

Final Thoughts on â??The Mostly Virtualâ?? AFI FEST 2020

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

AFI FEST 2020 presented by Audi attracted the largest national audience in its 34-year history.



Michael Lumpkin, Director AFI Festivals

â??With an audience of more than double from last year, we welcomed over 200 filmmakers and guests from around the world for Q&As and panels,â• said Michael Lumpkin, Director AFI Festivals. â??This yearâ??s festival was truly a celebration of film across the country with festival-goers joining us online from all 50 states.â•

I concur. Thank you to Michael and the entire AFI FEST team for making this yearâ??s â??mostly virtualâ?? festival top-notch!

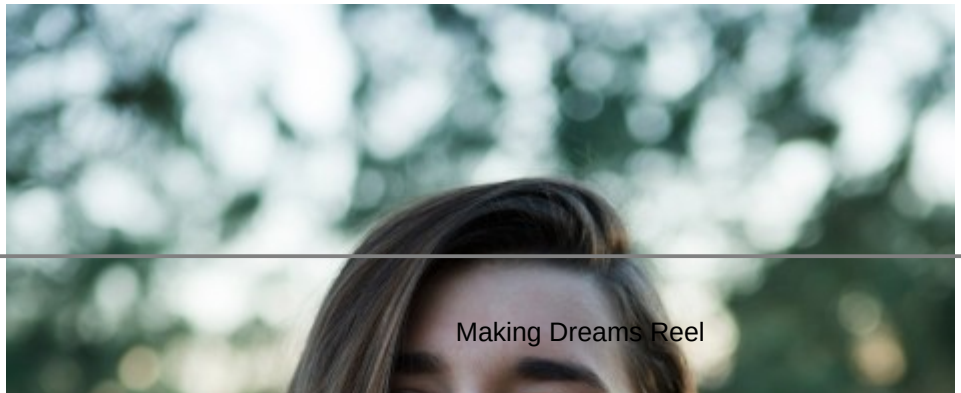


Sofia Coppola shares a photo during her 2020 AFI FEST Tribute

Highlights of the 2020 festival included a Centerpiece Drive-in screening of ONE NIGHT IN MIAMIâ?¦ (DIR Regina King) at the Rose Bowl; the World Premieres of Iâ??M YOUR WOMAN (DIR Julia Hart), PINK SKIES AHEAD (DIR Kelly Oxford) and REALLY LOVE (DIR Angel Kristi Williams); screenings of highly anticipated films including COLLECTIVE (COLLECTIV) (DIR Alexander Nanau), THE FATHER (DIR Florian Zeller), I CARRY YOU WITH ME (Heidi Ewing), MY LITTLE SISTER (DIR StÃ©phanie Chuat, VÃ©ronique Reymond), NEW ORDER (NUEVO ORDEN) (DIR Michel Franco), NINE DAYS (DIR Edson Oda) and WOLFWALKERS (DIR Tomm Moore, Ross Stewart); a conversation with Dr. Stacy Smith on the portrayal of characters with mental health conditions in film and television; a discussion with the director and cast of SOUND OF METAL with the Deaf community; a conversation with Academy AwardÂ® nominee, producer, director and writer Ava DuVernay about elevating and supporting BIPOC filmmakers; the Indie Contenders and Doc Roundtables; and Tributes to Sofia Coppola, Kirby Dirk, Mira Nair and Rita Moreno.

Additional Highlights

A few of my favorite additional highlights included *Elle,* an AFI Conservatory Showcase selection. *Elle* is a coming-of-age story and character-driven drama that explores themes such as self-discovery, unrequited love, and the ambivalence and intimacy that exists within female friendships. In the Directorâ??s Statement, AFI Conservatory Alumna, Nicole Vanden Broeck writes,



