



## Polls

# The female gaze: 100 overlooked films directed by women

In this list we aim to write women back into film history by championing 100 female-directed hidden gems that have been forgotten or unfairly overlooked – with contributions from Jane Campion, Greta Gerwig, Claire Denis, Isabelle Huppert, Agnès Varda, Tilda Swinton, our regular contributors listed below and many more special guests.

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# Sight&Sound



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In 1968 Ida Lupino was the sole female director to merit an entry in Andrew Sarris's auteur bible *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. Lupino's films were dismissed in a sentence; the rest of Sarris's pithy capsule drew attention to a "ladies' auxiliary" in cinema, listing notable female directors of the silent era and later, as well as those "the jury is still out on" (Shirley Clarke, Vera Chytilová and Agnès Varda among them). Dorothy Arzner, who directed 13 films after 1929 (plus two she was not credited for), only gets mentioned as an auxiliary.

Although he didn't question why there was such a paucity of female directors, Sarris at least highlighted the fact at a time when few others did, and extended his search for them beyond the US. However he needlessly resurrects Lillian Gish's statement about directing being no job for a lady, and hardly skewers it ("Simone de Beauvoir would undoubtedly argue the contrary").

Female directors didn't fare much better in the pages of *Sight & Sound* in those years (despite a female editor, Penelope Houston), although when their films were released in

the UK they received their due reviews in the then quarterly's sister publication, *Monthly Film Bulletin*.

Before the 1980s, of those filmmakers Sarris notes, only Chytilová, Varda and Leni Riefenstahl had features written about them in *S&S*, in addition to animator Lotte Reiniger, the Russian auteur Larisa Shepitko and avant-gardiste Maya Deren, who he didn't. The first time Shirley Clarke's career was appraised in these pages was in 1998, in her obituary.

Much vital work has been done since by critics, film historians, academics and programmers to write female filmmakers back into history. The damage, though, is deep-rooted. In April this year *Vanity Fair* credited Lupino as "one of the first" female directors "to crack the whip", ignoring predecessors such as Alice Guy-Blaché and Lois Weber, who were working up to 50 years before her.

As Mark Cousins points out in his *Dispatches* column this month (see page 11), depressing female filmmakers working today, and the (justified) internet outrage they provoke, tend to obscure those filmmakers who have gone before. Other than decrying the status quo and highlighting and critiquing new films by female directors, what can a film magazine do? Well, one option is to cast light on great female-directed films that have slipped through the net of male-auteurcentred criticism and such canon-forming exercises as *Sight & Sound*'s *Greatest Films* poll.

With that in mind, contributors to this feature – who range from filmmakers to critics, academics to programmers – were asked to nominate a film by a female director they believe has been forgotten or unfairly overlooked.

In August 2007, *S&S* produced a similar 'Hidden Gems' issue, unearthing 75 lost and forgotten films by men and women, which shone a light on, among others, Nicole Védres's *Paris 1900*, Sally Potter's *The Gold Diggers* and Barbara Loden's *Wanda* (discussed on page 24 by Isabelle Huppert).

In recent years more underappreciated films by women have resurfaced, such as Claudia Weill's *Girlfriends* (explored on page 27 by both Greta Gerwig and Allison Anders). We were never in any doubt that there were more out there.

This list's focus is primarily the 20th century – before the democratising advance of digital technology made it easier for women to make films, and the galvanising force of the internet enabled a wider critical advocacy; but also to ameliorate short-term memory syndromes.

The list is dominated by features, since these need more money and support of the kind that's been in short supply for female directors since the silent era – in the world of avant-garde short films, by contrast, women have faced men on more equal terms, and have enjoyed more success and critical esteem.

'Forgotten' and 'overlooked' are nebulous terms, particularly in the internet age, when everything is supposedly rediscovered, and our list of 100 films reflects that – including both undeniable obscurities (*The Enchanted Desna* by Yuliya Solntseva, who was namechecked by Sarris merely as "Dovzhenko's widow"), as well as films by relatively lauded directors (such as Elaine May and Kira Muratova) that are either hard to find or not regarded nearly as highly as we feel they should be.

Sadly, a far simpler proposition would be to note those female filmmakers who are appreciated, and whose work is regularly seen in cinemas – though such a shortlist might reveal still deeper problems, dominated as it would be by white Europeans and Americans.

Few female filmmakers have had the luxury of making more than a couple of features. So how do you achieve auteur status with so few films to your name? And how much more quickly do your films fade from history as a result? As the number of films listed here by actresses turned directors shows, women have often had to acquire power in front of the camera before being allowed behind it.

Also included are films that stood at the edges of famous movements in cinema (Jacqueline Audry's *Les Petits Matins* and the French New Wave, Lorenza Mazzetti's *Together and Free Cinema*, Li Hong's *Out of Phoenix Bridge* and China's New Documentary Movement), which were obscured by the work of more renowned and prolific male directors.

Revealing, too, is the surprising number of female filmmakers who died tragically young: Barbara Loden, Sara Gómez, Kathleen Collins, Larisa Shepitko, whose films are highlighted here, but also Nicole Védres and Forough Farrokhzad.

Of course, looking only at directors masks those women who work in other film industry roles – particularly those in the silent era, when women played a major part in all facets of filmmaking. As the only two female directors working in the Hollywood studios from the 1930s to the 60s, Ida Lupino and Dorothy Arzner were obviously important, but their careers don't tell the whole story of women's work and influence in the dream factory (see Mark Cousins's previous S&S Dispatches columns on female editors or Lizzie Francke's

excellent book *Script Girls*). Nor should it obscure the fact that women were making great films outside Hollywood at that time – in the UK, Norway, Mexico, China and beyond.

Time for a disclaimer: this list is far from definitive, but we hope it gives a sense of some of the great, unduly neglected films made by women throughout film history from all over the world – and of the many others

— *Isabel Stevens*

## 1. The Girl Spy Before Vicksburg

*Sidney Olcott & Gene Gauntier, US 1910*

Although Sidney Olcott is traditionally listed as the sole director, we need to remember that when the film was made, moving picture work was highly collaborative and screen credits did not yet appear, so advancing Gene Gauntier under the category of 'director' of any of her Kalem Company films is intended to challenge assumptions about early cinema 'job' descriptions.

Gauntier's *The Girl Spy Before Vicksburg*, one of her three cross-dressing action heroine shorts, predates *The Perils of Pauline*-type serial queens and is a forerunner of the American visceral 'sensation cinema' so admired by Sergei Eisenstein. The extant film, held in Amsterdam's EYE Film Institute, epitomises the fast-action exploits and explosions she innovated.

Dressed as a Confederate soldier, the girl spy plants an explosive in a Northern supply wagon and runs forward in the frame, ducking into the tall grass in the foreground just as the wagon explodes in the background – in one shot. This scene might have been one of those recalled in her 1928 memoir *Blazing the Trail*: "They never seemed difficult when I was seated before the typewriter in the throes of creating them, but as the moment for performance drew near they assumed unwarranted aspects of terror."

— *Jane Gaines*

## 2. Suspense

*Lois Weber & Phillips Smalley, US 1913*

Suspense (1913)

The techniques designed to create suspense in thrillers – as used, for instance, by Alfred Hitchcock – were developed in this short film. When a roving tramp threatens a woman and child in an isolated house, a real-time chase ensues, with the woman's husband racing back from town to save her while the tramp slowly makes his way through the house. One truly terrifying scene in close-up has the tramp's arm groping for the lock through a hole punched in the door in a "Here's Johnny!" kind of way.

The tension comes from cross-cutting between simultaneous actions, increasing the pace through the editing rhythm, innovative perspectives and thought-through narrative logic.

Suspense is a highly condensed film in which not a frame is wasted – indeed, in one celebrated scene, exposition is further condensed even within the frame, which is split three ways to show three concurrent actions. The fact that the audience knew what was going to happen didn't stop them being terrified, which is the trick that thrillers and horror films have pulled off ever since.

— *Bryony Dixon*

### 3. The Ocean Waif

*Alice Guy-Blaché, US 1916*

Where Alice Guy-Blaché's status as a film pioneer is acknowledged, she is credited with directing the first narrative film, *La Fée aux choux*, in 1896. *The Ocean Waif* (1916), a five-reel romcom made at her own production company Solax in the US 20 years later, reveals her dexterity with story, but above all her affinity with actors.

The woman who posted the instruction 'Be natural' prominently in her studio directs two now-obscure names, Doris Kenyon and Carlyle Blackwell, as lovers thrown together by chance. She's an abused tomboy teen on the run, he's a fancy novelist looking for a writing retreat, and they meet when they both hole up in an abandoned cottage.

Each half of the couple has equal screen time, but it's Kenyon who radiates as a nicely underplayed fish out of water. The glee with which Blackwell 'discovers' Kenyon is no ghost, but flesh and blood, is infectious.

— *Pamela Hutchinson*

### 4. The Girl in Tails

### *Karin Swanström, Sweden 1926*

Swanström was a Swedish actress, director and later film studio executive who eventually discovered Ingrid Bergman. In this charming film about a small rebellion, she takes the comic and ultimately poignant role of a widow who tyrannises the small-minded, conservative village of Wadköping.

Magda Holm plays the clever and spirited Katja, who, indignant at getting second-class treatment as a girl, attends a graduation ball in her brother's dress suit. Revelling in her new sexy persona, Katja speaks her mind and samples masculine freedoms – cigars, schnapps, a dance with a girl. Ostracised by her shocked neighbours and family, she takes refuge in an idyllic commune for intellectual women.

With its easygoing humour and lovely bucolic setting, the film ends up on the side of resolution and social harmony, but it is the heroine's one, elated night of rule-breaking that makes it memorable.

— *Imogen Sara Smith*

## **5. The Seashell and the Clergyman**

*Germaine Dulac, France 1928*

Dulac remains best remembered for *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, banned in Britain after the BBFC called it “so cryptic as to be almost meaningless”, adding that “if it has a meaning, it is doubtless objectionable”. Its meaning was hotly contested: according to legend, it sparked a near-riot at its premiere in February 1928 as various surrealists objected to differences between her film and Antonin Artaud's scenario about a priest who lusts after a general's wife – despite Artaud recording his satisfaction with Dulac's interpretation.

Before moving into film in 1915, Dulac edited the feminist review *La Française* and wrote plays. She established herself with *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1922), a feminist work about a smart woman in a loveless marriage, and impressed critics with *L'Invitation au voyage* (1927).

*The Seashell and the Clergyman's* poetic qualities shine through: with its simmering sexuality, dream-like overlays and fractured perspectives, it remains the most sensuous attempt to transfer the surrealist sensibility into cinema.

— *Juliet Jacques*

## 6. Knowing Men

*Elinor Glyn, UK 1930*

Noted British-born romantic writer Glyn scripted the 1924 Hollywood adaptation of her notorious 1907 novel *Three Weeks* and is known for coining the 'It' – denoting personal magnetism or sexual allure – of It, the 1927 Clara Bow vehicle adapted from Glyn's novella.

Glyn worked in Hollywood throughout the 20s as a screenwriter, consultant and mentor, nurturing a successful formula of upper-class settings, old romanticism and risqué eroticism in a dozen or so features. She returned home at the dawn of the sound era, supremely confident that her Hollywood know-how would rescue the ailing British film industry; and in 1930, with her own company, produced and directed two romantic comedies at Elstree.

In *Knowing Men*, heiress Korah (Elissa Landi) tries to dodge fortune-hunters by posing as a marquise's companion. The plot might be creaky, but the film is attractively shot, its settings are lavish, the costumes are exquisite, and Landi performs charmingly.

Nevertheless, a female outsider breezing in from Hollywood and telling the Brits how it should be done clearly put backs up, because the film met an excessively hostile reception on its release.

— *Annette Kuhn*

## 7. Merrily We Go to Hell

*Merrily We Go to Hell (1932)*

*Dorothy Arzner, US 1932*

Arzner is not exactly obscure – she reportedly made more pictures in the studio system than any other female filmmaker. *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940) is often considered her classic but *Merrily We Go to Hell* doesn't get the love it deserves. A pre-Code drama dealing with real adult issues and pain (an open marriage, alcoholism, what one will do for love), its pairing of the lovelorn, though never pathetic heiress (Sylvia Sydney) married to the dipsomaniacal, adulterous playwright (Fredric March) is sublime, complicated and



emotional as Sidney also agrees to cheating, to be a modern woman, in alliance with (and love for) her husband.

