesting choice considering the time period. However, the dialogue was dull, and the documentary was focusing on aesthetics more than plot.

-Nikaelle Augustin

■

Erupcja

(2025, dir. Pete Ohs)

Erupcja is a film about two girls—Bethany and Nel—who’ve known each other since college. Whenever they interact with each other or meet up after a few years of ghosting or losing contact, a volcano erupts. They make it a tradition that whenever they meet up, they cheat on their partners and ruin their relationships, so they can once be with each other again.

This film touches on important aspects of disconnection, however, it felt boring and lacked depth. The character stakes

weren’t high enough. The plot was complex and yet executed very boringly; it could’ve been more engaging and powerful with its message: the volcano represents the disconnect and disassociation they once had with each other, but also still having soul-ties to your ex partner and having unresolved feelings.

The cinematography was beautiful, it captured the beauty of the environment in a striking and almost surreal way, similar to the HBO series “Euphoria”. This is especially evident in the scene where Bethany and Nel meet up with each other at a party and start hanging out with each other after years of no contact. This film appeals to those who appreciate storytelling



through visuals rather than dialogue.

-Nikaelle Augustin

■

Set on a trip to Poland over the course of a few days, *Erupcja* is a stylized, quiet film.

A couple, Rob and Bethany (played by Charli XCX), is unassuming and indulgent in their domesticity; but, underneath every dinner and tourist attraction, Bethany’s

Saw

(2004, dir. James Wan)

Saw is a horribly gruesome horror movie about the Jigsaw Killer, who forces their victims to participate in horrifying and deadly psychological “games”.

The film opens with a man waking up in a bathtub and frantically pulling himself out. Two men are chained on opposite sides of a bathroom, neither of whom have any clue how they got there. They have to piece together clues to find out what they must do to escape before their time runs out.

There are lots of red herrings as to who may have trapped them there, over and over again you might be fairly certain you have it figured out, and then a character mentions something and suddenly it doesn’t quite add up.

If done right, this could’ve been really cool, and felt very natural. As the characters piece things together and realize what things led to this, you would be right there beside them. Instead, it feels like the characters are needlessly withholding information until it’s plot-relevant. The things they randomly remember seem such obvious clues that it feels ridiculous that you wouldn’t bring it up earlier. It ended up being frustrating and repetitive.

Saw has a very dark and grimy look to it, while simultaneously feeling oddly artificial, as though someone is in control. The bathroom has harsh fluorescent lights and huge rusty pipes coming out of the walls: the set itself is unsettling. The camerawork is shaky, and zooms in and out on people’s faces, very sporadic and panicked. There are a few wide shots that are sped-up, like a timelapse, giving the feeling of time helplessly ticking away, everything is made to make you, the viewer, uncomfortable.

The early 2000s had lots of “red water” and bad makeup when it comes to fake gore, and I wouldn’t say this film was all

that different, but with the sheer level of intensity of the circumstances it’s easy to suspend your disbelief. Each of the victims’ experiences are simply so absurd they don’t need to be realistic to be disturbing.

Saw had an incredibly unique and creative concept and for that it deserves recognition, it inspired many other horror films (most notably the rest of the *Saw*



franchise), though I don’t think it executed the idea as well as it could have.

-Saskia Walsh

■

Return to Silent Hill

(2026, dir. Christopher Gans)

After previously directing the first installment of the series, *Silent Hill* (2006), Christopher Gans returns to direct *Return to Silent Hill*, the newest installment to the *Silent Hill* franchise, based on the critically acclaimed video game series with the same name.

Starring Jeremy Irvine and Hannah Emily Anderson, *Return to Silent Hill* follows a depressed man, James Sunderland, returning to the small town of Silent Hill after receiving a letter from his lost love Mary, but little does he know that this once familiar town has been run down by darkness and creatures formed from the fears and mistakes of anyone who steps into the town.

The journey to the release of this film was quite rocky. Announced in October

American Honey

(2016, dir. Andrea Arnold)

The visually gorgeous 2016 film *American Honey*, by Andrea Arnold, is a gritty, yet poetic love letter to the Americana aesthetic, showing a realistic representation of life. Utilizing intimate angles and a warm color palette, it makes the settings of different lower-income rural towns come to life. The film follows Star (Sasha Lane), a teenager from a broken home, who joins a traveling magazine sales crew touring Bible Belt America.

Throughout *American Honey*, themes of poverty and coming of age are explored in a setting that can be both nostalgic and informative for the audience, while representing poor southern America.