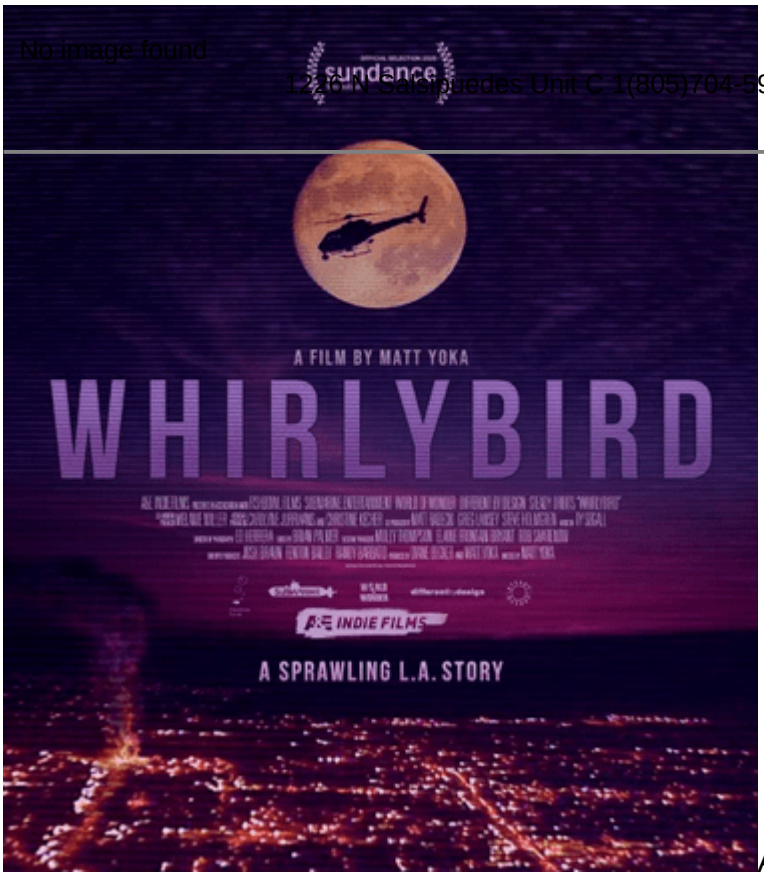
Nicole Vanden Broeck

â??I have always believed in the power of cinema to comfort us, to tell us that we are not alone, that others have felt what weâ??ve felt, that we share our struggles and our heartbreaks, that there is someone out there that understands.â?•



Elle

Technically and artistically, *Elle* hits all the marks. Strong cinematography by Guido Raimondo. Warm and intimate production design from Evan Welch. Seamless editing (Chris Tenzis, Editor). Believable and highly naturalistic acting with Sarah Sawyer as Elle and Ron Dadon as Sam. And, an emotionally rewarding narrative written by Vanden Broeck and Asher Jelinsky and a beautiful mise-en-scene to match. Gabrielle Cordero produced *Elle*. Highly recommended with a runtime of twenty-one minutes and a team to keep an eye on!



At the Virtual Industry and Filmmaker Mixer, I had the pleasure of connecting with Matt Yoka, director of *Whirlybird*, his feature documentary on the pioneering and groundbreaking TV aerial news reporting team of Bob Tur and Marika Gerard. Yoka crafts his work from 2,000 hours of recorded flight tape, direct interviews, news archives, still photos, and more. The result is a dynamic visual history of the biggest Los Angeles news events in the last 30 years including the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 and the pursuant, criminal assault of truck driver, Reginald Denny, at Florence and Normandy after the Rodney King beating verdict and subsequent acquittal of the four white police officers charged. And, if that wasnâ??t enough the duo broke and captured the infamous O.J. Simpson â??White Broncoâ?? car chase which became â??the apex of live news coverageâ?• with approximately 80 million viewers tuning in. A must-see!



Whirlybird

While I didnâ??t get an opportunity to connect with Sean Penn during the mixer, I did view *Citizen Penn.* Iâ??ve long been a fan of Sean Penn as an actor beginning with his Mick Oâ??Brien role in the 1983 *Bad Boys* and I was semi-aware of his Haiti relief efforts in 2010. As an Army Reservist, my battalion was on alert for deployment. In the documentary, Director Don Hardy, sometimes eloquently and sometimes pragmatically, reveals Sean Penn has diligently changed his image through Pennâ??s extensive efforts to aid assistance to his fellow â??manâ?? in war-torn, disaster-laden, disaffected countries beginning in 2002 with the war in Iraq right up to the current COVID-19-infected United States.



