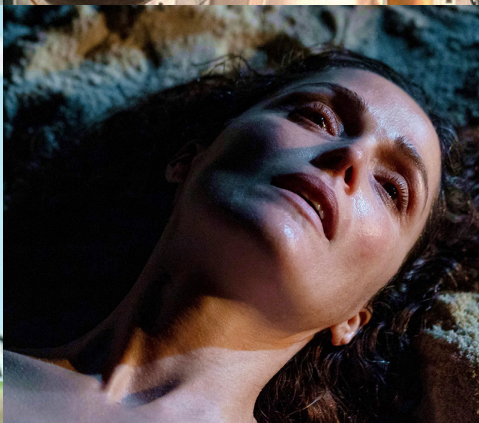
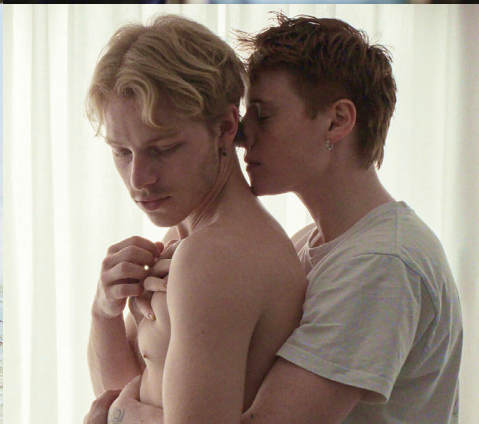


THE FILM

VERDICT

TFV CRITICS PICK THEIR TOP 2025 INTERNATIONAL FILMS

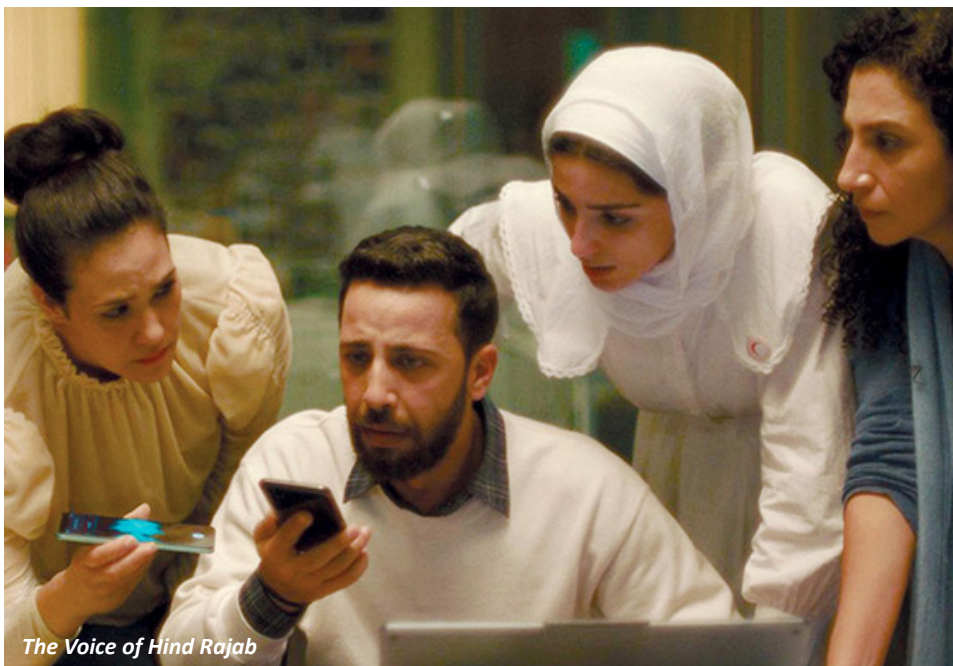


TFV International Picks from 2025

VERDICT: Films that mattered in 2025.

As The Film Verdict rips through its fifth year of publishing reviews that illuminate the films that matter, we want to take a moment to look back over 2025 and highlight some of the many excellent features, documentaries and shorts we've come across in our festival journeys around the world. While our L.A. reviewer Alonso Duralde has a long history of Top Ten list-compiling, this is the first time the international critics at TFV have sorted through more than 400 reviews to present our global recommendations for the most memorable titles of the year.

We are living through a momentous time of worldwide social and political change fired by wars of aggression, so it is not surprising that many of the top films reflect an anguishing malaise. But other notable titles take off in different directions, surprising in their exotic narratives and stylistic whimsy.



The Voice of Hind Rajab

In this special issue, TFV's global network of film critics gives their unique, wide-angle perspective on new international cinema that we hope you will enjoy. Our recommendations follow.