A scene at the very beginning of the movie, when the magazine sellers had a flash mob in Walmart, shows the dichotomy of teenagers being teenagers and the influence corporate America had on poorer Americans. This gritty look into an often-forgotten portion of America is unique, well written, and visually beautiful, and I could not recommend it more.

-Samantha Belford

■

Barbie

(2023, dir. Greta Gerwig)

Barbie follows “Stereotypical Barbie” (Margot Robbie) as she leaves Barbieland on a journey to help reignite childhood whimsy in her owner. To match the bright colors and even more colorful characters, the camerawork is very dynamic in Barbieland. Leaving Barbieland, and learning what life in the real world is really like, has a drastic shift, with seemingly flat and disillusioned characters that Barbie has to help find their own joy again.



Gloria, a shy doll designer with little to no confidence in her ideas, follows Barbie, and finds her confidence and even gets a doll out on shelves that is solely of her design.

Although it is greatly misunderstood, when it comes to gender politics, the film bites off more than it can chew. This is more a gripe with how audiences received the movie, but the entire film promotion and even award season was too focused on the only prominent man in the movie: Ken. (Ryan Gosling gets a critics choice award for “I’m Just Ken”, but Barbie Ferreira gets zip for her amazing speech on how women are viewed in society??)

The depictions of what is “feminine”



vs “masculine”, which at first seems like a negative, were wonderfully arbitrary. It helps viewers understand how naive Ken is and how gender roles in real life may be arbitrary. I wish they fleshed out Barbieland/the real world more.

-Jem Bryant

■

sense of apathy grows, as Rob’s secret plans for their engagement approach. Bethany has a secret too: Nel, her Polish lover—their meetings always coinciding with a volcano eruption—to whom she escapes one night, away from Rob.

A scene where Bethany sits on the floor reciting a poem to Nel, a wine glass by her outstretched legs, gives us a hint of her isolation, but Bethany, Nel and her interest in another woman are put aside in favor of Rob’s arc. While Rob’s journey to cope with the shrapnel of Bethany’s self destruction is significant, it is the sole perspective followed, as opposed to alongside the others’ perspective. It leaves the story feeling unresolved, and it is a disservice to the complexity of the relationships built between them.

This movie is feverish and slow moving, utilizing a shaky camera and beats determined by vibrant solid color screens that flicker with Charli XCX’s haunting original score. Together, these choices convey how parts of ourselves we don’t feed gnaw everything else away.

-Belle Greenberg

■

A sapphic look into superstition and why people might choose chaos over stability, the new 2026 film *Erupcja* follows Bethany (Charli XCX) and her boyfriend Rob when their trip to Warsaw is thrown off by a volcano eruption.

Bethany is faced with the choice between making a big decision for her future or getting caught up in her past relationship with a Polish girl named Nel.

Rob was very kind to Bethany but she treated him like absolute garbage; this made me dislike the main characters a bit too much to care what actually happens to them, but *Erupcja* is visually nice, with a very grey Warsaw color palette. Lena Gora gave Nel a mischievous energy, which added a whole other layer to the story.

The script had some awkward moments

and scenes that didn’t fit, but if you’re looking for a jaded sapphic love story, then look no further.

-Samantha Belford

■

A woman, Bethany, and her boyfriend Rob have come to visit Warsaw. Bethany has visited Poland 5 times.

Rob is planning to propose—he prepared everything for them and made sure that they are somewhere Bethany loves—and Bethany knows, so she reconnects with old friend Nel. When Nel and Bethany are together in Nel’s room and share poems out aloud, how they express their friendship feels personal and beautiful, but I felt bad for Rob.

Before they met, Nel had the gut feeling that Bethany was in Warsaw because a volcano had erupted. They would say later in the film, “Every time we get together, a volcano erupts. We like to joke that we’re making it happen.”

“What’s the joke? Volcanoes kill people.”

The cinematography is not professional, like something that you can make with no experience with a camera, and the music makes you feel like something is going on, so, overall the movie for me was 3 out of 5: I found myself bored sometimes, or very into the movie.

-Flora Farkas

■

Tears of the Black Tiger

(2000, dir. Wisit Sasanatieng)

A flavorful dish of a film with vibrant imagery and humor woven throughout, the parody western *Tears of the Black Tiger* follows solemn Dum, a young man pursuing the gang that killed his family, and his childhood sweetheart Rumpoe, born of a wealthy family and trapped in an arranged marriage.



The film boasts gorgeous shots that set it apart from any film you've seen before, and a score that nods to classic American westerns like *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*.