But it just doesn't work and rather than make March the villain, he's instead a richly conceived, flawed man, not without empathy for his wife Sidney's sad yet hopeful eyes, conveying so much depth. It's astoundingly touching that Arzner knew that March would see this too. So, no victims or devils here, just real live human beings.

— *Kim Morgan*

## 8. La mujer de nadie

*Adela Sequeyro, Mexico 1937*

Sequeyro (1901-92) started her career very early as a film journalist and an actress in silent films. She became the first woman director of Mexican sound cinema with *La mujer de nadie* (Nobody's Wife). She was also the producer, screenwriter, editor and beautiful star of this film set in the 19th century, a melodrama that tells the story of a young woman forced to leave home because her stepfather abuses her. She then receives protection from three bohemian men who give her shelter, fall madly in love with her, and believe her to be their muse. She secretly reciprocates the love of one of her admirers, but decides to leave their house in order not to disturb their brotherly harmony, heading toward a destiny that attests to the triumphant independence of the title.

A year later Sequeyro directed her second and last film, *Diablillos de arrabal* (1938), newly restored, which is a significant predecessor of Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950), in that it dared to portray homeless children in Mexico City. She made both films with her own production company, but their commercial failure led her to abandon directing and return to being a respected film journalist.

— *Daniela Michel*

## 9. Golden Gate Girl

*Esther Eng, US/China 1941*

San Francisco-born Eng (1914-70) brought *Heartaches* (1935) – a Cantonese talkie she co-produced in Hollywood – to Hong Kong in 1936 and subsequently became South China's

first female director. Most of her 11 feature films focus on unfulfilled love and reject conventional portraits of mothers, wives and daughters. Like her Hollywood contemporary, Dorothy Arzner (who, like Eng, was openly lesbian), Eng never compels women to fulfil domestic roles.

After WWII broke out, she directed *Golden Gate Girl* in San Francisco with veteran filmmaker Moon Kwan. The story follows a Chinese-American girl who falls for a Cantonese opera star against her father's wishes and becomes pregnant. After she dies giving birth to a daughter (played by a baby Bruce Lee), the child is left in the care of two men, her father's salesman and cook, but is later reconciled with her estranged grandfather during a fundraising performance for China War Relief.

The film was positively reviewed by *Variety* and praised at home for its "correct ideology and touching plot", showing to audiences across South-East Asia. Sadly, there are no known prints of the film, although copies still survive on VHS.

— *Louisa Wei*

## 10. Homes for the People

*Kay Mander, UK 1945*

Told by producer Michael Balcon at Ealing Studios that she wouldn't be able to control a male crew, Mander went on to direct almost 50 films, although subsequently returned to continuity work, saying that "I palpably had the skills" but couldn't face "battling" to continue directing.

*Homes for the People* (1945) is one of her most radical films – it uses the bold yet simple technique of encouraging five working-class women to describe their living conditions, in their own words. "I call it a muck-up," one of them declares from her kitchen sink about the design of her suburban house.

It's a rare, fascinating glimpse into the everyday lives of ordinary housewives in the 1940s and their hopes for better housing after the war. Mander was one of several British female documentarians of the time – Jill Craigie also puts the spotlight on housing in her stylish dramatised documentary *The Way We Live* (1946), which shows the cramped life of a family in post-war Plymouth.

Earlier, in the 1930s, Marion and Ruby Grierson (sisters of the celebrated John), each made their own films, beautifully combining visual and sound techniques with wit and

penetrating observation.

— *Ros Cranston*

## 11. The Last Stage

*Wanda Jakubowska, Poland 1948*

Dubbed the 'grandmother of Polish cinema', Jakubowska (1907-98) began dabbling in film in the early 1930s and made her feature debut with *The Last Stage*, the first feature-length Holocaust drama.

Set and partly filmed in Auschwitz (Jakubowska and several colleagues were recent inmates), the film was criticised for its pro-Soviet stance and for minimising the Jewish experience in favour of that of Poles and Communists (Jakubowska only ticked the last two boxes herself), but its combination of unflinching brutality and careful anatomising of the camp's complex hierarchies garnered favourable comparisons with Roberto Rossellini's early neorealist features.

Jakubowska made a dozen more films, all neglected today (although this may have more to do with her now unfashionable politics than her gender), but as a professor at the Lodz Film School (1949-74) she had a massive influence on generations of Polish filmmakers

— *Michael Brooke*

## 12. Death Is a Caress

*Edith Carlmar, Norway 1949*

Death is a Caress (Døden er et Kjaertegn, 1949)

*Death Is a Caress* (Døden er et kjaetegn) was the first Norwegian film directed by a woman, and the country's first film noir. It does not look like a noir: flooded with sunlight, the film breathes a clean, healthy northern air, scented with pines and seashore brine.

For a long time, the story does not follow any expected noir formula either. Erik, a handsome young auto mechanic (Claus Wiese), begins an affair with a wealthy married older woman, Sonja (Bjørg Riiser-Larsen). But no murder plot or guilty fight follows; instead there is a matter-of-fact divorce and the lovers marry.

Then, gradually, organically, their relationship starts to sour. They come from different worlds. He is callow, she is hysterical; they have fits of jealousy and sulks; their quarrels begin to turn violent. How a healthy, normal relationship that meets few obstacles ends in despair and blood is the dark thread of this unusual film: an everyday melodrama.

— *Imogen Sara Smith*

## 13. Outrage

*Ida Lupino, US 1950*

A young woman leaves work late one night and walks home whistling gaily, no doubt with happy thoughts of her recent engagement. Making her way down dark passages between industrial units, she hears a voice from the gloom and begins to run. A man doggedly pursues her as she looks for a place to hide; when she accidentally sets off the horn of a truck he closes in, the camera rising rapidly away from the scene to take in a disgruntled resident who leans out of an upstairs window looking for the source of the disturbance.

This compelling scene is the dramatic focus of Ida Lupino's third feature as director, made by her own production company, Filmakers. Inspired by Italian neorealism, British-born Lupino and her husband Collier Young wanted the freedom to make films independently.

She was clearly also keen to tell female-centred stories from the woman's point of view and this tale attempts to portray the profound effect that sexual assault can have. Although the censors excised all references to rape from the script, and the psychology is simplistic and clumsy, the film remains a powerful example of the work of one of Hollywood's pioneer female directors.

— *Josephine Botting*

## 14. Streetwalker

Streetwalker (Trotacalles, 1951)

*Matilde Landeta, Mexico 1951*

Landeta's third film Streetwalker (Trotacalles) was made after the director had worked for many years as an assistant director to some of the most prestigious Mexican filmmakers of the time, such as Emilio 'Indio' Fernandez and Julio Bracho.

Her melodrama explores the vulnerability and inequality of women in post-revolutionary Mexico, via the story of two estranged sisters (portrayed by stunning Czech émigré Miroslava Stern and Elda Peralta), both of whom end up as prostitutes but for very different reasons.

The film openly questions why Miroslava's Elena, a woman who has married for money, and who repeatedly describes herself as "pragmatic", should be considered less of a prostitute than her sister Maria, who has to sell her body cheaply on the streets after being seduced and exploited by a man she thinks she loves.

The film's noir elements – its suggestion that destiny is unavoidable in a society where women are considered to be objects – are quite remarkable. A dispute with government bureaucrats meant this was the last feature film Landeta would direct for almost 40 years, ending the career of the only female director in the Mexican film industry during those decades

— *Daniela Michel*

## 15. The Happy Family

*Muriel Box, UK 1952*

The Happy Family (1952)

Despite much opposition during her filmmaking years, with studio bosses declaring that women did not have the qualities to control a feature film, Box directed and co-wrote an impressive number of British films between the late 1940s and early 60s.

Born into what she called "respectable poverty", Box was committed to giving women and working-class people a voice. In *The Happy Family* (aka *Mr. Lord Says No*) Lillian Lord, after years of being a cleaner, finally owns a shop-cum-house. But compulsory demolition looms, to make way for the Festival of Britain site on the South Bank. Lillian, whose mother was a suffragette, leads her family in defiant protest. With its humour and charm, the film could be the sister project to *Passport to Pimlico* (1949).

Ada, Lillian's unmarried sister, says, "I've had my moments even if I don't brag about them," and this sums up *The Happy Family* and Box's directing in general: unflashy, genuine and bittersweet.

— *Carol Morley*

## 16. The Stranger Left No Card

*Wendy Toye, UK 1952*

When a top-hatted, tail-coated eccentric breezes into town (Windsor, as it happens), the inhabitants quickly warm to his antics and magic tricks. The tone of this accomplished short film – Toye's first – remains jaunty, almost twee, for most of its 23-minute running time, as Alan Badel relishes playing the "remarkable fellow" dubbed Napoleon by the locals. But on day ten of his sojourn, the inane smile fades and the mood darkens as the purpose of the enigmatic stranger's visit is finally revealed.

The film won Best Short Fictional Film at Cannes in 1953 and was much praised by Jean Cocteau, who had met Toye through her work in theatre choreography. Her dance training is vital to her skill as a filmmaker; movement is a strong feature of both this and her 1955 Oscar-nominated short *On the Twelfth Day*.... Toye directed five successful but unremarkable British studio features and contributed the most chilling episode to the horror omnibus *Three Cases of Murder* (1955), but this debut remains her most unusual and brilliant contribution to British film.

—*Josephine Botting*

## 17. A Portrait of Ga

*Margaret Tait, UK 1952*

## + 18. Vincent the Dutchman

*Mai Zetterling, UK 1972*

I want to cheat and suggest two films: not least because they feel like they might form a beautiful double – two jewels.

Scottish director Margaret Tait's miraculous four-minute *A Portrait of Ga* is a haiku from one of the cinema's true poets. The images of Tait's mother's fingertips deftly unwrapping a sticky old boiled sweet from its cellophane, the sunlit hairs on her chin, her dauntlessly magnificent smoking, her leaping uphill towards a rainbow – this is portraiture of an exquisitely lyrical nature, time and love distilled.

I caught sight of Swedish director Mai Zetterling's *Vincent the Dutchman* 30 years ago and have never forgotten it. This is a film I cherish for its rawness and verve, a long, brave

reach for a portrait, not of an intimate, private love, but of an inspiration, an icon, a man only ever sketched obliquely however many times he painted himself.

As Van Gogh, the honest, clear-headed presence of Michael Gough brings a profound intelligence to the question 'how to play'. Zetterling asks further, with frank élan and the help of equally dedicated contemporary artists, 'how to make art and live a life?'. Tender and robust, thoughtful and heartfelt, formally candid and searchingly bright-eyed.

— *Tilda Swinton*

## 19. The Eternal Breasts

*Tanaka Kinuyo, Japan 1955*

Tanaka Kinuyo is best known as the magnetic lead actress in numerous films by Yasujiro Ozu, Mizoguchi Kenji, Naruse Mikio and others, where she tended to be cast as women suffering the constraints imposed by a suffocating patriarchy. Less well known is the fact that she directed six of her own films, at least one of which, *The Eternal Breasts* (*Chibusa yo eien nare*), is pretty special.

Based on a real-life story, the film follows Fumiko, a mother of two dissatisfied with her lot, who discovers an outlet through poetry and divorces her unfaithful husband. Diagnosed with breast cancer, she undergoes a mastectomy that seems to give her a new confidence and lease of life, at least for a while. There's an unsparing frankness and directness to the film, especially around female sexual desire, which feels exhilarating. Towards the end, as death encroaches, Tanaka unleashes some bleak, fiercely potent images that will haunt you for weeks after seeing the film.

— *Kieron Corless*

## 20. Together

*Lorenza Mazzetti, UK 1956*

Free Cinema's Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson would go on to features and fame, but looking back at the first programme of the movement's 16mm short films, held at the National Film Theatre in London in 1956, it is Italian director Lorenza Mazzetti who emerges as the most radical poet of the ordinary.