Deborah Young, editor

THE VOICE OF HIND RAJAB

(Kaouther Ben Hania)

Ben Hania established herself as Tunisia's politically attuned, stylistically forward voice of modernity with *Four Daughters* (2023), the true story of a family split

asunder when the two eldest daughters become radicalized and join an extremist Islamic group. The film's canny mixing of actors and the real protagonists is a dress rehearsal for the daring conceit in *The Voice of Hind Rajab*, which pairs the real-life audio of heart-breaking telephone calls of a small Palestinian girl trapped in a car with her dead family, and a re-creation by actors of her attempted rescue by the Red Crescent. This tremendously moving reenactment bowed at Venice and has shaken audiences to the core wherever it has played, revealing the simple truth about Israel's war with Gaza with an emotional power and directness that cannot be denied. —*Deborah Young*

THE TESTAMENT OF ANN LEE

(Mona Fastvold)

Writer-director Mona Fastvold's gloriously bizarre avant-garde musical biopic stars Amanda Seyfried as 18th century female religious leader Ann Lee, messianic founder of the "shaker" sect. Filmed with the same freewheeling stylistic flair as her collaboration with husband Brady Corbet on *The Brutalist* (2024), but thankfully without the same undertow of grandstanding pomposity, Fastvold's unorthodox passion play celebrates Lee's legacy as a trailblazing proto-feminist who was ultimately sunk by her own obsessive, puritanical zeal. Seyfried's explosively energetic, all-singing, all-dancing star performance is a pure joy. —*Stephen Dalton*

Continued on next page



The Testament of Ann Lee

Continued from previous page

MY FATHER'S SHADOW

(Akinola Davies Jnr.)

At Cannes last year Alice Rohrwacher, as head of the Camera d'Or jury, referred to *My Father's Shadow*, the debut feature of Nigerian-British director Akinola Davies Jnr, as a "ghost story". In the film, a busy father goes to the city with his two kids against the backdrop of Nigeria's 1993 presidential elections. Those familiar with Nigerian politics know the outcome of those elections, a matter that adds a tragic poignancy to the father's declared hopes for the country his children will inhabit. The film's delicate surrealism suggests Rohrwacher was right—the film is indeed a ghost story—but *My Father's Shadow* is also a love letter to a country, and a dream, that never emerged.

Honourable Mention: **MATABELELAND**
—*Oris Aigbokhaevbolo*

SENTIMENTAL VALUE (Joachim Trier)

Art and life can often intertwine in painful ways, as is the case in Joachim Trier's father-daughter story about a filmmaker (Stellan Skarsgård) who struggles to reconnect with his estranged firstborn (Renate Reinsve) after having been an absent parent for years. As he tries to set up a new project, with the main role intended for her, the layers of artifice and sincerity overlap to create an increasingly affecting exploration of the relationship between creativity and familial affection, as well as a witty metaphor for Nordic co-productions (the director is Swedish and his main producer Danish). Bonus points for Skarsgård's "Where else?" in response to a question about his film – a Netflix production – playing in theaters, a line that has become more relevant in light of the streamer's recent interest in purchasing Warner Bros. —*Max Borg*



Put Your Soul on Your Hand and Walk



Sentimental Value

SIRAT (Oliver Laxe)

Sirat (the very narrow bridge between hell and heaven) has been called the most controversial film of the last Cannes festival. Director Oliver Laxe works with producers (the legendary Esther García, among others) who give him the freedom to be daring, imperfect, to use naturalistic actors and make a film with a very tenuous storyline and no ending. As Homer teaches us, it's the journey and not the destination that matters. The first, very powerful scenes depict a rave in the Moroccan desert, where Luis (Sergi López) and his son Esteban (Bruno Nuñez) arrive like aliens from another civilization. They are looking for Luis' daughter. In the middle of the rave, some soldiers appear to take the Europeans to a safe place. It seems the feared total war is near. When tragedy strikes it's a punch in the gut. The consequences and following punches are so quick that they leave us numb. *Sirat* is not a masterpiece but a much-needed cinematographic experience, and for me, that's better. —*Lucy Virgen*

PUT YOUR SOUL ON YOUR HAND AND WALK (Sepideh Farsi)

A devastating yet profoundly human portrait of life under siege in Gaza is shaped through intimate, pixelated WhatsApp calls with photojournalist Fatma Hassona. What defines the film is not only horror, but the stubborn persistence of everyday life in its shadow: laughter over oversized sunglasses, carefully chosen hijabs, children playing hopscotch beside

ruins. The imperfections — frozen frames, garbled audio when bombs fall — pull us closer rather than distancing us. Fatma's journalism is rooted in home, where the front line is family and friends. There is no dramatic score, no commentary, only her matter-of-fact voice describing airstrikes and loss with the tone of everyday conversation. The tragedy of her death hangs over every frame, yet what lingers is vitality. Not a symbol or statistic, but a full, complex person — funny, talented, flawed, and vibrantly alive — whose presence turns cinema into an act of responsibility and remembrance. —*Adham Youssef*

BELEN (Dolores Fonzi)

Belén is based on the true story of a woman accused of having an abortion after suffering a miscarriage in Tucumán, Argentina, in 2014. Attorney Soledad Deza defended Belén in what became a cause célèbre that energized the women's movement and ultimately led to the legalization of abortion in Argentina. Writer-director Dolores Fonzi plays the lawyer defending Belén, and Camila Pláate, who plays the accused, won Best Supporting Performance at San Sebastian. The film conveys the tensions and difficulties of the struggle, as well as the determination of the many women who rallied behind the victim of an abusive system. Belén also defies the current challenges of filmmaking in Argentina, after President Javier Milei cut all public funding to the national film institute INCAA. —*Patricia Boero*

Deborah Young: A Memorable Five from 2025

VERDICT: A trip to Mecca, an escape from Venezuela and a very old tree.