The campy comedy borrows from these films and makes it its own, its exaggeration and earnest performances refreshingly endearing. Each fight scene is energetic and compelling and the minimal budget is evident in the saturated blood and often cardboard-like set, most evident in the scene where Dum's right hand confronts him while brooding in a tree at sunset; but the final confrontation between Dum and Rumpoey's husband Kumjorn, though surprising, is unfulfilling in its brevity.

-Belle Greenberg

■

A parody of American westerns, *Tears of the Black Tiger* is a story about the doomed love between Dum, a bandit gunslinger who never misses a shot, and Rumpoey, an upper-class woman.

The two lovers, who have known and loved each other since childhood, always seem to miss each other just by a second: Rumpoey's father has arranged for her to be married to a police captain and when they finally seem to be just in each other's grasp, something goes wrong.

The acting is sometimes overly dramatic and very cheesy, but the characters make you feel for their love of each other.

Tears of the Black Tiger is, overall, a very visually appealing film. The costume design references 1950s fashion; certain sets are clearly painted in a way to make it look fake; unrealistic sunsets and clouds seem to be drawn and animated. Throughout the film there are three major colors used: magenta, turquoise and yellow. (Magenta and turquoise being complementary colors makes certain scenes really pop in your face.) When shot, bandits spurt out purple blood and fly through the air before hitting the ground, poking fun at the overly dramatic gun scenes and show downs in classic westerns.

Tears of the Black Tiger film is very fast paced and campy, with big almost-too-bright colors, great costumes and maybe not the realest but still beautifully painted sets. Sadly, the ending was easier to predict than I had hoped.

-Izzy Miranda

■

A camp mix of vibrant and saturated clichés, *Tears of the Black Tiger* is an homage to 1960s Thai culture, filmed similarly to old Hollywood films. While there were

witches in a traditional sense: they have no powers and perform rites that don't appear grounded in any sort of magical reality, but they fall in line with Apple's manifestations of empowerment and confess to the spirit of Marilyn Monroe, their goddess, who Apple deems the "ultimate female martyr."

The coven's attempts at progressiveness and female empowerment are demonstrated through fashion and the items they sell—highly overpriced pieces



they pair with praise and outright trickery.

This film works because of its disheveled and messy nature. It's ultimately incoherent and doesn't have a direct message, but the messiness feels intentional as it manages to entertain viewers and appeal aesthetically.

Forbidden Fruits is a slumber-party watch, a movie appealing to lovers of female-driven cult classics. While it lacks some of the imagery and symbolism present in a story like *Jennifer's Body*, it maintains a humorously clever bite that makes it worth the watch.

-Lola Crews

■

House

(1977, dir. Nobuhiko Obayashi)

House tells the story of Gorgeous, a young schoolgirl who takes a trip with her friends to her aunt's house in the countryside. They soon realize that there is something very wrong with Gorgeous' aunt, and the house.

House has a very childish and playful

presentation.

Bright and vibrant colors flood the screen, comparable to stained glass in a church. Cheerful music accompanies the characters at every turn, emphasizing the sense of a carefree life. The sky looks like it was stroked by a delicate paint brush. The town that these characters reside in could have been taken straight out of a 5-year-old's drawing, with buildings labeled "Sherif" or "Office." Everything is childish, even to the names of the characters directly describe their one-note personalities: Gorgeous, Melody, Sweet.

As the film sets into Gorgeous' aunt's house, the same music is injected with eerie notes. The house is filled with faded whites and grays. Eventually, the film bounces from scene to scene, presenting horrific cheesy high jinks after horrific cheesy high jinks. The house is a nightmare, but a nightmare dreamt by a child: dancing skeletons, flying heads, man-eating pianos, the list could go on. Creativity in this film is lacking nowhere.

The use of practical effects are great. Though the effects looked very aged, the film uses it to its advantage, in order to display how bizarre the situation the characters are in. *House* is an incredible psychedelic, horror experience that scares, but also one that reignites abnormal



childish fears that the audience could make up from their now dimmed imaginations.

-Gael Guadarrama

■

Later, we are all alone. One by one, we pass away.”
 “Life is hard.”
 -Flora Farkas

■

Our Hero, Balthazar
 (2026, dir. Oscar Boyson)

Unsettling and apathetic Balthazar (Jaeden Martell) lives in immense privilege in a high-rise in midtown Manhattan, and *Our Hero, Balthazar* follows his obsession with performative activism online.

When a crush at his school shows interest in advocating for stricter gun laws in the wake of a school shooting in Arkansas, Balthazar becomes consumed with the idea of school shootings and what could cause a person to want to, in his words, “do a school shooting”.