Her 52-minute study of the friendship between two deaf dockworkers in London's East End is a narrative-tinged piece of street filmmaking, long before hybrids were the norm. The older, more insular of two men is played by artist Eduardo Paolozzi channelling Brando. His younger friend is the curious one with dreams and desires and the camera and soundtrack take his heed, alive to the life they are isolated from.

Mazzetti freewheels with the pair through crowded markets and pubs, follows as they wander desolate bombed streets chased by taunting children and watches as they eat dinner in their boarding house surrounded by hostile gazes. Scriptwriter Denis Horne wanted dialogue but Mazzetti refused; and her melancholy, quiet tragedy is all the more potent, and true to the world of its protagonists, for it.

— *Isabel Stevens*

## 21. Les Petits Matins

*Jacqueline Audry, France 1962*

One of the few female filmmakers in postwar France, Audry directed many popular costume films, but *Les Petits Matins* is resolutely contemporary. It follows Agathe (Agathe Aëms), a young secretary who hitchhikes across France, from Belgium to the Côte d'Azur.

There are at least three reasons to rediscover the film. First is its delightfully irreverent modern heroine, who successfully deflects the unwanted attentions of a litany of male drivers – from cheesy jokes to attempted rape. Second is the roll call of great French actors (including Lino Ventura, Arletty and Jean-Claude Brialy) who play the various characters she encounters. Third it broadens our view of the nouvelle vague, with a film shot on location, with a New Wave actor (Brialy) but centred on a woman who has fun, gets her way and, unlike many New Wave heroines, is not punished for it.

— *Ginette Vincendeau*

## 22. El camino

*Ana Mariscal, Spain 1963*

Mariscal (1923-95) is now primarily remembered as an actress associated with the conservative screen roles of Francoist cinema: girlfriends, wives and mothers who unquestioningly accept the importance of sacrifice to the military duty of restoring order



to a wayward Spain. Her own trajectory, however, defies such a simplistic classification, encompassing roles as the 'other woman', and work as a novelist, screenwriter and director.

*El camino*, her adaptation of Miguel Delibes's 1950 novel, offers a sharp, sly portrait of small-town life dominated by a conservative church seeking to police community morals. The makeshift cinema established in the village allows Mariscal to probe the politics of censorship in Spanish cinema as the parish priest promotes religious biopics he hopes will curb the locals' pre-marital amorous adventures.

The film also features a reference to Mariscal's own 1952 directorial debut, the maligned *Segundo López*, *aventurero urbano*, a portrait of post-war Madrid melding neorealism with the picaresque, which similarly probes the rhetoric of a regime that too often pushed women into narrow roles.

— *Maria Delgado*

## 23. Sparrows Can't Sing

*Joan Littlewood, UK 1963*

Based in Stratford, East London, Littlewood's Theatre Workshop revolutionised British theatre in the 1950s. Its big hit, Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*, was, however, filmed by Tony Richardson, a director associated with the "very middle-class and proper" Royal Court. In 1962, having "never taken so much as a snapshot", Littlewood decided to film another Theatre Workshop production, Stephen Lewis's *Sparrows Can't Sing*, herself. Her freewheeling and collectivist methods collided head-on with the inflexible routines of the industry, and her diary records the experience as "the worst hell that I have ever been in".

The film itself, in which a volatile merchant seaman (James Booth) returns to a straying wife (Barbara Windsor) and a changing East End, is centrally concerned with community as at once nourishing and confining. The conflict between the familiar ways and new alternatives is embodied in Windsor's character, who lives in a towerblock and is first seen in a supermarket.

— *Henry K. Miller*

## 24. The Enchanted Desna

### *Yuliya Solntseva, Soviet Union 1964*

There are few masterpieces harder to access than this 70-millimetre stereophonic poem by Moscow-born Yuliya Solntseva (1901-89), widow of the great Alexander Dovzhenko, who devoted most of her filmmaking career, after playing the title role in *Aelita* (1924), to assisting her Ukrainian husband and then filming his unrealised projects after his death.

I've never seen this subtitled, but Godard's favourite film of 1965 was periodically screened at the Paris Cinémathèque over the following decade, and I've managed to fill in a few details by reading an English translation of Dovzhenko's extended memoir of the same title.

It's a rambling but exalted account of his impoverished rural childhood, where, as in his best features, it becomes impossible to distinguish reality from fantasy or imagination, or pantheistic epic from a kind of music dreamt in images – a reciprocal dance performed by nature, family and other eccentric local touchstones in perpetual, mysterious collaboration. Solntseva brings to this dance muted and shaded uses of widescreen colour and all-enveloping, multidirectional sound that her husband could only dream about.

— *Jonathan Rosenbaum*

## 25. Wings

### *Larisa Shepitko, Soviet Union 1966*

*Wings* (Krylya, 1966)

In *Wings* a female fighter pilot falls back to earth after WWII. No longer wanted by the military, Nadezhda 'Nadya' Petrukhina (Maya Bulgakova) becomes a headmistress. Constricted by civilian life, Nadya daydreams of looping the loop in the clouds, an upsidedown world of space and light that contrasts with the grey reality of bureaucracy and school plays peopled by wooden Russian dolls.

As a portrait of a woman in all her frustration, strength, shrugging acceptance and longing for lost love – both of a flying machine and a man – it is unsurpassed. *Wings* was Russian director Larisa Shepitko's first feature after film school, and her realist style is combined with exquisite cinematography. Shepitko's 1977 drama *The Ascent* won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, and had she not died in a car crash at 40, we

might be talking about her in the same breath as her contemporaries Andrei Tarkovsky and Elem Klimov, who became her husband.

— *Kate Muir*

## 26. Short Encounters

*Kira Muratova, Soviet Union 1967*

Short Encounters (aka Brief Encounters, 1967)

Made in Odessa in 1967, Muratova's first feature *Short Encounters* (also known as *Brief Encounters*) was banned for 20 years and only reached the West during the era of perestroika. A harassed town official (Muratova herself) and a hesitant country girl who turns up on her doorstep secretly share the affections of an itinerant geologist (played by Russian singer-songwriter icon Vladimir Vysotsky), but neither can make him commit.

The film boldly plays around with time, spinning back and forth between then and now, from country to town, the characters closely observed with a nervy camera style and a sculptural use of light. Muratova's sensibility was too wistful for the dictates of socialist realism, and she struggled to maintain a career until the 1990s, since when the films have flowed. The confrontational *The Asthenic Syndrome* (1990) was a defining portrait of the Gorbachev era, in which reality was depicted as far crazier than fiction, and Muratova has constantly juggled with the conventions of cinema in her very human stories.

— *David Thompson*

## 27. La fiancée du pirate

*Nelly Kaplan, France 1969*

A controversial example of counter-cinema, Kaplan's first solo fiction feature deserves a revival. Centring on Marie, daughter of a reputed witch, living with her pet goat on the edge of a rural backwater, it tells a story of gender, sex, power and resistance.

After a motorist kills her mother, Marie learns the arts of seduction, enticing the village's various male inhabitants to her hut in the woods as a means of economic survival. With the villagers in uproar and the abbé threatening damnation, she creates a pagan installation of the consumer goods acquired through prostitution, disrupts a church

service with a recording of her clients' visits, and, after setting fire to her hut, walks into the distance in jaunty Chaplin fashion.

Kaplan's taut control over camera and cutting, along with her surrealist eye for the overdetermined look, gesture or image, mirror the power of Marie's iconoclastic resistance to the hypocrisy of village life. Rather than reaffirming gendered stereotypes, Kaplan animates their core contradictions, exposed by the awakening of her heroine to a magical power associated not only with the natural world but with cinema.

— *Christine Gledhill*

## 28. I Am Somebody

*Madeline Anderson, US 1969*

In 1969 Madeline Anderson was invited to Charleston to film the University of South Carolina's Medical College workers' strike. (All 400 strikers were black and only 12 weren't female.) While it's remarkable to see their actions expand to include Southern Christian Leadership Conference superstars Andrew Young and Coretta Scott King, students, and other labour unions, what defines the film is its narration.

Striker Claire Brown reflects upon the personal toll the strike took, as well as the contradictory nature of "our" ante-bellum heritage. Directly addressing the tourists who visit Charleston's picturesque historic mansions – but never see the abject poverty, only blocks away, of those who created and maintain that beauty – her calm but damning testimony complicates the Confederacy's legacy and the notion that women in the workforce is a recent feminist phenomenon.

— *Violet Lucca*

## 29. Wanda

*Barbara Loden, US 1970*

Wanda (1970)

I first saw Barbara Loden's film many years ago, though it was long after its original release; despite support from Marguerite Duras, it had become more or less invisible, and was almost completely forgotten. But when I saw it, I was so full of admiration for it that we ended up restoring the film and releasing it first theatrically and eventually on

DVD; indeed, we've just released it again, since the negative has now been restored by Martin Scorsese's Film Foundation.

It is such an extraordinary movie. Loden, who wrote, directed and took the lead role in it, was an actress, and the wife of Elia Kazan. The film – which is quite unusual in various ways and which centres on a woman who has left her husband and ends up going around with a guy who's basically a crook – was based on a true story Loden had read about, and she developed a whole fiction around that.

What's so interesting is that this very realistic, very simple story is told in such a way that you can also read it as something more metaphorical – to do, perhaps, with Loden's own relationship both to the cinema and to a man, Kazan, whom she may have felt was stealing from her. And because it can be read in that way, the film becomes more conceptual and more universal in its relevance.

It's important if you make a film which is metaphorical or conceptual that it should also be credible as a story. Ordinarily it takes a lot of experience to be able to carry that off properly; what's amazing about *Wanda* is that Loden managed to do it in her very first film.

Sadly, because she died so young a few years later, she never got to make another film. (She was meant to appear in Kazan's 1969 film *The Arrangement*, but the studio didn't want her and she was replaced by Faye Dunaway.) And that's one reason why the film is so moving: it reflects Loden's own very sad destiny. It feels like a scream of someone just about surviving...

Of course, *Wanda* was made at a time when certain people were fighting against the constraints and contrivances of the old studio system; they were looking for new ways of filming, and *Wanda* shows a kind of freedom in the way it was made. The very opening scene where you see Wanda with curlers in her hair – I can't think of another American film that starts that way. It's weird, almost as if she was naked, but it's also funny, and faintly disturbing at the same time. Or there are those shots of huge black mountains of coal, which are also part of the film's aesthetic; they say so much about industry and poverty and work. Things like that set the tone for the whole film.

And of course *Wanda* is not some romanticised positive role model, but a real person. As a character I find her very moving. I feel as if I identify with Wanda, in that she's both fragile and strong at the same time; she may be alone, but deep down there is a real resistance in her. I find that very touching. I can't imagine such a film ever having been made by a man. But Loden did make it, and she did everything.

— *Isabelle Huppert, speaking to Geoff Andrew*

## 30. The Arch

*Cecile Tang Shu Shuen, Hong Kong 1970*

How radical Cecile Tang's period melodrama must have seemed in 1970, arriving in a Hong Kong film industry dominated by kung fu and opera films, and still a decade or so away from the New Wave it anticipates.

Tang, who was born in Taiwan and studied in the US, was something of an outsider in the Hong Kong industry, even before her gender is taken into account, but she was one of the most original of any filmmakers active at the time (and the bravest – her follow-up, 1974's covertly-shot *China Behind*, was one of the first films to address the excesses of the Cultural Revolution).

Set during the early Qing dynasty, *The Arch* focuses on a respected widow whose life is disrupted when a soldier is billeted to the house she shares with her daughter. The emotional turmoil and social disapproval aroused by the ensuing love triangle is vividly suggested in an intensely subjective mode that's been described as a mix of Mizoguchi, Alain Resnais and costume drama.

The black-and-white cinematography by Subrata Mitra (DP on Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy* and others) is achingly beautiful, but it's how the measured pace is often disrupted by rapid nouvelle vague-inspired editing (by Les Blank!) – employing freeze frames, jump cuts, dissolves and montage – as well as the unusual use of traditional instrumentation, voiceover narration and sound design that really make *The Arch* spellbindingly unique.