SILENT FRIEND (Ildikó Enyedi)

As magically engrossing as the firm embrace of ancient tree roots, *Silent Friend* accomplishes the remarkable feat of turning a meditation on time, nature, neuroscience and interspecies connections into a stirring adventure of ideas. Written and directed by Hungarian master Ildikó Enyedi, this is a totally original, time-spanning story set in three historical moments that are connected by the towering presence of a Ginkgo biloba tree clocking the centuries. Hong Kong star Tony Leung Chiu-wai arrives in a quiet German university as a visiting professor — just in time for COVID-19 lockdown — and makes the telephonic acquaintance of tree expert Léa Seydoux. A film for all ages and tastes



DEBORAH YOUNG, EDITOR & SENIOR CRITIC, is an American writer, film critic and festival director based in Rome. In 2008 she became The Hollywood Reporter's international film editor; formerly, she served as Variety's bureau chief in Rome. She directed the Taormina Film Festival for five years and has been a programming consultant for the Tribeca Film Festival and the Venice Film Festival, among others. Her first novel, *Pirates in Black Tie*, is published by Europe Books. As a screenwriter and adapter, Deborah has contributed to key Italian films including Ermanno Olmi's *The Legend of the Holy Drinker*, the Taviani brothers' *Good Morning, Babylon* and Valerio Zurlini's *Across the River and Into the Trees*.

from sci-fi to gardening, it should have no trouble crashing the art house barrier.



HIJRA (Shahad Ameen)

Three women's journey to Mecca becomes a stunning allegory on life in Saudi director Shahad Ameen's bewitching road movie *Hijra*. Incorporating something of the mythic dimension of Ameen's first feature *Scales*, this complex, layered film offers the viewer different doors of entry. On a hot, dusty bus ride to visit the holy site of Mecca, an elderly woman and her two teenage granddaughters go through a severe trial, when the rebellious older sister suddenly vanishes at a rest stop. Using faces and landscapes, coupled with naturalistic performances from a perfectly chosen small cast, Ameen offers a penetrating, multifaceted portrait of women caught up in Arab culture without resorting to clichés, and reaching high into the sky with an unforced spiritual dimension.

IT WOULD BE NIGHT IN CARACAS (Mariana Rondon, Marité Ugas)

Set against the riots and civil unrest of 2017, *It Would Be Night in Caracas* is a wrenching, atmospheric escape thriller brought to the screen by Mariana Rondon and Marité Ugas. Dark and grim, this fast-paced tale shows how Venezuela's political crisis has transformed the country into a violent outlaw state and couldn't be more topical. The story is told through the terrified eyes of Adelaida (Natalia Reyes), who comes home from burying her mother to find her apartment occupied by a pro-regime female militia, and a dead body in the neighbor's apartment where she takes refuge. With all exits out of the country shutting down, she makes a daring bid for freedom. A must-see for background on the current political upheaval.

IT WAS JUST AN ACCIDENT (Jafar Panahi)

Film by film, Jafar Panahi has become increasingly direct and outspoken about the blatant trampling on human rights in Iran. But never has this masterful filmmaker, who has himself spent time in Evin prison, been more explicit in denouncing the torture of political prisoners than in *It Was Just an Accident*. The film's mixture of humor and tenderness with anger and drama creates a fable-like dissonance and distance from the viewer, even while it raises the stakes in attacking the Iranian regime and the violence it perpetrates on its citizens. The film's uniqueness lies in its choice to focus on the lasting psychological damage done to the victims of torture and their painfully impotent fantasies of revenge on their captors — if only they could find them. It won the Palme d'Or at Cannes.



ORWELL: 2 + 2 = 5 (Raoul Peck)

"Ignorance is Strength," proclaims the omniscient Big Brother in 1984. "War is Peace." In Raoul Peck's dark and timely documentary *Orwell: 2+2=5*, the director of *I Am Not Your Negro* limpidly shows how these bombastic oxymorons exemplify the shift towards authoritarianism taking place in democratic societies today. The film's explicit critique of Donald Trump, whose image appears frequently, hammers home America's dive into fascism. A militant film structured around the life of English visionary George Orwell, author of prescient political fantasies like *Animal Farm* (an allegory of Stalinism in Russia) and *1984*, it is designed to arouse political outrage and involvement in the audience — and for the most part it succeeds spectacularly. Peck pulls no punches.

Stephen Dalton's Five Favorites from 2025

VERDICT: An SF comedy, a doc on a Ugandan poet and Kirsten Stewart's directing bow.

IF I HAD LEGS I'D KICK YOU

(Mary Bronstein)

Mary Bronstein's wildly original dark comedy depicts high-anxiety parenthood as a surrealistic nightmare. Breaking out of her anodyne rom-com lane with all guns blazing, Rose Byrne stars as the super-stressed mother of a teenage daughter with a disturbingly vague eating disorder. Producer credits include Bronstein's husband Ronald and his frequent collaborator Josh Safdie, lending heavyweight indie pedigree to this audaciously weird, highly entertaining genre mash-up.

BULK (Ben Wheatley)

After flirting with mainstream Hollywood success on the blockbuster shark thriller *Meg 2: The Trench* (2023), British indie auteur Ben Wheatley returns



STEPHEN DALTON, SENIOR CRITIC, has been writing professionally about cinema and music for over 30 years, including for *The Hollywood Reporter* as a regular film/theater reviewer and occasional columnist. He has written extensively for *The Times of London*, where he was a daily TV film columnist for 12 years, *Sight and Sound*, the BFI (British Film Institute), and the UK film and music monthly *Uncut*. His work has also appeared in *The Guardian*, *Rolling Stone*, the *Evening Standard* (London), *Wallpaper*, *New Musical Express*, *The Quietus*, *Electronic Sound*, *Classic Rock*, *The National* (UAE) and other publications. He is based in London.