After connecting online, Balthazar drops everything to meet in person an anonymous user, Solomon, who claims to be planning a shooting at his local elementary school. Balthazar underestimates the deep rooted instability within Solomon and, in turn, within himself.

Oscar Boyson, known for producing popular indie films such as *Frances Ha*, *Good Time*, and *Uncut Gems*, creates an explosive and strikingly unapologetic story; *Our Hero, Balthazar* is an indie gem unlike anything I have seen recently. From its first



shot—showing Balthazar fake-crying for Instagram in front of a tripod—the film establishes a uniquely bleak tone, aided heavily by Martell’s cold performance. He is singlehandedly carrying the first portion of the film, having to make a very unlikeable character satirical and funny while also serving as a criticism of social media culture and America’s problematic mindset.

-Tess Nicholas

■

Forbidden Fruits
 (2026, dir. Meredith Alloway)

Meredith Alloway’s *Forbidden Fruits* is a campy, femme, and devilishly fun ride set in Texas, following a coven based in a mall after hours. The arrival of Pumpkin (Lola Tung), a new employee, sets off a series of humorous and twisted events.

Headed intensely by Apple (Lili Reinhart), a Regina George-esque figure, Cherry (Victoria Pedretti), and Fig (Alexandra Shipp) dress colorfully and embrace each other in sisterhood; they don eponymous charms and carry out their femininity freely.

The characters aren’t

a lot of close up shots, ambience, and dramatic one-scene monologues, it didn’t hide the raw inevitability of the story.

We see the main character, Dum, a nonchalant vigilante with a big heart—a man of little words—develop from boy to man in a variety of time jumps showcasing his relationship with Rumpoey and the progression of his gangster status—we learn how he became this mysterious gunslinger, after avenging his father’s death. The film constantly interrupts what the viewer wants to happen, like the couple kissing or finding a chance to be together.

For a time where happy endings and rom-coms were taking over cinemas and audience expectations, the cinematography of *Tears of the Black Tiger* was intentional: Rumpoey, stands in the rain waiting for Dum, her pigmented makeup and dress overlaying a mellow, faded background as a picture falls directly to the ground in a graceful and perfect trail—a portrait of herself, a symbol of love for her childhood lover. The perfect timing and framing of the falling image creates a “hopeless romantic” appeal. Maybe the audience would get to see Rumpoey and Dum after all.

Overall, *Tears of the Black Tiger* does an amazing job portraying a fairytale love story through a lens of fabricated and exaggerated aesthetics, like seeing a glimpse of Barbie dolls going rogue.

-Nehemiah Cooley

■

REC
 (2007, dir. Paco Plaza and Jaume Balaguero)

REC follows Angela Vidal, a local news anchor, and Pablo Rosso, her cameraman, as they film a local news special following a crew of firefighters over the course of a night.

Angela and the cameraman go around the firehouse looking for things to record. They get some footage, but nothing special, until the first call of the night comes in: an elderly woman is screaming at the top of her lungs, stuck in an apartment.

Angela, Pablo, and a few firemen rush over with some police officers and find her covered in blood. When one of the police officers tries to approach her, she bites him in the neck. The scene dissolves into chaos: they rush downstairs to get him help, but they are locked inside the building, unable to leave a military-enforced quarantine, and start to panic.

The police officer is in critical condition, the crazed elderly lady is still somewhere upstairs, and they realize a virus turns people into zombie-like creatures with superhuman strength. Between the zombies and the government preventing the spread of the mysterious illness, they have to face many things as they figure out what is going on and escape the building.

I really enjoyed *REC*. The plot is simple, but it works. It’s impressive how truly horrifying an experience they are able to make using only the inside of an apartment building: the relative closeness of everything creates the feeling that they are never safe and only a few steps away from death.

The visuals are very interesting, and the color grading is simple, but fits the vibe of the movie



very well. The graininess adds to the creepiness. But what really stands out is the videography: seeing the world through the character's point of view creates a lot of tension, which makes the jump scares extremely effective.

With only Angela and Pablo left, the final 5-10 minutes of the movie are the most notable. They get so close to escaping, until they come face to face with a horrifying creature. While running away, Angela drops the camera; all you see is her being dragged away by the creature.

REC was a lot of fun to watch, and I would definitely recommend it to anyone who wants to watch a short but scary horror movie.

-Decker Jennison

■

Memories of Murder

(2003, dir. Bong Joon-Ho)

It's a small province of South Korea in 1986. There have been two murders.

Local detectives Park Doo-man and Cho Yong-koo are trying to solve the case. More murders start happening.