Citizen Penn

Utilizing a plethora of photographs, direct interviews, and archival news footage, documenting the devastation and suffering along with footage from one camera operated by a Haitian police officer who accompanied Penn at all times following the countryâ??s 2010 earthquake. Penn was adamant about his efforts not being used for overt publicity but allowed the official to have and operate a camera at his own discretion. Penn stayed on the ground for several months returning often guiding not only relief efforts but also debris and gravel removal. More recently, Penn began hosting an annual gala raising several million dollars from a limited guest list as his efforts are taking root. Highly recommended and quite compelling. A must-see!



Left to right, Meet The Pressâ??s Chuck Todd, and The Reagans Director, Matt Tyrnauer.

THE REAGANS (DIR Matt Tyrnauer), presented by Meet the Press and Chuck Todd, screened Parts 1 and 2 of this compelling and extremely timely re-examination of President and Mrs. Reagan. Chock full of evocative archival footage and illuminating contemporary interviews, THE REAGANS asserts Nancyâ??s central role in her husbandâ??s career, shines a light on the darker aspects of the Reagansâ?? climb to power, and provides a revelatory perspective on how the political tactics used in the â??60s and â??70s are a progenitor of our current national politics. The screening was followed by an in-depth conversation between Chuck Todd and Tyrnauer as they discuss the subjects, several of the Reagan biographies, and Tyrnauerâ??s previous documentary, *Whereâ??s My Roy Cohn.*



Belushi

Belushi, from Showtime Documentary Films, directed by award-winning, filmmaker R.J. Cutler, reveals the complicated, singular, and too-short life of a beloved American icon who helped change American culture and comedy, John Belushi, a once-in-a-generation talent who captured the hearts and funny-bones of audiences around the world. From his early years growing up in Wheaton, Illinois, Belushi showed an extraordinary talent for comedy and music. But, it was a visit to the Second City theater in Chicago where Belushi established himself and from that moment on he became an unstoppable and pioneering force in the comedy world. His audacious rendition of Joe Cocker singing the Beatles â??With A Little Help From My Friends,â?• proved to be the star shot launching pad. Cutler utilizes still photos, archival footage, home videos, animation, and telling letters from John to his high school sweetheart girlfriend and later wife, Judy, that paint a picture of Belushiâ??s passion, love, and humanly struggles.

Belushiâ??s insatiable drive for success and fame kept the candle burning at both ends. When his acting attempts in *1941*, *Neighbors,* and *Continental Divide* failed to provide him the accolades of *The Blues Brothers and Animal House*, Belushi sought consolation and creativity in dark habits as he continually pushed himself for greatness. As a performer, John Belushi grasped the importance of developing and recreating himself on stage and felt a high degree of compulsion to do this on the big screen. Belushiâ??s ambitious drive and need for approval reached its limits on March 5, 1982, at the

hotel Chateau Marmont in West Hollywood. Belushi was found alone, not breathing, and unresponsive. The coronerâ??s report stated the cause of death was â??acute cocaine and heroin intoxication.â?•

Cutler captures what John Belushi was as a performer and scratches the surface of who Belushi was as a person. Told linearly using previously unheard audiotapes, the film also examines Belushiâ??s life in the words of his collaborators, friends, and family, including Dan Aykroyd, Jim Belushi, Penny Marshall, Lorne Michaels, Carrie Fisher, Chevy Chase, Harold Ramis, Jane Curtin, Ivan Reitman and his wife, Judy Belushi. As much as I enjoyed experiencing his comedic genius again, there is more to John Belushi than what appears in this screening of *Belushi.* Yet, Cutler does an excellent job of creating a framework of understanding some of the comedic legendâ??s motivation and unmet needs with a well-researched and documented biographical treatment. *Belushi* is scheduled to launch on November 22, 2020, on Showtime. Highly recommended.



Wander Darkly

Thriller/Drama *Wander Darkly*, is as good a film as Iâ??ve seen this year. Written and directed by Tara Miele, and starring Sienna Miller as Adrienne and Diego Luna as Matteo, *Wander Darkly* is a surreal journey into conflict resolution between a young couple following a traumatic car accident. On its most basic level, *Wander Darkly* is a relationship film challenging boundaries while seeking the answer for continuity. In a very non-linear approach, the couple relives the past through the duality of their shared moments including fond memories from the initial courtship through the truths of the present as they attempt to rediscover the love that binds them together as they face an uncertain future. Miller in a tour de force performance crushes it as Adrienne pulling out all the emotional stops exploring grief, joy, and love. *Wander Darkly* is scheduled to be in select theaters, on digital, and on-demand on December 11th. Check it out! Youâ??ll be glad you did!