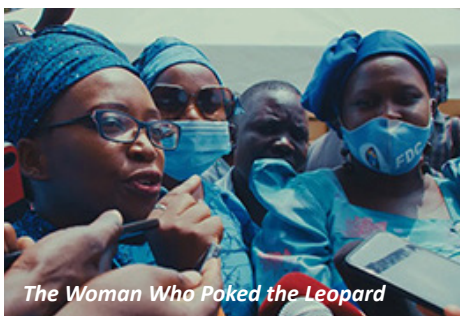


to his lo-fi roots with this darkly comic sci-fi meta-mystery about three characters trapped inside an endless quantum loop. Post-modern narrative in-jokes, mind-bending plot twists and purposely cheap-looking visual effects make this Wheatley's most thrillingly experimental, daringly imaginative work for years.

THE WOMAN WHO POKED THE LEOPARD

(Patience Nitumwesiga)

Director Patience Nitumwesiga's assured debut feature is an intimate, highly entertaining documentary portrait of Ugandan poet, academic, ex-convict and political activist Dr. Stella Nyanzi. A one-woman Pussy Riot and compelling force of nature, Nyanzi proudly pursues a strategy of "revolutionary rudeness" against repressive patriarchal authority figures, most notably her country's long-serving president Yoweri Museveni.



THE CHRONOLOGY OF WATER

(Kristen Stewart)

It divided critics in Cannes but actor turned film-maker Kristen Stewart's feature directing debut is a stylistically dazzling treat, adapted from writer Lidia Yuknavitch's emotionally wrenching 2011 memoir of the same name. Starring Imogen Poots on revelatory form, K-Stew's powerful, haunting psychodrama replicates the book's sense-blitzing effect using non-linear narrative, woozy voice-over, disruptive sound design, high-art visuals and hyper-intense staccato edits.



BETTER GO MAD IN THE WILD

(Miro Remo)

Mischievously interweaving fly-on-the-wall reportage with magical realism, Czech director Miro Remo's prize-winning documentary delivers an intimate, tragicomic portrait of two deeply eccentric twin brothers who share a remote, crumbling farmhouse full of memories and regrets. Loosely adapted from a non-fiction book of the same name, *Better Go Mad in the Wild* is a lyrical, hugely charming real-life fairy tale narrated by a talking cow.

Ben Nicholson's Five Favorite Shorts of 2025

VERDICT: Those permanently online. A ghostly atmosphere. An SF documentary.

COMMON PEAR (Gregor Bozic)

There is a whole world of amazing hybrid sci-fi documentaries out there and Gregor Bozic's *Common Pear* uses the trope to make a disappearing way of life into the content of some imagined dystopia's celluloid archive. An act of witnessing shot on luminous 16mm stock, the traditional fruit growers of Western Slovenia are charmingly captured and then cast against a threatening and uncertain future.

COYOTES (Said Zagha)

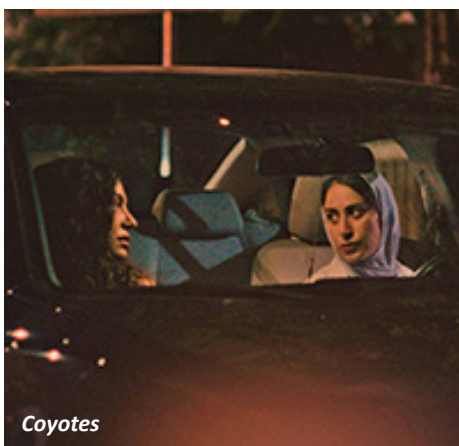
Darkness punctuated by glowing car headlights and the sounds of unseen predators give *Coyotes* its irresistible atmosphere. This is the life of fear lived by many Palestinians re-framed as a gripping neo-noir and I've returned to it several times since it premiered at Venice in August. A flat tire leads to game of cat-and-mouse as pervasive anxiety sees someone pushed to – or perhaps past – breaking point.



BEN NICHOLSON is a writer and curator whose words have been published in *Sight & Sound*, *Mubi Notebook*, *Little White Lies* and *Hyperallergic*, amongst others. He has programmed for Sheffield Doc/Fest and the London Short Film Festival and in 2019 founded Alt/Kino, which screens and discusses experimental film and artists' moving image. Ben has led TFV's four-year push to show respect for short films with full-length reviews and credits. To date, TFV has published 200 of Ben's short film reviews.



Happiness



Coyotes

HAPPINESS (Firat Yucel)

Firat Yucel's desktop documentary *happiness* is one of those films that perfectly encapsulates the experience of so many people in the contemporary world – permanently online and incapacitated by the emotional turmoil of what they're seeing happen around them 24/7. It's funny and painfully sharp in its observations, expertly conveying very specific but familiar feeling and even, maybe, proffering a little hope.