Seo Tae-Yoon, another detective, is called in from Seoul to aid the investigation. They are hunting down one of the first documented serial killers of South Korea.

Visually, *Memories of Murder* is very dirty. Certain places you'd expect to be clean (a doctor's office, a school, a sick woman's bedroom) are very grimy and gritty. The lighting makes a lot of scenes grayish. Everything is dulled, muted.

The film is always building anticipation. It leads you to believe they have caught the killer, it leads you to think one person is going to be killed, or the detectives have finally acquired evidence

that will crack the case. Throughout the film, certain moments seem to be calling out to you to look harder, just like the detectives: the killer is not only taunting the detectives but the viewer too.

The comedy in this film is well placed and used as relief for rather dark moments. Most of the humor was physical action—slapstick and irony—but the ending of the film gave my stomach a sick feeling, physically and mentally. It helped add to the fear and nervousness the entire film created.

-Izzy Miranda

■

Jacob's Ladder

(1990, dir. Adrian Lyne)

When demons begin following him, Vietnam War veteran Jacob Singer struggles to differentiate reality from delusion.

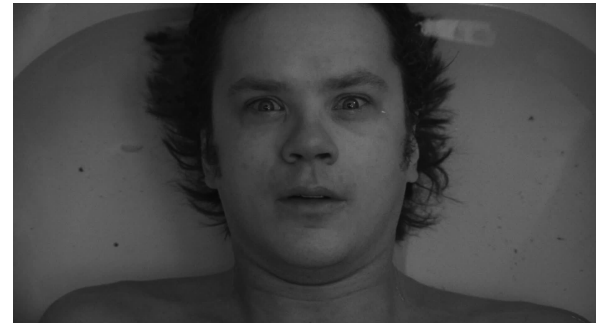
It starts fairly straightforward; a scene from the war, Jake on his way home from work, him with his girlfriend. Something about these moments doesn't feel quite right, though. As it begins to slowly devolve into increasingly profound and disturbing imagery, Jake seems to lose his grip on



reality. He's becoming paranoid that people—or demons, or some combination of both—are following him. Had the

government done something to him in the war? Who can he trust? He's running out of people who will hear him out.

Even the more mundane scenes have a feeling of uncertainty, as though you are being followed: the whole film has an edge of discomfort and distrust. Interestingly,



a lot of scenes that you might expect to be from Jake's perspective are focused on his face rather than from his point of view. Instead of showing you the things he is seeing, or the things he is unable to remember, they show you his reaction. A small detail that is incredibly effective, as it takes you out of it for a moment, and makes it feel as though someone is recounting a series of events, telling you a story.

Jacob's Ladder was released in 1990, with this in mind, it does not come across as too dated or at all limited by its time. It has that distinct early 90s feel that suits the film perfectly; a little grainy, no CGI—it even features Macaulay Culkin!

There's a charm to it, it's personal, angsty, a little messy. So much symbolism is packed into this film, making it a little hard to follow at times, but it is very intentionally put together; similar to a dream in that, when you wake up, you can remember the general idea, some key moments, but you know much more happened that you cannot remember.

A beautifully crafted psychological horror set in New York City in the 70s, *Jacob's Ladder* is unsettling, uncomfortable, and a little confusing; a film very deserving

of a watch and a rewatch, to catch every handcrafted detail that was put into it.

-Saskia Walsh

■

Cuba and the Cameraman

(2017, dir. Jon Alpert)

I genuinely loved *Cuba and the Cameraman*, a 45-years-long documentary started by Jon Alpert in the 1970s. It and was the best documentary I saw this year. Jon interviews strangers in Cuba, talking about their lives, their struggles, and thoughts about the revolution as years go by.

Jon returns and reunites with them and asks them the same questions as before to see what changed in these Cubans' lives during the revolution, in good times and hard times. He captures the beginning of the revolution, led by Fidel Castro, till his final days. Jon talked to Fidel Castro, interviewing him. It made Fidel a normal man and funny, which surprised me.

The documentary was so raw and real; seeing Jon creating a strong bond with the Borrego brothers—Angél, Gregorio, and Cristobal—was so wholesome and emotional at the end.

"What happened to Cristobal?"

"I'm all alone."

"Gregorio also died? You're the only one left. Only you."

"They were always wonderful. They always wanted us to be together. We never separated. I always took care of them. They treated me like their mother."

"Your brothers were my friends. I thought I was going to get to see them one more time. I'm sorry."

"I never had a chance to say goodbye to the brothers."

"Life is short. Little by little, we fade away. We are born together and happy."