

# LXXXI Venice International Film Festival

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The 75<sup>th</sup> Venice Film Festival unfolded along a spectrum between two extremes: the rigid narrative structure of Alfonso Cuarón's *Disclaimer*, and the excessive and unclassifiable nature of Harmony Korine's *Baby Invasion*. In both cases—albeit for different reasons—we are confronted with the notion of cinema seeking new ways to explore the present elsewhere, relocating itself beyond its traditional forms (Casetti 2015). While Cuarón guides the viewer through an unsettling exploration of the capacity of evidence to recount a traumatic past, juxtaposing different testimonial regimes (from documents to victim narratives), Korine literally detonates the cinematic form, taking it even further than in his previous work, *Aggro Dr1ft* (2023). In *Baby Invasion*, editing appears to relinquish its traditional ordering function in favour of a continuous livestream. Here, vaporwave aesthetics and generative artificial intelligence's ability to alter faces and spaces transform the film into an almost hallucinogenic experience. This elicits a bodily reaction in the viewer, reminiscent of Williams's (1991) observations on "body genres".

Despite their formal differences, these two works share a capacity to depict a world "out of bounds", facing an imminent crisis that can no longer be postponed. Many of the films presented in Venice appear to engage with the notion of an impending end, urging us to consider the present and the future in light of an unavoidable trauma and a necessary rupture. In this sense, Thomas Vinterberg's foray into televised drama with *Families Like Ours* (*Familier som vores*) is emblematic in its depiction of the dissolution of

social bonds in the face of ecological collapse. As Denmark dissolves and homes are abandoned, the director's unflinching social critique highlights the fragility of our beliefs, as epitomised by a gay couple sheltered by their class privilege who strive to defend a border that no longer exists.

The imminence of the end, which is cosmological in Vinterberg's view, also runs through some of the most hotly debated films at the festival, albeit in a more individual way. In *Maria* (directed by Pablo Larraín), the existential arc of "la Callas"—masterfully portrayed by Angelina Jolie—is presented as a spectacular hallucination. Here, the approach of death blurs the boundary between reality and delirium as the character is consumed by her own spectrality, in a fully Fisherian sense (2013). The peril of life-consuming risk lies also at the heart of the widely discussed *Babygirl* (Halina Reijn), where it is not the heavily publicised erotic element that strikes the viewer most, but rather Nicole Kidman's performance, which skillfully captures the complexities of mature stardom.

Moving towards an ideal synthesis of the themes found in the films of Larraín and Reijn is *Queer* (Luca Guadagnino), one of the director's most intriguing works and an adaptation of Burroughs' 1985 homonymous novel. The relationship between Lee (Daniel Craig) and Allerton (Drew Starkey) is presented in a structured series of chapters that gradually emphasises the impossibility of desire and the power dynamics it inevitably entails. Their journey into the jungle in search of Yagé provides an opportunity to explore the capacity of cinema to capture the spectrality of desire, a theme



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further enhanced by Guadagnino's sophisticated use of superimposition to visualise the rhythms of love and imagination.

Traces of Guadagnino's influence can also be seen in Giovanni Tortorici's debut feature, *Diciannove*. This film stood out for its deeply personal reworking of coming-of-age tropes, which were used to portray the malaise of a generation unable to find its place in the world. Harmonising influences from television seriality with the legacy of a courageous strand of Italian cinema, the film delivers a personal yet stylistically mature work.

Less acclaimed during the festival but certainly deserving of attention is *Joker: Folie à deux*, in which Todd Phillips continues his personal deconstruction of the DC character by pairing him with Lady Gaga in an unusual pop musical. Though it was met with undue critical coldness, the film impresses with its complexity and postmodern flair, playing with audience expectations shaped by his previous *Joker* (2013).

By contrast, *The Room Next Door*, recipient of the Golden Lion, was met with an almost unanimous praise. This powerful melodrama uses strict compositional and aesthetic rigour as a backdrop to a profoundly emotional story, with outstanding performances from Tilda Swinton and Julianne Moore. Building on the trajectory of *Dolor y gloria* (2019), Pedro Almodóvar creates a suspended space for a story set entirely in the present, in which the anticipation of death becomes a real ordering principle.

The documentary section remains one of the most compelling parts of the festival, and one of the most appropriate audiovisual styles for exploring the complexities of our time. Within a highly varied line-up, where archival footage is frequently used as a tool by which to analyse the contemporary world, Errol Morris's *Separated* stands out for its overtly political nature. Focusing on migrant family separations at the US–Mexico border, the film dares to speak out against practices that often transcend the

bounds of legality, using powerful testimonies and emotionally charged reenactments.

Equally compelling is *Israel Palestina på svensk TV 1958–1989* (Göran Hugo Olsson), which is a notable example of cinema's political significance. Spanning 206 minutes, the film presents archival footage from Swedish television on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict which inevitably intersects with well-known contemporary events. The excavation of archives and the editing of diverse, unaligned materials becomes a genuine act of care, demanding that filmmakers and audiences take a position and engage in an interpretative process that cannot be postponed. The same impulse also animates *Russians at War*, a compelling documentary that chronicles Anastasia Trofimova's extended presence on the Ukrainian front alongside the Russian army. By progressively immersing herself in the mindset of the soldiers and sharing with them a space where her life is constantly at risk, the filmmaker reveals a hidden aspect of the conflict, filling a significant void in the war narrative and presenting the human side of an army comprised of traumatised individuals on both sides, all of whom are part of a hopeless youth.

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