HILL STATION

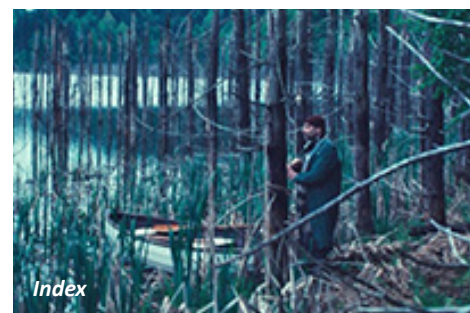
(Ed Lawrenson and Killian O' Dochartaigh)

An enclave in Freetown, Sierra Leone, is the ostensible subject of Ed Lawrenson and Killian O' Dochartaigh's *Hill Station*. It explores the way this community was constructed, on a plateau overlooking the city, using specifications about malaria prevention to aid its European settler inhabitants. The film collapses time and

geography – visiting the buildings now and exploring calculated colonial health inequality through this specific, enduring artefact.

INDEX (Radu Muntean)

There are few images as striking across the short film landscape in 2025 as the ghostly emergence of the person living in the woods in *Index*. The whole film is mired in a dusky half-light that creates an oppressive atmosphere even before night fully descends. A sort of two-hander thriller, what begins as very observational becomes somewhat more unsettling and dangerous as it continues.



Index

Lucy Virgen: The Most Necessary Films in Latin America and Spain

VERDICT: Films with unusual form, unique content, that gave hope in 2025..

In the convulsive and divided 2025 world, one frequently read in reviews the phrase, "this is the film we need now". This phrase was generally associated with comedies. Yes, we need laughs, smiles at least, but we also need films unusual in content or form, original in their representations, or able to give us hope. Here is a personal list of the best and most "necessary" films in Latin America and Spain now.

SIRAT (Oliver Laxe – Spain)

The first, very powerful scenes of *Sirat* take place at a rave in the Moroccan desert, where Luis (Sergi López) and his son Esteban (Bruno Nuñez) arrive like aliens



LUCY VIRGEN is an engineer, journalist, film critic, programmer, and she is a founding member of the Center for Cinema Studies at the Universidad de Guadalajara. She has written for several daily news outlets and magazines and works extensively in radio. Lucy has sat on many international film festival juries. She is the founding editor of the online magazine *The Thinking Eye*. She was the artistic director of the Festival Internacional de Cine en Guadalajara from 2006 to 2010. She has worked with the Ventana Sur film market in Argentina. In 2023 Lucy became Editor of TFFV's CINEVERDICT, a Spanish language review section.



from another civilization. They are looking for Mar, Luis' daughter. This is a real rave, so nothing is stylized. Luckily, Laxe teams with producers that gave him the freedom to be daring, imperfect, to work with naturalistic actors and make a film with a very tenuous narrative line, without a clear end. The music from Kanding Ray is a perfect complement to the cinematography by Mauro Herce.

O AGENTE SECRETO

(Kleber Mendonça Filho – Brazil)

The Secret Agent uses humor and irony to recreate the hardships of the dictatorship in the 1970's. In those days a secret agent could be anybody: a university researcher, a professor, an elderly landlady... The great Kleber Mendonça Filho directs Walter Moura, two Brazilian stars that no festival can resist. The memory of past dictatorships is especially timely today for those who flirt with autocratic governments.

EN EL CAMINO (David Pablos – Mexico)

Is love possible amid narco, bullets, revenge and 18-wheeler trucks? Mexican director David Pablos's answer is a strong "yes" in his film *On the Road*, which won the Orizzonti Award in Venice and Fipresci Award in Havana. An LGBT+ road movie that also explores the journey of desire, it tells the story of Muñeco (Osvaldo Sánchez) and Veneno (Víctor Prieto), a long-distance driver and a hustler.

HISTORIAS DEL BUEN VALLE

(Jose Luis Guerin – Spain)

Stories of the Good Valley is a mosaic of stories about Vallbona (Good Valley in Catalan) on the outskirts of Barcelona, and its inhabitants. Spanish director Jose Luis Guerin did a documentary -a mix of observation and talking heads- about the history and everyday life of a place when solidarity and lack of prejudice allows locals and migrants from all the world live, suffer and have fun together.



SI NO ARDEMOS COMO ILUMINAR LA NOCHE (Kim Torres – Costa Rica)

Latin American cinema always needs renovating with invigorating new faces. If *We Don't Burn, How Do We Light Up the Night* is a remarkable first film from a country with little film production. Director Kim Torres carefully avoids melodrama and delivers a coming-of-age tale in rural Costa Rica where Laura, the main character, must decide if a series of feminicides have a supernatural or a human cause.

Max Borg's Five Nordic Picks

VERDICT: Religious sects, queer romance, a European actioner and more.

SAUNA (Mathias Broe – Denmark)

Queer romance with a twist: a cisgender gay man's world is turned upside down when others start shunning him for falling in love with a trans man. First-time director Mathias Broe draws achingly compelling performances from his two young leads, Magnus Juhl Andersen and Nina Rask, and deftly explores the complexities of Copenhagen's LGBTQ+ community.