— *James Bell*

## 31. The Velvet Vampire

*Stephanie Rothman, US/Philippines 1971*

The Velvet Vampire (1971)

Made by the first female director to work for exploitation king Roger Corman, Rothman's *The Velvet Vampire* is a uniquely feminine 1970s West Coast take on the gothic fiend. The film opens in a Los Angeles art gallery, where the pale, dark-haired Diane LeFanu (a

reference to the author of early vampire story Carmilla) invites an attractive young couple to stay at her ranch in the desert.

Rothman, who also co-wrote the script, didn't want her character to be either villain or victim and succeeds in creating a seductive, menacing, and at times poignant figure whose fluid, feral sexuality makes her apparently liberated guests increasingly anxious.

Tonally close to Harry Kümel's *Daughters of Darkness*, Jess Franco's late 1960s work and Jean Rollin, *The Velvet Vampire* has a similar oneiric quality, lush beauty and narrative haziness, and makes great use of the arid, sun-beaten expanses of its unusual desert setting.

— *Virginie Sélavy*

## 32. **Sambizanga**

*Sarah Maldoror, Angola/France 1972*

*Sambizanga* is as beautiful as a Caravaggio painting. Maldoror was born in France to parents from Guadeloupe, studied film in Moscow with Ousmane Sembène, and assisted Gillo Pontecorvo on *The Battle of Algiers* (1966).

Shot in Congo, which stands in for Angola, *Sambizanga* follows a woman, Maria, searching for her husband, who's been arrested for his activism in the Angolan liberation struggle in the early 1960s. The woman is defiant and untiring. She carries her child on her back. Like Rosetta in the Dardennes' film, or Imamura's *Insect Woman*, she seems to have an engine within her. She never stops.

If some of the anticolonial Third Cinema films of the 70s feel preachy now, Maldoror's does not. She said, "I have no use for preachy militant films." Maybe that's why *Sambizanga* still feels open, and tender.

Like Caravaggio, the director seems to love touch, and flickering light. Tenderness mixed with politics. It's a weird comparison, but the songs in the film are like those in John Ford's work: golden and about togetherness. Because of its visual beauty, variety of textures and affecting humanity, *Sambizanga* is a masterpiece. She's made other films – mostly shorts or docs – but this is the only one of hers I've managed to see.

— *Mark Cousins*

### 33. Vivre ensemble

*Anna Karina, France 1973*

While recently producing a new Blu-ray release of Godard's *Vivre sa vie* (1962), I worked with the BFI National Archive on digitising one of their holdings – a somewhat damaged one-inch video recording of a long-unseen interview with Anna Karina from 1973. In it, she talks eloquently about her directorial debut, *Vivre ensemble*, which had evidently recently screened in London.

Reportedly, *Vivre ensemble* is a drama that tells of the fraught relationship between a hippy girl, Julie (Anna Karina), and a rather uptight professor, Alain (Michel Lancelot), who descends into drug-addiction when he is introduced to the hedonistic milieu of Julie's friends. I say reportedly because, despite being warmly received upon release in France, *Vivre ensemble* has subsequently disappeared without trace, and has remained in almost total obscurity ever since.

Karina's film has never been granted any kind of home-video release, and seems to be totally unavailable online in any bootlegged form. I had hoped to view the film and write about for this feature but, despite concerted efforts, I could not locate a copy anywhere. Hopefully, *Vivre ensemble* will resurface, as the little writing there is on this ultra-rare film testify to it being a thoughtful and touching directorial debut.

—James Blackford

### 34. Year of the Woman

*Sandra Hochman, US 1973*

In this personal experimental documentary about the women's liberation movement in 1972, poet Sandra Hochman brought recent NYU grads Claudia Weill (*Girlfriends*), Martha Coolidge (*Rambling Rose*), and Barbara Kopple (*Harlan County, USA*) to the Democratic National Convention in Florida.

Utilising humour, fantasy, animation, poetry and theatrics, Hochman and her crew challenge the male establishment for ignoring the first meeting of the National Women's Political Caucus and Shirley Chisholm's bid for US vice-president. The film is also an excellent platform for Hochman's mentor and partner-in-crime, the undersung feminist heroine Flo Kennedy, and features notable appearances by Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, Warren Beatty and Norman Mailer.



It is a fascinating and important part of documentary and feminist film history, which, due to complicated rights issues, has only ever screened a few times since its initial New York run and has only recently been made available to rent and buy on Vimeo.

— *Miriam Bale*

## 35. One Way or Another

*Sara Gómez, Cuba 1974*

One Way or Another (De Cierta Manera, 1974)

One Way or Another (De cierta manera), a brilliant, highly pleasurable subversion of a Hollywood romantic drama, is Sara Gómez's only feature film, due to her tragic early death. It is a love story between Yolanda, a middle-class primary school teacher, who struggles to find the best methods to teach the children of the poor neighbourhoods of Havana, and Mario, a worker at a bus factory and a typical macho man confronted by Yolanda's instinct for emancipation.

The film (radically for its time) mixes documentary-style scenes with a fictional story in a complex portrait that looks at the poor areas of Havana shortly after the Cuban Revolution of 1959, demonstrating how demolishing slums and building modern developments does not immediately change the culture of the inhabitants. Posthumously released, this is a deeply disturbing, radical portrayal of patriarchy and male chauvinism from a pioneering figure of Cuban cinema.

— *Julie Pearce*

## 36. Adoption

*Márta Mészáros, Hungary 1975*

Mészáros is without doubt one of the most significant female directors from Central Europe, with the majority of her outspoken work dealing frankly with issues of gender, politics and society. I first saw her film Adoption (Örökbefogadás) in the late 70s. It is a story about the hushed rebellion of two strong women, one in her late forties and one in her teens, and is made without any hint of artifice; a film quiet and truthful in the best way, with no grand occurrences, no heavyweight discussions of issues, just eminently honest scenes.

The film was awarded the Golden Bear at the 1975 Berlin Film Festival but, as with her renowned Diary films, has hardly been able to be seen in the West these past 40 years. Mészáros insisted that she was not a feminist filmmaker but that it was her duty to make films about women. Now in her mid-80s, she continues to work in film.

— *Mehelli Modi*

## 37. Hester Street

*Joan Micklin Silver, US 1975*

A mother of three before she was a filmmaker, Micklin Silver wrote and directed *Hester Street* with money raised by her husband – marriage as it should be! The film itself is a meticulously and lovingly realised tale of Jewish immigration into the Lower East Side at the end of the 19th century, the screenplay deriving from a novella by Abraham Cahan, a chronicler of the Jews who left Poland to settle in America.

Micklin Silver takes great pains to deliver authenticity of idiom, tone and language. Evoking the photography of the period, the images are lovely: all dusty black-and-white chiaroscuro. The film is a deliciously warm wallow in Yiddish back-talk, verbal play, and the permutations and crises of assimilation. Star Carol Kane rightly drew an Academy Award nomination.

— *Adam Roberts*

## 38. Kaddu Beykat

*Saf Faye, Senegal 1976*

Letter from My Village (Kaddu Beykat, 1976)

With *Kaddu Beykat* (Letter from My Village), Faye became the first sub-Saharan African woman to direct a feature-length film. She studied ethnology and film in France, and her initiation into cinema came with acting experience in films by French ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch.

The findings of the research she did among her own ethnic group, the Serer peasants in Senegal, inspired many of her films, including *Kaddu Beykat*, which is set in her family village, Fad'jal, and brings to the fore the central role women play within traditional village societies.

The film commences and ends with a narrative voiceover in the form of a personal letter addressed to the villagers, and for the most part it follows, in slow pace, the close connection between the villagers' peasant lifestyle and the rhythms and fluctuations of their natural environment. The film could be best described as docu-fiction, and presents a unique way of storytelling through merging fiction and documentary filmmaking, experimental at the level of both content and narrative style.

— *Lizelle Bisschoff*

## 39. A Real Young Girl

*Catherine Breillat, France 1976*

I was really taken by *A Real Young Girl* as I had never seen anything so direct and honest about female sexuality. It could be mistaken for porn, but in my experience it was about truth, about the fact that women are truly, beautifully horny! It was a correction of the sex perception about women and because of it I felt my coyness – and also respect for Catherine.

She had transgressed the cultural understanding of girls and I think people felt affronted and shocked by the film [which was banned for 20 years in France and only released in 1999]. It's so daring for a debut. But Breillat's *Fat Girl* (2001) is an important other film – almost a companion piece, because it is touching and emotional but also surprising, about women and girls wanted to be wanted

— *Jane Campion*

## 40. Mikey and Nicky

*Elaine May, US 1976*

May's *Ishtar* was considered such a terrible movie it became an easy put-down, even for those who'd never seen it – the movie is now enjoying a cult renaissance. For me, her classic is *A New Leaf* (1971) but *Mikey and Nicky* – another film plagued by bad reviews and production problems – is also a vastly underrated work.

Poignant, angry, dark and wonderfully 'messy' in its rambling, ambling dialogue, it features two old gangster friends (the spectacular pairing of John Cassavetes and Peter

Falk), who spend an evening together, talking, fighting, revisiting old memories and betrayals, all while Cassavetes fears Falk might be there to do him in.

Long shaky camera sequences follow these actors through their intense dark night of the soul, resulting in a searing experience that now feels influential on everything from Quentin Tarantino's talking hit men in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) to Jon Favreau's small-timers arguing in *Made* (2001) which, not surprisingly, features Falk.

— *Kim Morgan*

## 41. The Sealed Soil

*Marva Nabili, Iran 1977*

Long before Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's and Jafar Panahi's movies about Iranian women, Nabili (b. 1941) made *The Sealed Soil* (*Khake sar beh mohr*) based on a true story about a young woman's silent struggle for independence in a village in pre-revolution Iran. With its poetic tone, sparse dialogue and focus on its heroine's daily life, the film recalls Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) but owes as much to Iranian director Sohrab Shahid Saless's films.

After acting in Fereydoun Rahnema's acclaimed *Siavash* in *Persepolis* (1965), Nabili studied filmmaking in the UK and the US. Returning home, she secretly made *The Sealed Soil* on the eve of revolution, smuggled it out of Iran and completed it in the US. It was celebrated at a few film festivals but never screened in Iran. Nabili made her next film *Nightsongs* (1982) in the US, and that was the end of her career.

— *Hossein Eidizadeh*

## 42. Girlfriends

*Claudia Weill, US 1978*

*Girlfriends* (1978)

I'll never forget seeing Claudia's timeless, incredible movie in the theatres in 1978. It was the first time I had ever seen a female friendship presented in all its complexity: warmth, humour, sisterhood, competition, jealousy, longing, rage and absolute acceptance and trust. The fact that a woman had written and directed it was not lost on me: Claudia became a role model. A beacon.

Melanie Mayron and Anita Skinner are so beautifully cast as roommates Susan (a photographer) and Anne (a writer) who drift down different paths. When Anne gets married, Susan is left behind to create her life in the apartment they briefly shared. The journey of each woman is so unexpected and gorgeously real. Sexuality is treated so beautifully matter of fact. One scene with Christopher Guest and Mayron running playfully, naked in her apartment, and hugging each other nude, is one of the most romantic sex scenes I'd ever seen. So authentic.

Weill's framing and long takes, use of hallways and offscreen space was incredibly inspiring to me. I also love how the film doesn't need to trash the male characters to justify complicated choices made by Susan and Anne. Looking at it today, Claudia's work was so ahead of its time. And this film is deeply timeless.

— *Allison Anders*

When I saw *Girlfriends*, it felt like the film had been made just for me. I can't write about it in any analytical way, so here are just some pieces that I love.

I use character names because that's how I think of them: Susan's face, when she smiles, is filled with such sheer joy it makes me actually smile back. Painting the red wall by herself. The way time jumps and then stalls. When Susan goes to see the rabbi for what she thinks is an afternoon fling, she takes off her glasses. Then when he can't do it because his family is there, she hustles out of his office. Crying, she re-puts on her glasses. How success doesn't come all at once, it's in fits and starts: "I'll never do another bar mitzvah or wedding!" Susan says. Later, of course, she photographs another wedding. Even though she lies to get in to see the fancy art guy, he helps her out anyway. Her: "I really appreciate it." Him: "I know." The two gallerists both wearing never-explained neck braces. When you're young, you don't know what in your life will turn out to be a lark and what will become something solid. The amount of time we get to be alone with our heroine. The last shot, when Anne's husband comes home. Even though she's sitting there making fun of him with her old friend, she still gets up and leaves Susan alone when he calls her name.