Uncle Frank

Uncle Frank, an Amazon Original Film, starring Paul Bettany, Sophia Lillis, Peter Macdissi, Steve Zahn, and Stephen Root (*Office Space*), and directed by Alan Ball, tells the story of a young, rural South Carolinian woman, Beth, (Sophia Lillis) a precocious spirit with a connection to her rarely seen Uncle Frank.

When a death in the family occurs, Beth and Uncle Frank embark on a road trip back to South Carolina delving into deep interpersonal dialogue on sexuality and death before being unexpectedly joined by Wally. Along the rest of the way, Beth is exposed to bigotry, homophobia, and a warm, loving relationship. Once she and Uncle Frank are back in small-town, rural Creekville, South Carolina, the past reveals itself, and moments for self-reflection and overcoming imposed beliefs come to pass.

Uncle Frank, a character-driven drama, is quite entertaining and could easily pass for a period piece, much like *Green Book*, with its costuming by Megan Stark Evans, production design by Darcy C Scanlan, its superb cinematography by Khalid Mohtaseb, and with the layered narrative (screenwriting, Alan Ball) dealing with family, remorse, death, loss, same-sex relationships, religion, as well as social norms and beliefs in the Deep South.

Seeing Bettany cast had a lot to do with my viewing selection of *Uncle Frank*. And, he doesnâ??t disappoint as he carries the heaviness, the emotional weight, of *Uncle Frank*. My hatâ??s off to Casting Director, Avy Kaufman *(Brokeback Mountain).* Bravo! *Uncle Frank* is scheduled for a U.S. release (internet) on November 25th, 2020, and is a beautiful, entertaining film. Very warmly recommended viewing!



MY PSYCHEDELIC LOVE STORY

The Closing Night Presentation was the World Premiere of MY PSYCHEDELIC LOVE STORY (DIR Errol Morris), followed by an interesting conversation between Indiewireâ??s Ann Thompson and Morris (available along with 69 other conversations here.) In MY PSYCHEDELIC LOVE STORY, Morris delivers a tell-all story of Johanna Harcourt-Smith, a once young, Swiis born, Paris-raised, jet-setting, an aristocratic, Jewish woman who cavorted with the high priest of LSD, Timothy Leary. *My Psychedelic Love Story* is the story of Harcourt-Smith and Oâ??Leary as they circumvent extradition



two-month period before Leary is extradited back to the
ne time there was much speculation Harcourt-Smith was
HEDELIC LOVE STORY will be airing on Showtime!

Wolfwalkers, an Apple Original Film from Cartoon Saloon, the Kilkenny, Ireland, the animation studio that previously produced *The Secret of Kells* (2009) and *Song of the Sea* (2014) completes an Irish folklore animated trilogy spanning slightly more than ten years.

Wolfwalkers is set in 17th-century Ireland, a time of great change with successive transfers of land from catholic to protestant ownership and where administrative and political power passed into the hands of a new English minority (Irish Historical Studies, Vol. 15, No. 60, Sep 1967, pgs. 366-375). Literary references to the Arthurian Camelot myth and to historical figure Oliver Cromwell are smoothly incorporated as well. Moore and Stewart encapsulate this situation in a magical friendship that develops between two young girls, Robyn and Mebh.

Wolfwalkers, steeped in historical significance, is one of the most breathtakingly beautiful films I have had the pleasure of viewing and experiencing and itâ??s a film the whole family can watch! *Wolfwalkers* is set to be released theatrically on October 30, 2020, by WildCard in the United Kingdom and Ireland, and on November 13, 2020, by GKIDS before debuting on Apple TV+ on December 11, 2020.

Stay tuned for the upcoming holiday film guide!



HollywoodGlee celebrating the start of the 2019 AFI FEST presented by Audi. (Photo credit: Larry Gleeson)

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Tags

1. #NicoleVandenBroeck

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