SISU: ROAD TO REVENGE

(Jalmari Helander – Finland)

Aatami Korpi (Jorma Tommila), the taciturn one-man army who decimated a squad of Nazis in 2022's *Sisu*, is back for a second serving of ass-whooping, this time on Soviet turf against the man (Stephen Lang) who slaughtered his family. High-octane filmmaking of the finest variety, with Jalmari Helander once again confirming



Sauna



Max Borg is Finnish-born, Swiss-based journalist who joined The Film Verdict as a Feature Writer in August 2022, covering international festivals via topical stories and interviews. He writes for various print and online publications in Switzerland, Italy, Denmark and the US, and has served on critics' juries in Venice, Toronto, Zurich, Karlovy Vary and Gothenburg, among others. His specialist subjects include Swiss and Nordic cinema, genre films, and festivals. He also works as a translator and writer for the Locarno Film Festival, most notably as part of the editorial staff of the in-house Locarno Daily.

he's one of the more intriguing names in European genre cinema.

THE GROUND BENEATH OUR FEET

(Yrsa Roca Fannberg – Iceland)

Seasons pass within the confines of a Reykjavik retirement home, where the director carefully documents the everyday routines of the residents, some of whom are almost a century old. A lovingly realized portrait of a generation that hasn't lost its spark, even as their bodies begin to wobble more than usual.

SOLOMAMMA

(Janicke Askevold – Norway)

Single motherhood (by choice) undergoes a singularly thorny transformation in Janicke Askevold's sharp sophomore feature, where a journalist (brilliantly played by Lisa Loven Kongsli) crosses ethical boundaries to figure out the identity of the sperm donor (Herbert Nordrum) who fathered her son. Funny and thoughtful in equal measure, especially when the two leads share the screen.



*Jalmari Helander,
director of Sisu:
Road to Revenge*

RAPTURES (Jon Blåhed – Sweden)

Loosely inspired by real events, Jon Blåhed's depiction of a religious sect in the northernmost part of Sweden is a riveting character study and a fascinating exploration of a linguistic minority: this is the first mainstream feature film where the dialogue is largely spoken in Meänkieli, the local dialect rooted in Finnish with some influence from Swedish.

Clarence Tsui: Five Asian Favorites from 2025

VERDICT: Japanese kabuki artists, women's solidarity in India and the chaos of Chinese history.

THE WORLD OF LOVE (Yoon Ga-eun)

Can a victim of rape laugh, be good at sports, go on dates or – heaven forbid! – speak freely about her past? From the title of her third film onwards, Korean filmmaker Yoon Ga-eun subverts the clichés of rape-victim drama by having her protagonist do all that and more. Driven by a nuanced screenplay and a complex performance from first-time actor Seo Su-bin as a teenager who refuses to be told about how to live her life, *The World of Love* is erudite, empowering and emotionally charged throughout.



The World of Love

KOKUHO (Lee Sang-il)

Never mind all that noise about Japanese box-office records being broken. What matters here is Lee Sang-il's brilliance in offering at once an epic, decades-spanning chronicle of a part-brotherly, part-bitter and always all-consuming relationship between two kabuki artists, and a delicate representation of a very traditional Japanese art form which has always appeared in the global imagination as merely cul-

tural exotica. Zeroing in on an outsider's struggle in a world of long-standing hierarchies, *Kokuho* adds yet another chapter to the Korean-Japanese director's reflections about the struggles of suppressed minorities in Japan.

THE RIVER THAT HOLDS OUR HANDS (Chen Jianhang)

Here's a film that ebbed as quickly as it appeared in an out-of-competition slot flowing through the Busan sprawl. Which is a shame: Chen Jianhang's Hong Kong-Vietnamese-Korean first feature, revolving around a string of characters' transnational pursuit of a past marked by war, political turmoil and the simple passing of time, is a visually mesmerizing ode about the chaos underlining contemporary Chinese history and the banishment and forgetting of vernaculars in the country.

SONGS OF FORGOTTEN TREES (Anuparna Roy)

A moving yet unsentimental piece about the blooming bond between two marginalised migrant workers struggling to stay afloat amidst the bright yet brutal lights of Mumbai, Anuparna Roy's first feature picks up the baton from last year's *All We Imagine As Light* and signals the rise of emancipating female-solidarity films in Indian cinema, with powerful performances from Naaz Shaikh and Sumi Baghel as two young traumatized women seeking control of their bodies and emotions in the hustle and bustle of urban India.

ANOTHER BIRTH (Isabelle Kalandar)

Driven by Forugh Farrokhzad's evocative poetry and images which matched those verses stanza by stanza, Isabelle Kalandar's self-produced debut is a melancholic yet captivating ode to grief and loneliness in the rugged landscape of rural Tajikistan – as seen through the eyes of a young, curious yet headstrong eight-year-old girl brought vividly to life by debutant Shukrona Navruzbekova.



Another Birth



CLARENCE TSUI, CONTRIBUTING CRITIC, is a Hong Kong-based film critic, programmer and part-time lecturer. He has written for *The Hollywood Reporter*, *South China Morning Post*, *Cineaste* and *Film Quarterly*, and has served on juries at Cannes, Berlin, Rotterdam and Tokyo. He is currently the director of the Broadway Cinematheque and the Hong Kong Asian Film Festival. He teaches at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Adham Youssef Picks MENA Titles Worth Remembering

VERDICT: Refugees of the Sudan civil war, missing family members and remodeling a cinema.

BABA WA GADDAFI (Jihan El-Tahri – Libya)

Searching for her missing father Mansour Rashid Kikhia, director Jihan El-Tahri presents a film shaped by absence, despair, and hope. El-Tahri makes sure her family's story is told within the political history of modern Libya, before and after Muammar Al-Gaddafi's rule. The film allows uncertainty and partial testimony (as many family discussions go) to give it a moral weight, suggesting that forced disappearance is not an isolated tragedy for one family, but a political epidemic that has plagued the nation.