— *Greta Gerwig*

## 43. *La Bouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*

*Assia Djebar, Algeria 1978*

Algerian novelist, scholar, poet and filmmaker Assia Djébar (1936-2015) is one of North Africa's best-known and most widely acclaimed writers. Her experimental semi-autobiographical docu-fiction film *La Nouba*, completed in 1978, provides a platform for the marginalised and repressed stories of Algerian women's experiences during and after the Algerian War. The film takes its title from the 'Nouba', a traditional song in five movements.

Through a lyrical structure which moves away from chronological narrative filmmaking, the film mingles fiction and documentary styles to retell and document women's personal and cultural histories. Djébar's observational camera captures intimate female-centred moments, domestic spaces and scenes of the natural environment through the eyes of the main female protagonist, Lila. *La Nouba* was a groundbreaking Algerian film at the time it was released, unique in the milieu of a national cinema which did not represent women's stories.

— *Lizelle Bisschoff*

## 44. The Cuenca Crime

*Pilar Miró, Spain 1979*

A day before the release of *The Cuenca Crime* (*El crimen de Cuenca*), a film by one of the most influential and emblematic figures in the Spanish film industry, its licence was removed and all copies confiscated apart from one, which was shown at the Berlinale. At a time of political transition and turmoil in Spain, the film was always going to be polemical.

Based on documented historical facts about the apparent murder of a shepherd in 1910, Miró's extraordinary film depicts – in gruesome detail – members of the Civil Guard savagely torturing the two men incriminated by the shepherd's widow, in order to get a confession. Some 16 years later, the shepherd reappeared, alive.

Accused of slander against the Civil Guard, Miró was prosecuted by a military tribunal, which asked for six years in prison; she had to show up at the military's offices every fortnight for a year until the full trial was abandoned. *The Cuenca Crime*, the only film to be banned in Spain during the democratic era, was finally released a year and a half later.

— *Mar Diestro-Dópido*

## 45. The Song of the Shirt

*Sue Clayton & Jonathan Curling, UK 1979*

The Song of the Shirt emerged from the same UK independent filmmaking scene that produced Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's Riddles of the Sphinx (1977). Happily, the BFI rereleased Riddles on DVD in 2013; sadly, the only way you can currently see Song is by visiting the archives.

Part drama, part documentary, Song tells the story of the women who worked in Victorian London's clothing sweatshops, eschewing a conventional narrative in favour of a series of still photographs and acted reconstructions to show that this story has been rewritten/written-over many times before.

The multi-textured, stitched-together look of the film reflects the textile theme ingeniously – as does the incredible soundtrack by Lindsay Cooper, co-founder of the Feminist Improvising Group, of which Sally Potter was a member. Overtly feminist, socialist and experimental, Song is a reminder of the radical potential of film. Now almost 40 years old, its subject well over 100, it remains as innovative and relevant as ever.

— Anna Coatman

## 46. Demon Lover Diary

*Joel DeMott, US 1980*

"This is my boyfriend Jeff," are among the first words spoken by Joel DeMott in her uproarious Demon Lover Diary, her catty narration delivered as we watch her dopey significant other Jeff Kreines looking a bit like a deer in headlights. It's an ironic enough beginning for a movie made by a woman that so deftly skewers the bloated male ego. Life partners DeMott and Kreines would go on to co-direct the seminal observational film Seventeen (1983), but here she is documenter and he is among her funnier-than-fictional onscreen subjects.

Filmed in 1975, originally released in 1980 and virtually lost until someone posted a work print on the internet in the early noughties, Demon Lover Diary chronicles the too-dumb-to-be-real making-of story of low-budget horror flick Demon Lover by factory-workers-turned-would-be-schlockmasters Don Jackson and Jerry Younkens. The film has been aptly called the proto-American Movie (1999), but from its clear-eyed intimacy to its frenetic, semi-paranoid climax, it's a distinct work of no-budget brilliance.

— *Robert Greene*

## 47. Little Ida

*Laila Mikkelsen, Norway 1981*

Adapted by Marit Paulsen from her semi-autobiographical novel in collaboration with the director, *Little Ida* looks at the last year of the German occupation of Norway through the puzzled eyes of a seven-year-old girl whose mother, a sad, faded beauty, cooks in a German prison camp kitchen in the far north and has an affair with an SS officer.

Sunniva Lindekleiv gives a heartrending performance as the tragic innocent *Ida*, a victim of historical circumstance, ostracised by her fellow pupils and their parents in a film of subtle, but often brutal observation. There is scarcely a touch of sentimentality in a movie that is one of the best, least judgemental treatments of fraternisation with the enemy during WWII and the terrible revenge taken by those involved at the end of hostilities.

— *Philip French*

## 48. The Loveless

*Kathryn Bigelow & Monty Montgomery, US 1981*

A graduate in fine art and film studies, Kathryn Bigelow wrote and directed her stylised, colour-saturated first feature with Monty Montgomery. *The Loveless* was both the last of the juvenile delinquent/rebel biker movies of the 1950s-70s and among the first of the 1980s-90s arthouse cool school that would include *Rumblefish*, and the break-out films of John Waters, David Lynch, Gus van Sant and le cinéma du look.

All black leather and chrome, Dixie and Thunderbird, snarling dialogue and themes of Nowheresville violence, ennui and sexual corruption, *The Loveless* is fully appreciative of the male form with its Scorpio Rising-style crotch shots and casting of Willem Dafoe (channelling Brando and James Dean; butt-naked in a memorable scene) and rockabilly musician Robert Gordon, who also provided the film's fabulous soundtrack. There is no other female director like Bigelow, whose films over the following decade were *Near Dark* (1987), *Blue Steel* (1989) and *Point Break* (1991).

— *Jane Giles*



## 49. The German Sisters

*Margarethe von Trotta, West Germany 1981*

The German Sisters (aka Marianne and Juliane) was dedicated to the sister of Gudrun Ensslin, one of the founders of the German left-wing militant group the Red Army Faction. It was released in the same year I began film school and it had a huge impact on me. It is a highly intelligent and profound story set against the politics of Cold War West Germany, but is as meaningful and poignant today as it was when it was made.

The intellectual older sister Juliane fights her political battles through her journalism, while her little sister Marianne chooses militant extremism with a violent revolutionary group. The film contains one of the most unforgettably moving yet simple scenes in cinema: Juliane visits her terrorist sister in jail, and in a gesture of affection she swaps her warmer sweater with her freezing little sister's

— *Lone Scherfig*

## 50. The Skin

*Liliana Cavani, Italy 1981*

In a career spanning more than 50 years, the Italian director Liliana Cavani has made several films on WWII, including pioneering TV documentaries such as History of the Third Reich (1963-64) and Women of the Resistance (1965), as well as controversial, morally complex features such as The Night Porter (1973) and The Skin. The latter, based on a 1949 novel by Curzio Malaparte and starring acting royalty Marcello Mastroianni, Claudia Cardinale and Burt Lancaster, deserves to be far better known.

Set in Naples in 1944, The Skin is an eye-poppingly frank, frequently harrowing chronicle of the liberation of Italy by the Allied forces. Comparable to Sam Peckinpah's Cross of Iron (1977) in its unsentimental view of war, the focus in Cavani's film is less on the battlefield and more on the devastating impact of conflict on the civilian population.

— *Pasquale Iannone*

## 51. 36 Chowringhee Lane

*Aparna Sen, India 1981*

Indian female directors can be counted on one hand and Aparna Sen is one of these rare few. She started her career at 16 when she was cast in Satyajit Ray's *Teen Kanya* (1961), and her appealing screen presence and raw talent ensured her a long career in Bengali cinema.

At 36, she wrote and directed her first film, *36 Chowringhee Lane*, the melancholic story of Violet Stoneham (played brilliantly by Jennifer Kendal), a 60-year-old retired Anglo-Indian schoolteacher who lives in a one-bed flat on Chowringhee Lane in Calcutta. Without family or friends, she has to rely on a cat and a self-serving former student for company.

Produced by the Hindi star Shashi Kapoor, *36 Chowringhee Lane* is a small gem that tells of loneliness and old age. It was highly acclaimed at the time of its release, winning a clutch of awards, but has since fallen from public view.

— *Nasreen Munni Kabir*

## 52. Will

*Jessie Maple, US 1981*

The pioneering Jessie Maple was the first African- American woman to gain entry to New York's camera operators' union. She took the case to court to fight discrimination after becoming a member, and wrote a book documenting her life and experience, *How to Become a Union Camerawoman*.

Maple made her feature debut in 1981 with the Harlem-set drama *Will*, on a budget of just \$12,000. Shot on vibrant, grainy 16mm, it tells the story of a heroin-addicted basketball coach and his wife, who adopt a troubled 12-year-old homeless boy. It's rough around the edges, but wryly funny, well acted and extremely moving, plus a valuable time capsule of its rapidly gentrifying locations.

In need of a venue to premiere *Will*, Maple and her cinematographer husband Leroy Patton built and founded the independent cinema 20 West in Harlem, which stayed open for nine years. Maple and Patton remain an item today, still working on projects together.

— *Ashley Clark*

## 53. Losing Ground

*Kathleen Collins, US 1982*

It took visionary audacity for Kathleen Collins to call her debut feature – one of the first by a black female director – *Losing Ground*, but the movie's overwhelming artistic energy is matched by its bitter ironies. It's centred on a New York couple, Sarah (Seret Scott), a young philosophy professor studying ecstatic experience, and Victor (Bill Gunn), a middle-aged artist trading his success with abstraction for life studies.

Collins's sun-splashed, highly textured images are painterly, her emotional realm is ecstatic, and – with its close, naturalistic examination of the contours of a fracturing marriage – her conception is passionately symbolic, culminating in a tribute to the intimately revelatory power of the cinema itself.

Herself a civil-rights activist and a literary scholar, Collins found agonised stresses of black culture, history and identity – and of women's romantic and professional relationships with men – in lives that seemed to have overcome the worst of discriminations. With its painfully insightful private dramas, Collins's film embraces a grand spectrum of experience; its non-release is an enduring tragedy, because its inspirational power should have marked its time.

— *Richard Brody*

## 54. A Question of Silence

*Marleen Gorris, Netherlands 1982*

Hugely controversial (with men) at the time of its release but now rarely seen, Gorris's first feature deals with the lead-up to and consequences of a seemingly unprovoked killing of a male boutique owner by three women who were previously unknown to each other. We come to understand the unconscious political and social forces, as opposed to conventional motive, that lead to the incident during the course of the investigation, which is led by a female psychologist. By the end, she resolutely stands by the women, rejecting claims that they are insane in the face of massive establishment protest and assertions that madness can be the only explanation for such an act.

The film boldly tackles deeply held cultural assumptions around heterosexuality and gender imbalance, women's status and visibility in society, and masculine rationality. It privileges violence, anger, silence and laughter as tools for tackling patriarchy from a distinctly female perspective, seeing conventional dialogue as having its own ideological pitfalls. The male characters are shown to have no understanding of their own power, nor how they ignorantly apply it.

— *Helen DeWitt*

## 55. The Slumber Party Massacre

*Amy Holden Jones, US 1982*

Scripted by feminist novelist Rita Mae Brown as a satire on the Halloween variety of slasher movie, and directed by former editor Amy Jones under the aegis of exploitation producer Roger Corman, *The Slumber Party Massacre* is an archetypal low-budget horror film of its period – fluffy-haired teenagers hang out at a slumber party and are menaced by a glaring-eyed driller killer.

There are a few table-turning jokes, such as the moment the heroine lops off the phallic bit of the appalled villain's power tool, but it's mostly an unassuming genre exercise with a nice sense of humour and a matter-of-fact suburban setting.