ADHAM YOUSSEF is a film researcher and critic with deep interest in Middle East and African cinema. He is a contributing critic with The Film Verdict, and other international publications such as The Africa Report and The Guardian. He regularly collaborates with Egypt-based film festivals including The Luxor African Film Festival and the Ismailia Documentary Film Festival, as well as The Cairo International Film Festival where he has been working as a catalogue editor since 2017. He worked with the Durban International Film Festival as a new projects selection member, and participated in Rotterdam International Film Festival's Young Critics Workshop in 2017, Durban Talents in 2020, and the Cairo Critics Week Workshop in 2016. He is also a freelance investigative jour-



The Settlement

THE SETTLEMENT

(Mohamed Rashad – Egypt)

The desire for normalcy collides with the inescapable weight of inheritance. Set in a working-class neighborhood far from Alexandria's romantic image, the film follows Hossam as he is forced to take his dead father's factory job as compensation for a fatal accident. The film avoids easy condemnation of corruption, focusing instead on reintegration, family burden, and fragile attempts at redemption. The factory emerges as a central character: a bleak, post-apocalyptic world of endless labor. Hossam is neither hero nor victim, but an uncomfortable, volatile presence, whose contradictions allow the film an honesty rarely afforded to working-class characters in Egyptian cinema.

EXILE (Mehdi Hmili – Tunisia)

The body of Mohamed, who worked in a large steel factory on the brink of bankruptcy, becomes a battleground for corruption, grief, and uncovering a rotting system. Mehdi Hmili turns revenge into allegory to trace how loss and humiliation turn into resistance, and gives Mohamed agency to become a symbol of the workers' struggle.

HABIBI HUSSEIN (Alex Bakri – Palestine)

Alex Bakri's critical and power-conscious documentary chronicles the restoration of Cinema Jenin. Though it initially appears to be a modest NGO triumph to pump life into a long-shuttered movie house in the occupied West Bank, Alex problematizes the "white man saviour" syndrome, highlighting the unbalanced power dynamics favoring the German team and NGO. Bakri rarely intervenes, allowing awkward and tense conversations, cringeworthy exchanges, small victories, and quiet

humiliations to speak for themselves. This restraint, however, is deliberate and not passive, allowing for empowering storytelling.

LIFE AFTER SIHAM

(Namir Abdel Messeeh – Egypt)

Like Youssef Chahine's autobiographical quadrilogy, which explored his and his family's defeats, shames, and victories, Namir Abdel Messeeh's tender-hearted documentary turns private mourning into a quiet, searching act of cinema. Avoiding sentimentality, the director arrives at the conclusion there is no clear life "after" Siham. His parents don't simply vanish. Their existence passes into stories, pictures, and letters that they leave behind, and most importantly, they pass on their habits and bodies to their children and grandchildren. Abdel Messeeh, like anyone grieving for a loved one, doubles back, contradicts himself, and lets memory remain unresolved



Life After Siham

KHARTOUM

(Anas Saeed, Rawia Alhag, Ibrahim Snoopy, Timeea M. Ahmed – Sudan)

Rather than follow a single narrative, this brilliant documentary describes multiple lives exiled from one's homeland. Sudanese refugees scatter after the start of the 2023 Sudanese civil war. The extremely personal approach allows the four filmmakers to create scenes that alternate between real locations and green-screen animation that visualizes the characters' dreams. The mix of iPhone and professional footage, along with a score that shifts between playful hope and tension, reflects the emotional highs and lows of their journeys. The fourth wall frequently dissolves as the crew and equipment appear on screen and the filmmakers openly discuss reenactments with the protagonists.

Alonso Duralde's Top 10 Films of 2025

VERDICT: 2025 was a calamitous year in many ways, but there were always worthwhile movies to see.

2025 was an exasperating year in general, and films and moviegoing were certainly part of that twelve months of uncertainty. On the one hand, the threat of Netflix acquiring Warner Bros. set off another round of doom-predictions regarding the future of theatrical exhibition and of people watching movies at a multiplex rather than on their couches. On the other hand, Warner Bros. released two movies (*Sinners* and *One Battle After Another*) that actively encouraged viewers to experience them not once but multiple times on the big screen, in a variety of projection formats.



ALONSO DURALDE is TFFV Chief North America Critic, and the former Film Review Editor for TheWrap and the co-host of the “Linoleum Knife,” “Maximum Film!,” “Breakfast All Day” and “Deck the Hallmark” podcasts. Duralde has appeared on TCM and was a regular contributor to Film Struck. He is the author of two books, *Have Yourself a Movie Little Christmas* (Limelight Editions) and *101 Must-See Movies for Gay Men* (Advocate Books), and the co-author of *I’ll Be Home for Christmas Movies* (Running Press). His book on the history of LGBTQ+ Hollywood was published by TCM/Running Press in 2024.



Number-crunchers will observe that ticket sales are creeping back up to pre-COVID numbers, and lovers of film — at least those lucky enough to live near venues that screen arthouse, documentary, and international titles on a regular basis — could at least appreciate that fact that there was always something to recommend throughout the entire year.

My 2025 runners-up (alphabetically): *Art for Everybody*; *The Baltimoreans*; *Black Bag*; *BLKNWS: Terms and Conditions*; *Blue Moon*; *Bugonia*; *Cloud*; *The Damned*; *Dracula* (Radu Jude); *Dust Bunny*; *Freaky Tales*; *Henry Fonda for President*; *If I Had Legs I’d Kick You*; *Kiss of the Spider Woman*; *Little Amélie* or *the Character of Rain*; *The Long Walk*; *Lurker*; *Merrily We Roll Along*; *Misericordia*; *Nouvelle Vague*; *On Becoming a Guinea Fowl*; *One of Them Days*; *Pavements*; *Peter*

Hujar’s Day; *Presence*; *Sorry, Baby*; *Souleymane’s Story*; *Splitsville*; *An Unfinished Film*; *The Wedding Banquet*

10. HAPPYEND

Neo Sora’s tale of high-school students in a Tokyo of the near future standing up to totalitarianism on the macro- and micro- levels provided a much-needed jolt of hope in a year when fascism lurked around seemingly every corner.



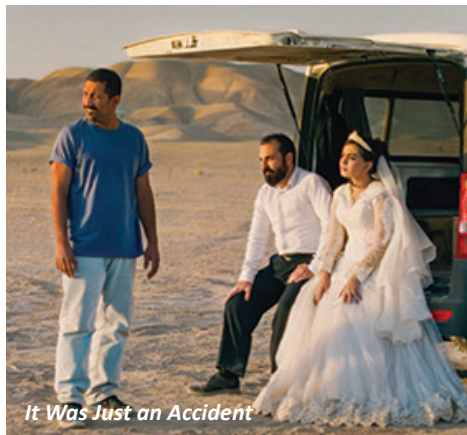
9. A HOUSE OF DYNAMITE

The unspoken layer of dread and tension in Kathryn Bigelow’s nuclear thriller came in imagining members of the current regime being part of life-or-death conversations, but even without that added terror,

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

this breathlessly suspenseful and exquisitely edited tale was a white-knuckler that offered no easy answers or palliatives regarding the global arms race.

*It Was Just an Accident***8. REBUILDING**

Writer-director Max Walker-Silverman followed 2022's *A Love Song* with another low-key and heartfelt look at working-class Americans surviving and planning what to do next with their lives. Josh O'Connor (one of 2025's hardest working and most talented screen actors) leads an extraordinary ensemble, including Meghann Fahy, Kali Reis, Lily LaTorre, and Amy Madigan. (Madigan's Aunt Gladys, from the suspenseful *Weapons*, was one of the year's standouts, launching countless memes and Halloween costumes.)

*Caught by the Tides***7. IT WAS JUST AN ACCIDENT**

Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi continues to tell unfiltered human stories about life in Iran, even as his government constantly threatens to throw him back into prison. But Panahi's movies aren't just brave and daring: they're meaningful, powerful, and insightful, like this story of a reunited group of former political prisoners who are pretty sure (but not 100%) that they've captured their former torturer.

6. ONE BATTLE AFTER ANOTHER

Paul Thomas Anderson's saga of revolutionaries up against the forces of white supremacist patriarchy — both blatant and behind-the-scenes — met 2025's political moment while also redefining the car chase, not to mention crafting some of the year's most indelible characters.

5. TRAIN DREAMS

They don't put up plaques commemorating the men who cleared the forests and

built the railways and otherwise created the United States as we know it, but this gorgeous, minimalist look at the life of a lumberman (a never-better Joel Edgerton) and his loves and labors gave shape and focus to an existence usually ignored by history.

4. CAUGHT BY THE TIDE

Chinese master filmmaker Jia Zhangke crafted a gorgeous and heartbreaking tale of the 21st century by putting together footage of actress Zhao Tao (much of it previously unused, from previous productions) and crafting the story of a separation, culminating in a COVID-era reunion that provided one of the year's most heartbreaking moments.

3. MY UNDESIRABLE FRIENDS: PART I — LAST AIR IN MOSCOW

Documentarian Julia Loktev introduces us to independent Russian journalists, most of them women, during the run-up to the war in Ukraine, and we see the government go from tarring these brave reporters as "foreign agents" to forcing all of them to flee the country for their safety. This five-and-a-half-hour epic (the first in a series) was one of 2025's most breathless thrillers, and a haunting glimpse at the price of speaking truth to power.

2. EEPHUS

Two local baseball teams gather at a local ballpark in the late 1990s for the very last time, since the park is about to be demolished for the construction of a school. That's all that happens in this baseball comedy, but as with *Christmas Eve in Miller's Point* (which *Eephus* director and co-writer Carson Lund shot), it's less about plot and more about the melancholy of a ritual that is coming to an end.

1. SINNERS

Whether you saw it in IMAX, 70mm, 35mm, digital, or (as Jesse Plemons recently confessed to doing) on an airplane, there's no denying the majesty of Ryan Coogler's period piece about twin gangsters (both played by Michael B. Jordan) returning to Mississippi after surviving the First World War and the mean streets of Chicago. *Sinners* is a musical, and a horror movie, and a cultural history, and a drama about racism, and that just scratches the surface of all the ideas this glorious movie manages to wrap its arms around. Its success as a non-IP film with a cast principally composed of actors of color stood out as a moment of hope for the movies, now and in years to come.

*One Battle After Another*