Sequels ensued – uniquely, this is the only slasher franchise exclusively written and directed by women: writer-director Deborah Brock made *Slumber Party Massacre II* (1987), with its memorable guitar-drill ghost rockabilly villain, while Sally Mattison and Catherine Cyran finished things off with *Slumber Party Massacre III* (1990).

— *Kim Newman*

## 56. Sugar Cane Alley

*Euzhan Palcy, France/Martinique 1983*

*Sugar Cane Alley (La Rue Cases-Nègres, 1983)*

In 1930s Martinique a grandmother desires to save her gifted grandson José from a life cutting sugar cane. Though slavery has been abolished almost 100 years previously, women, men and children all work in plantation fields.

By adapting Joseph Zobel's autobiographical 1950 novel *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, Palcy, a native of Martinique herself, does with cinema what his book and the literature of Aimé Césaire and Edouard Glissant had done masterfully and poetically: pull Martinique out of the obscurity and opacity imposed by years of colonialism. It is through José's eyes that we see the aftermath of French slavery, how it organises life and how it can determine the destiny of one individual and its community.

The film's child cast, led by Garry Cadenat, shows a peculiar maturity. French cinema has ignored (and still ignores) Caribbean life. What stands out in Palcy's film is the illumination of a forgotten community, the landscapes in which its people navigate, their language, their desires and dreams.

— *Fanta Sylla*

## 57. Angry Harvest

*Agnieszka Holland, West Germany 1985*

In Poland toward the end of WWII, a farmer (Armin Mueller-Stahl) finds a woman (Elisabeth Trissenaar) alone, wrapped in a fur coat, and starving in the woods. She has escaped from a train carrying Jews to extermination camps. On impulse – part pity, part lust – he hides her in his basement, but her presence causes his inchoate misogyny, class resentment and anti-semitism to surface, wrapped in fear, self-hatred, alcoholism and religiosity. The woman accepts his crude sexual assaults, but not his attempt to save her soul by converting her to Catholicism. With understated irony, she confronts his hatred of her Jewishness; her refusal of the Resurrection casts doubt on his belief that he will be saved.

Angry Harvest is Holland's toughest film – and that includes her *A Woman Alone* (1981) – but despite the horror of her characters' circumstances and actions, she allows us to view them with compassion.

— *Amy Taubin*

## 58. Desert Hearts

*Donna Deitch, US 1985*

Desert Hearts (1985)

Although it has become a cult classic due to its explicit lesbian sex, *Desert Hearts* is a wonderfully well-made film with a host of appealing attributes. Steeped in moody, classic country and western music, it conveys romantic longing and confusion with bittersweet intensity.

The casting is superb, starting with Helen Shaver as a primly proper New York professor and Patricia Charbonneau as a charismatic Reno cowgirl, but also extending to a riveting

supporting cast, who do humorous, sharply observed vignettes across the spectrum of social class. Crisply edited subplots are effortlessly woven throughout. The gritty, monotonous sense of place is accentuated by Shaver's endearing disorientation in wide-open Nevada. The film has a beguilingly hypnotic atmosphere, like Shakespeare's magical green world, where things change shape and identities are transformed.

As we contemplate the aching degrees and varieties of love, we must laugh at the eternal muddle of human aspiration and absurdity. With neither cynicism nor sentimentality, *Desert Hearts* charmingly asserts the centrality of emotion, as well as its prankish surprises.

— *Camille Paglia*

## 59. Hour of the Star

*Suzana Amaral, Brazil 1985*

*Hour of the Star* (*A hora da estrela*) was Brazilian director Suzana Amaral's first film, made when she was in her fifties. It is an adaptation of Clarice Lispector's final novel, an ambitious project for any director. The author, in the form of a narrator called Rodrigo S.M., wonders at length how the story of Macabéa, a naive young typist from a poor region of northern Brazil working in Rio, should be told, examining the "sparse and mundane" subject matter from multiple angles.

Amaral's film presents only the meagre story, not its shifting perspectives nor its more philosophical dimensions. But she presents it confidently, fleshing out characters and particularly locations: Macabéa's dark office and cramped lodgings, and the streets, subways and parks of Rio, where she drifts through dates with her irritable boyfriend Olímpico.

Marcélia Cartaxo won awards for her performance as Macabéa, and *Hour of the Star* works best when it's in her subdued register. Only the ending really jars, as the film becomes a detached, somewhat prurient portrait of poor lives, rather than asking, as the book does, how poverty shapes imagination.

— *Frances Morgan*

## 60. Oriana

### *Fina Torres, Venezuela 1985*

Winner of the Caméra d'Or at Cannes in 1985, *Oriana* is a complex interwoven story, told like those small Chinese boxes that open only to reveal more and more layers. María is a woman who returns to Venezuela from France in order to sell the family estate. Once there, she starts unearthing the story of the house's owner, her aunt Oriana, through photographs and memories that come back to her, leading her toward a tragedy in Oriana's past.

Through the use of *mise en abyme*, Torres starts assembling flashback within flashback in order to reach a moment when the family fractures as the result of a forbidden love, whose consequences can be traced to the present. By means of the characters and the narrative's flashback structure, the film questions how marginalisation – as a result of race, gender, social class – occurs throughout history under a patriarchal system.

— *Diego Lerer*

## 61. Vertiges

*Christine Laurent, France 1985*

Despite being better known as an actress and screenwriter, Christine Laurent is also the director of six films which achieved little international distribution, and are not even available on DVD in France; I was only able to see *Vertiges*, her second feature, thanks to a Channel 4 screening in the 90s.

Given that *Vertiges* focuses on several individuals rehearsing a production of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, with onstage activities reflecting offstage relationships, it is easy to see why Laurent attracted Jacques Rivette as a collaborator (she has co-written all but one of his films since 1988).

But if Rivette tends to push this mirroring of fictional and real worlds in the direction of paranoia, Laurent is more interested in mourning lost performative opportunities. Her yearning for less rigidly defined gender roles gives this elusive masterpiece a haunting atmosphere of sadness and regret that suggests the presence of a major filmmaker.

— *Brad Stevens*

## 62. The Black Dog

*Alison de Vere, UK 1987*

A contemporary of animator and designer Alison de Vere described her masterpiece *The Black Dog* as an advance in the art of animation in the way that *The Marriage of Figaro* was for opera. What makes the film all the more extraordinary is that it was released as she was turning 60, with 35 successful years in a difficult industry (especially for women) under her belt, and another decade to come.

Over the course of 20 minutes this rich, symbolic, intensely personal yet universal film wordlessly follows the path of a woman on a journey of self-discovery. Exotic hieroglyphic-style creatures populate a treacherous landscape in which the pinnacles and pitfalls of an independent life are richly portrayed.

That the film is not better known is probably due more to the ghetto status of short 'grown-up' animation than its creator's gender. Yet it is a work of rewarding depth, which is long overdue further attention.

— *Jez Stewart*

## 63. Pestonjee

*Vijaya Mehta, India 1987*

Vijaya Mehta (b. 1934) played a major role in Marathi experimental theatre in Bombay in the 1960s. She has directed two films, one of which, *Pestonjee*, won the 1987 National Award for the Best Feature Film in Hindi.

The film focuses on the emotional repression and subsequent disappointed life of Pirojshah (Naseeruddin Shah), who falls in love with beautiful Jeroo (Shabana Azmi), but instead marries his close friend Pestonjee (Anupam Kher). Pirojshah leaves the city, returning to find Jeroo aged and bitter, but blames Pestonjee who has found love and a family with his mistress.

A slow theatrical film, it has been mostly valued for its beautifully evoked fading world of Bombay's Parsi (Zoroastrian) community, but less attention has been given to its portrayal of the emotional world of the two men.

— *Rachel Dywer*



## 64. Woman Demon Human

*Huang Shuqin, China 1987*

A 'Fourth Generation' filmmaker, Huang Shuqin (b. 1939) had to wait until the end of the Cultural Revolution to be allowed to direct. Hailed as the first feminist film in China, *Woman Demon Human* (Ren gui qing) was overshadowed by the Fifth Generation films of Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, which stole the limelight.

Respected in China, Huang is also perceived as the middle link in a prestigious dynasty of Shanghai filmmakers. Her father, Huang Zuolin (1906-1994), originally a stage and opera director, directed such landmark films as *Phony Phoenixes* (Jiafeng xuhuang, 1947) and *The Watch* (Biao, 1949). Her son, Zheng Dasheng, authored an award-winning documentary and several art films.

No wonder that, in her most accomplished and resonant work, she expresses the plight of an exceptionally gifted young woman (patterned after the real-life opera singer Pei Yanling) who strives, in a performing art world dominated by men (her father, her teacher, her inconsequential husband), to accomplish her dream: playing on stage, in full opera make-up, the role of the benevolent (male) demon Zhong Kui. Femininity as double masquerade, indeed...

— *Bérénice Reynaud*

## 65. Celia

*Ann Turner, Australia 1989*

Brilliant, dark and singular in its vision, Ann Turner's *Celia* remains one of the most fascinating and visceral films about girlhood. Set in conservative, Cold War Australia in the 50s, the film parallels the government's response to a virulent rabbit plague with the communist witch hunts, playing out these broader social tensions in the violent, ritualised, secret world of children.

The film – about nine-year-old Celia, whose beloved granny has just died and who is obsessed with storybook monsters and getting a pet bunny – defies easy categorisation (one of the reasons its release was botched in most territories). Part-horror, part grim fairytale, it explores girlhood at the threshold of sexual and moral awareness.

It premiered in 1989, the same year as Jane Campion's first feature *Sweetie*, and my first year of film studies. I still find it wholly distinctive and more deliciously ambiguous than the two films it was compared with at the time – Francois Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* and Peter Brook's *Lord of the Flies*.

— *Clare Stewart*

## 66. *Pet Sematary*

*Mary Lambert, US 1989*

Mary Lambert was best known for her early Madonna videos when she directed *Pet Sematary*, adapted from his own novel by Stephen King and set in his habitual stamping ground of rural Maine. Absent are the auteurial gloss of the most celebrated King adaptations, and the arty pretensions of Lambert's feature debut *Siesta*, dismissed as a confused mess in 1987 but looking in retrospect like an outlier of the they-were-dead-all-along trope.

Instead, *Pet Sematary* settles for B-movie casting and unabashed horror, drawing its narrative force from emotionally painful themes that a genre untrammelled by notions of good taste often explores more honestly than mainstream drama – disease, death and bereavement, topped off with a *Monkey's Paw*-style kicker. Lambert goes straight for the jugular, delivering not just the requisite shocks, violent death and walking corpses, but a mounting sense of dread as its protagonist resolves to bring his dead child back to life, no matter what the cost.

— *Anne Billson*

## 67. *Mirror Mirror*

*Marina Sargenti, US 1990*

*Mirror Mirror* is a little-known 'indie' gem by someone who has since worked mainly in television. The presence of Karen Black and Yvonne De Carlo in the cast may suggest camp parody of the horror genre, but Sargenti clearly has more serious business on her mind.

This tale of a righteously vengeful teenager (played by Rainbow Harvest) controlling and being controlled by demonic powers recalls Brian De Palma's classic *Carrie* (1976). At the

same time, it leans toward avant-garde cinema's reworking of female gothic tropes, as first immortalised by Maya Deren in *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943).

*Mirror Mirror* is visceral, energetic, hallucinatory and, by the end, fantastically incoherent. How could it be otherwise? Generating florid psychodrama from the symbolism of mirrors – narcissism, split identity, the beast on the other side of the glass – it plumbs the daily lurking terrors of patriarchy

— *Adrian Martin*

## 68. An Angel at My Table

*Jane Campion, New Zealand/Australia/UK 1990*

This is not only a great film by a great director – of course, there could never be any doubt about that – but for the first time I felt here was a film that could only have been made by a woman, this woman. And not only as a filmmaker but woman as a whole, brave, brave as a human can be. This is not a film about a brave woman's tormented heroic destiny... No, it has something deeper, more urgent to declare about films and women.

This film changed my life as a woman, not simply as a filmmaker. Nobody had made images of girls and landscapes that beautiful before, with such a vibrating intuition for life. I will savour forever the closing image of Kerry Fox dancing the twist in the garden at night-time

— *Claire Denis*

## 69. Daughters of the Dust

*Julie Dash, US 1991*

Julie Dash's feature *Daughters of the Dust* centres on a matriarchal family in the Sea Islands of South Carolina in 1902 as they make the tough decision about whether to migrate to the American 'mainland' or remain on their ancestral land.

This land, sometimes known as the 'Ellis Island for Africans' during the slave trade, contains memory and history that connects them to their Gullah traditions. But these are tested when daughter Viola Peazant returns from Philadelphia with the word of Christ,

while family matriarch Nana Peazant refuses to leave the land, and her daughter-in-law Eula suffers the trauma of a past sexual assault, and is undecided.

Drawing on West African folklore and oral traditions, the film ruptures the three-act film structure and challenges cinema's tendency of having a single protagonist, utilising the voiceover of Eula's unborn child to frame the narrative. Dash captures the nuances of black womanhood in a natural environment – against rolling shores, backed by sprawling nature, in white dresses, with natural hair. The film stands as a landmark achievement not only in black cinema, but in independent cinema generally.

—*Nijla Mu'min*

## 70. The Party: Nature Morte

*Cynthia Beatt, Germany 1991*

This hypnotically beautiful film is the work of Berlin-based director Cynthia Beatt, who shot it in 15 days, on a tiny budget, shortly after the fall of the Wall. The eponymous party is hosted by Queenie and Burrs, long-term lovers who are rapidly growing apart. The tension between them is palpable as they interact with an intriguing array of guests (Fassbinder veteran Irm Hermann and actor-composer Simon Fisher Turner provide witty cameos).

But what makes it all so spellbinding is the exquisitely nuanced, physically expressive performance of a young Tilda Swinton as Queenie. Whether absorbed by music, dreamily recalling a favourite poem or dancing seductively with a stranger, she invests the character with complex inner life.

All this unfolds in ravishing black and white, courtesy of Elf Mikesch, one of Germany's finest cinematographers and herself a director of note. Her expressionistic lighting and sinuous camera movements evoke the glamour and shadowy menace of Weimar cinema.

— *Margaret Deriaz*

## 71. Proof

*Jocelyn Moorhouse, Australia 1991*

Singularity and clarity of vision mark out Jocelyn Moorhouse's slyly humorous character study as a durable and list-worthy debut. A sense of timelessness pervades her

exploration of the shifting ground of perception and illusion, in which the longing and mistrust of the past corrupt the reality of the present.

Blind from birth, Martin takes photographs to help him see. Independent and abrasive, he is caught in a relationship of mutual animosity with his housekeeper Celia, who also desires him. He rebuffs and humiliates her; she torments him with petty aggravations in return. When he befriends a younger man, who seems guileless but proves himself feckless, Celia's retaliation takes a more calculated turn.

Directing from her own script, Moorhouse escalates comedy as skilfully as she builds tension, confounding expectation and skewering sentimentality. Her controlled direction extends to her graceful technical choices, bringing us close to Martin's experience while holding enough distance to allow that his 'proof' might be anything but.

— *Sandra Hebron*

## 72. Queen of Diamonds

*Nina Menkes, US 1991*

Nina Menkes holds a distinctive but overlooked position in American independent cinema. Her provocative and visually arresting art films hover between experimental and narrative, fearlessly exploring the alienated feminine, the subconscious and violent patriarchal outer realities. "For me, cinema is sorcery, a creative way to interact with the world in order to rearrange perception and expand consciousness, both the viewers and my own."

Queen of Diamonds is one of four significant films she completed with her collaborator and sister Tinka Menkes from 1983-96. Set in Las Vegas, Tinka plays Firdaus (an Arabic word for 'paradise'), a blackjack dealer. This solitary young woman glides through her daytime existence with a heightened sense of isolation and ennui. A single eight-minute take of a burning palm tree is mesmerising; Menkes's aesthetic combines Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal with Akerman's fierce feminist social critique.

— *Selina Robertson*

## 73. Gas Food Lodging

*Allison Anders, US 1992*

### Gas Food Lodging (1992)

Gas Food Lodging opened as the fight was on to get Democrat Bill Clinton elected after more than a decade of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, Sr in the White House. Allison Anders, in her standalone debut as a director and writer, took a sledgehammer to Reaganite sensibilities and showed women who were living on the edge – and in doing so placed herself in the vanguard of the indie wave of the 90s.

What made her stand out at that moment is that she made brutally real movies about women. About single mums. About the working class. About rape. About abandonment. Rewatching the film so many years later you see a heartbreaking performance from Lone Skye as the rebellious Trudi, so disappointed by everyone and everything, especially men, that she almost gives up. And there was Fairuza Balk as Shade, desperately seeking the father who left and who just didn't fit in anywhere except at the movies. And Brooke Adams (how come we didn't see more of her?) gave us a portrait of a woman whose everyday life is a struggle to make ends meet and to keep her daughters safe.

Throughout her film career, Anders has brought her tough personal experiences to the screen and challenged audiences to see women in new ways – a legacy directors continue to build on today.

— *Melissa Silverstein*

## 74. Poison Ivy

*Katt Shea, US 1992*

Getting the sensibility right when making a swoonily tacky B movie shocker is a task that has eluded many. New Line wanted “a teenage Fatal Attraction”. They hired Shea off the back of four Roger Corman exploitation pieces. The script grew more Hitchcocko-Freudian.

The ace card was getting 17-year-old Drew Barrymore to play the eponymous Ivy, who befriends our point-of-view heroine Sara Gilbert – then a major TV star playing Roseanne's nerdy daughter Darlene – and moves in on the suicidal mom (Cheryl Ladd) and stressed-out dad (Tom Skerritt).

Barrymore's always most immaculate when about to do the most psychotic things. She looms in the background, often out of focus, and can be very alarming. The whole

confection is exquisitely LA. Atom Egoyan went for something like it with *Chloe* (2009), but his instincts are not as refined for this material as *Shea's*.

— *Nick James*

## 75. *Wildwood, NJ*

*Ruth Leitman & Carol Weeks Cassidy, US 1992*

Wildwood, New Jersey has long been the home of an annual summer migration for hundreds of thousands of holidaymakers heading to the beach. In 1992, Leitman and Cassidy, and an all-woman crew, spent a summer with the girls of Wildwood. Through the gorgeous sun-kissed pastel tones of their Super 8 camera, they take us on to the boardwalk, home to big hair, stonewash denim and sass. A collage of interviews lets us experience these girls' summer flings, dreams, friendships and fistfights, brilliantly interspersed with an older generation reminiscing about their own adolescent adventures and chastising the younger.

Preceding its better-known reality TV counterpart, Leitman and Cassidy's film is a testament to the beauty of simplicity, capturing a moment in time. This portrait of youthful abandon and the magic of a summer was recently brought out of obscurity, 20 years after its initial release, after clips posted online went viral, creating a new fanbase, including singer Lana Del Rey who appropriated its images for one of her videos.

— *Charlotte Cook*

## 76. *Priest*

*Antonia Bird, UK 1994*

Bird's emotionally intelligent account of a gay priest confronting the contradictions of celibacy and the confessional was equally celebrated and reviled on its release. Castigated by offended Catholics yet feted at Berlin and Toronto, *Priest* rewards re-viewing – particularly in the wake of this brilliant director's too-early passing in 2013.

Its tender vision of developing love between Father Greg Pilkington (Linus Roache) and bar pick-up Graham (Robert Carlyle) set a frank precedent for burgeoning British queer cinema: in one ecstatic revolving shot the lovers kiss passionately on a wide empty beach, reinventing chilly Liverpool as a place of unguarded erotic romance. But this brief utopia

is embedded in darker urban disquiet (the child abuse storyline remains shocking, though now sadly more familiar).

Despite the soapboxing of Jimmy McGovern's script – the one element of *Priest* which has dated – Bird maintains the nuanced class politics she developed across her work through character, performance, location.

— *Linda Ruth Williams*

## 77. The Silences of the Palace

*Moufda Tlatli, Tunisia/France 1994*

The first Arab film directed by a woman, Tlatli's plaintive post-colonial melodrama won first-film awards from London to Cannes; *Time* named it one of the top ten films of 1994 and Laura Mulvey interviewed its maker for this magazine – so if it belongs in this inventory, it's as another case of how movies' reputations can dim when not maintained by the currencies of privilege. Tlatli, one of North Africa's most eminent film editors for the two decades prior to this, has directed only two films since, although she also served a brief stint as Tunisia's minister of culture after the 2011 Jasmine Revolution.

Ironically the experience of revolution and its frustrations is the story of *The Silences of the Palace*, which distils the country's mid-century struggles for emancipation through the coming to womanhood of a scion of the country's royal-servant class – and her reflections from a less than gloriously liberated adulthood on the legacy of oppression, abuse and fear that patriarchy impresses down the generations. Nuanced and sharp-sighted, it's a masterfully affecting work.

— *Nick Bradshaw*

## 78. Carman Miranda: Bananas is My Business

*Helena Solberg, Brazil 1995*

The only female filmmaker of Brazil's cinema novo frequently makes films that explore her country's identity and the lives of Latin women. Helen Solberg's documentary follows the career of one of Brazil's most popular singers, against the political landscape of the Cold War. Born in Portugal and raised in Rio, Miranda found fame in Hollywood's star



system of the 1940s, but was rejected by Brazilian elites, who saw her as too populist and Americanised.

The film opens with Miranda's death from a heart attack and loops back to the beginning, narrating chronologically her skyrocketing success, from her first happy years in America and on to a rocky marriage. Solberg, who provides the voiceover, weaves impressionist re-enactments with interviews and archival footage. Showing how showbiz and the media consistently distorted Miranda's image, Solberg offers a passionate polemic against her reductive portrayal as a sexualised Latina.

— *Ela Bittencourt*

## 79. Elle

*Valeria Sarmiento, France 1995*

Revisiting a subject sanctified by one of the great directors is always risky, which may account for the neglect of Valeria Sarmiento's coolly elegant *Elle* (1995). Luis Buñuel's *El* (1952) was one of his Mexican melodramas: the story of a neurotic bachelor who, after marrying a beautiful woman, submits her to increasingly deranged accusations of infidelity and pleas for forgiveness.

Based on a 1926 novel by the Spanish feminist Mercedes Pinto, then exiled in Uruguay, it resolutely takes the husband Francisco's point of view. But what about his victim, Gloria? Sarmiento's version, filmed in *Sofa* and co-scripted by her partner Raúl Ruiz, returned to Pinto's semi-autobiographical novel to show the marriage as a true folie à deux, in which these two tortured souls provoke each other to new extremes of paranoia and perversion. A decade after her debut feature, *Notre mariage*, *Elle* revealed Sarmiento's distinctive take on romantic illusion and disillusion.

— *Ian Christie*

## 80. Welcome II the Terrordome

*Ngozi Onwurah, UK 1995*

Welcome II the Terrordome (1995)

Born in Nigeria to a white British mother and a Nigerian father, Ngozi Onwurah moved to England at a young age, where she and her brother – her future producer Simon – faced

intense racism. Onwurah parlayed this experience into raw, personal shorts (1988's *Coffee Coloured Children*, 1990's *The Body Beautiful*) before making her feature debut with the gruelling *Welcome II The Terrordome*.

It opens with a prologue set in North Carolina in 1652, in which members of an Ibo family drown themselves rather than succumbing to slavery. It subsequently leaps into the near-future to submerge the viewer in a rancid, neon-streaked inner-city slum – the Terrordome – where racism, drugs and crime are as rife as the violence visited upon the majority black inhabitants by the police.

Precious slivers of compassion puncture the choleric fug, but this is one bad trip, remarkable for the white-hot intensity of its rage. Its lack of restraint may have in part accounted for the negative reviews it received on release, but its trenchant commentary on police brutality is hyper-relevant today.

— *Ashley Clark*

## 81. **Bastard Out of Carolina**

*Anjelica Huston, US 1996*

When it became clear that Hollywood had expectations that, if she was to direct, Anjelica Huston would continue her father John's legacy with a sequel to *Prizzi's Honor*, she turned instead to television for her harrowing coming-of-age drama based on Dorothy Allison's novel of the same name.

The film follows the quiet if fiery Ruth Anne 'Bone' Boatwright, growing up poor and illegitimate in 1950s South Carolina, where she endures physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her sadistic stepfather.

After Ted Turner of Turner Entertainment refused to air the film due to its "graphic violence", the film instead screened at Cannes in the Un Certain Regard sidebar. A critical success, it earned Huston an Emmy nomination for her direction. Starring a young Jena Malone and Jennifer Jason Leigh, *Bastard out of Carolina* is a poignant, masterful debut.

— *Kelli Weston*

## 82. **Kissed**

*Lynne Stopkewich, Canada 1996*

What's remarkable about Lynne Stopkewich's *Kissed* (1996) is not that it's disappeared from circulation, but that it was ever released in cinemas at all. A debut (in fact, MFA thesis) film adapting a first-person short story by a little-known Canadian writer – Barbara Gowdy's 'We So Seldom Look on Love' – *Kissed* was lead actor Molly Parker's breakthrough, as a necrophiliac. Parker plays Sandra, whose mother's death during her childhood creates an abiding fixation with the moment of death.

Using a soundtrack by Sarah McLachlan and eschewing gratuitous voyeurism, Stopkewich achieves erotic transcendence with little more than the artful lighting of Parker's translucent skin, haunted expressions and balletic gestures, and a gently Canadian black humour.

Released in 1997 – between *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996) and *Romance* (Catherine Breillat, 1999) – *Kissed* also met with concern from the BBFC but, in contrast to those films' ironic moral comedy, it exhibits a sexual tenderness at once emotionally raw, gently observational and truly radical.

— *So Mayer*

## 83. The Watermelon Woman

*Cheryl Dunye, US 1996*

The Watermelon Woman (1996)

Dunye should be a household name – with *The Watermelon Woman* she was the first gay African-American female filmmaker to write and direct a commercially released feature film. In her exploration of self and sexuality Dunye plays herself – a passionate cinephile and low-budget filmmaker working in a VHS rental store. When she decides to make a passion project out of trying to discover the true identity of an actress credited as 'The Watermelon Woman', she makes a film about her investigation and journeys the potholed history of black and gay women on screen.

Part faux documentary and part driven by its fictional story, it's playfully meta and radically fresh. Cheryl's subplot about her flirtations with a white woman (Guinevere Turner) allows for a gorgeous lovemaking scene, yet the sexual preference of the cast and the interracial romance is presented nonchalantly and without sensation or scorn.

*The Watermelon Woman* has a 90s jive and charm yet despite its joshing attitude brings home truths still haunting women in film today and is a testament to the importance of

staking a claim.

— *Corrina Antrobus*

## 84. Will It Snow for Christmas?

*Sandrine Veysset, France 1996*

Veysset started as a driver and the art director's assistant on Leos Carax's *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* (1991) while still a student. Inspired by the experience, she apparently dropped out of her French literature course to pursue a career in film.

Her debut, *Will It Snow for Christmas?* (*Y aura-t'il de la neige à Noël?*), would seem to follow more in the naturalist tradition of Robert Guédiguian – set in a Provence that is austere for those who work the land.

In this case, a nameless woman cares for a farm with her seven children; the brood's authoritarian father has another family on a nearby estate. Veysset portrays the minutiae of farming life, finding occasional moments of joy in the mother and kids' burdened lives as the film spans spring to a bleak mid-winter.

Notable for its unsentimental depiction of rural life, Veysset's film went on to win the César for best first feature. Her next two films, *Victor... pendant qu'il est trop tard* (1999) and *Martha... Martha* (2001), were equally compelling and poetic explorations of the vicissitudes of family life.

— *Lizzie Francke*

## 85. Eve's Bayou

*Kasi Lemmons, US 1997*

"The summer I killed my father I was ten years old," the narrator Eve Batiste says coolly. What follows is a Southern Gothic coming-of-age tale reminiscent of Tennessee Williams, but still quite unlike any film before or since.

The meticulous and assured directorial debut from former actress Kasi Lemmons (who also wrote the film) tells the story of the glamorous but tragically dysfunctional Batiste family: Louis (Samuel L. Jackson), their beloved, charming patriarch, is a shameless philanderer whose adulterous habits threaten to rip his family apart. At the centre is

young Eve (Jurnee Smollett), forced prematurely to navigate a world of complicated adult issues, before the whisper of one terrible secret cements the loss of innocence.

Following its release, the film was showered with critical acclaim, particularly for Lemmons and Smollett, and it remains a mesmerising, haunting film about memory, history and family.

— *Kelli Weston*

## 86. Out of Phoenix Bridge

*Li Hong, China 1997*

Jump-started by Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan and Jiang Yue in the early 1990s, the New Documentary Movement renewed the way Chinese cameras approached 'reality'. Li Hong gave this quiet revolution a powerful female voice when she lived several months in a tiny room no bigger than a closet with four girls from a remote village in Hunan province who had come to Beijing to work as noodle vendors or domestics. Li kept filming minute moments of these invisible lives, confronted her own preconceived ideas and learnt, as documentary filmmaker Johan van der Keuken has stated, that it is "difficult to touch the real".

Gradually the piece shifts its focuses from the young women's material conditions to their intimate emotions, to the stories of family pressures, enduring poverty and lost loves that are hidden in the snowy back alleys of the faraway Phoenix Bridge.

Distributed in the US by Women Make Movies, *Out of Phoenix Bridge* (Hui dao fenghuang qiao) remains a solitary landmark. Li's delicate (too feminine?) *mise en scène* turned off potential international backers, and she subsequently joined the television station CCTV.

— *Bérénice Reynaud*

## 87. The Apple

*Samira Makhmalbaf, Iran 1998*

I first saw *The Apple*, by Samira Makhmalbaf (daughter of filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf), when I was at film school and I was blown away by it. It is the story of the aftermath of an extraordinary real-life incident in which two 11-year-old girls were discovered to have been kept by their father confined in their own home since their birth.

Only days after they emerged for the first time, Samira started filming – working with the real girls and their parents. The film mixes fiction and documentary to create something that is so truthful, tender and compelling. It is political in the best sense – telling a deeply personal and particular story that makes us reflect on oppression and much more.

As a female director working in that society, Makhmalbaf is breaking so many taboos – and she was only 17 when she shot the film. I have also loved her subsequent work, especially *Blackboards* (2000), again filled with astonishing images and moments that have stayed with me

— *Sarah Gavron*

## 88. But I'm a Cheerleader

*Jamie Babbitt, US 1999*

This year California became the latest state to ban the use of 'conversion therapy' on gay minors. A decade and a half before that, director Jamie Babbitt made her feature debut with a prescient comedy about a peppy cheerleader forced to attend a summer camp that claims to 'cure' gay teens.

Written by future *Smallville* showrunner Brian Wayne Peterson, *But I'm a Cheerleader* was ahead of its time in its sympathetic but wildly irreverent take on sexual stereotypes, with a cast of cult favourites including Natasha Lyonne (*Orange Is the New Black*), Clea DuVall (*Carnivàle*), Melanie Lynskey (*Two and a Half Men*) and RuPaul (in a rare non-drag appearance).

Out and proud but also defiantly silly, it was not a success with critics, perhaps because in the era of *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) it was deemed inappropriate to sympathetically explore LGBT themes in a mainstream movie with anything other than serious furrowed brows.

— *Catherine Bray*

## 89. The Hat

*Michèle Cournoyer, Canada 1999*

In *The Hat*, an exotic dancer performs in front of shapeless figures with dark hats while remembering being abused as a child. But this is not just a film about sexual abuse; it is

about addiction, love, seduction and emotional manipulation – and its impact lies in its complexity of emotions.

For Cournoyer, *The Hat* was a personal battle. For months she struggled with physical demons and creative roadblocks in order to find the voice for her film. As she tumbled further into the pits of emotional hell, Cournoyer found her Virgil in the form of producer Pierre Hébert. His support, encouragement and guidance helped her produce one of the darkest, dirtiest and most complex films to emerge from the cold scrubbed halls of the National Film Board of Canada.

What is most disturbing about *The Hat* is not the graphics, it's the memories and imaginations that loom underneath our hats. *The Hat* takes us to places we do not want to see, to a darkness that lurks behind our scared small-talk smiles. In this darkness we stumble.

— *Chris Robinson*

## 90. The Day I Became a Woman

*Marzieh Meshkini, Iran 2000*

*The Day I Became a Woman (Roozi keh zan shodam, 2000)*

Meshkini's first feature, shot exclusively in exteriors on gorgeous Kish island in Iran, tells three successive tales of rebellious female empowerment at separate ages: Hava enjoys sharing tamarind pulp and a lollipop with a male friend a few hours before she turns nine and officially loses her freedom by becoming a woman. Ahoo fiercely pedals her bicycle with other women while her husband and other male relatives on horses try to restrain her. Hoorā, a dowager, buys a beach full of home furnishings at a nearby mall and has them hauled out to sea.

All three tales are allegorical and sensual, and the leisurely pacing of the first is followed by the constant motion of the second. The surrealist deconstruction of domestic space in the third brings the three characters together, and once again turns the censorship rules into creative opportunities.

— *Jonathan Rosenbaum*

## 91. Happy Man

## *Malgorzata Szumowska, Poland 2000*

Since this admirably assured first feature, made when she was just 27, Szumowska has established herself as one of the most successful, productive and rewarding Polish filmmakers working today.

Her debut deploys a meticulously measured pace to construct a concise but rich character study – initially elliptical and enigmatic but finally wholly lucid – of a thirtysomething slacker, a would-be writer content to live with (and, to some extent, off) his mother. When it appears she may be terminally ill, he decides to change his ways and marry, all too quickly settling on a single mother who works in a local factory.

Using extremely eloquent imagery (strikingly shot by Michal Englert, who to this day collaborates with Szumowska as both director of photography and occasional co-writer), long takes (many with little or no dialogue) and terse, robust performances, Szumowska teases out the various cruel ironies and subtle nuances of a fragile emotional triangle, to very impressive effect.

— *Geoff Andrew*

## **92. Martha... Martha**

*Sandrine Veysset, France 2001*

The first film written and directed by Sandrine Veysset, *Will It Snow for Christmas?*, made its mark, but her third film, *Martha... Martha*, remains almost unknown. It impressed me and I was sorry that even after earning its FIPRESCI critics' award at Cannes, it didn't reach a decent-sized audience.

The screenplay is daring in the way it makes us feel how depression can build up, regardless of circumstance. The characters are well written: Martha, Reymond and their daughter Lise facing the highs and lows of Martha's mental storm together. I like Valérie Donzelli as Martha, a mixture of violence and sadness (since then she has acted in numerous films and directed the well-received *Declaration of War* in 2011). I like Yann Goven as Martha's husband, playing the role of a powerless helper. The girl, half-abandoned by her parents, echoes Martha's own difficult childhood. I want to emphasise just how skilful Veysset is in making us share Martha's confusion and contradictions.

I like films that are really sad and don't try to propose false hope. The image of Martha in a white dress disappearing slowly into the dark lake has remained with me over



the years...

PS There has not even been a DVD edition, which is a shame, though you can still find it on video on demand.

— *Agnès Varda*

## 93. Chico

*Ibolya Fekete, Hungary 2001*

Hungarian independent screenwriter and director Ibolya Fekete's second feature, *Chico* (2001), is effectively a biopic of the life and times of Eduardo 'Chico' Rózsa-Flores, a Bolivian-Hungarian-Croatian journalist, actor, mercenary, and alleged secret agent, who fought with the Croats in the Croatian War of Independence in the early 1990s. Rózsa-Flores was a strange Zelig-like character and the ingenuity of Fekete's film is to cast Rózsa-Flores as himself, throwing fiction and documentary together to create a maelstrom of possibilities.

Assassinated in 2009, his life was more dramatic and full of bizarre twists and turns than any screenwriter would normally dare to tackle, but Fekete deftly embeds archive and surreal reimaginings of what might really have happened to Chico as he zigzags through his less than reliable chronicle of his own life.

Enriched with lavish detail to embellish the low-budget film, there are touches of genius throughout, and Fekete remains in full control of both her subject and film, for which she won Best Director at the Karlovy Vary festival. That Fekete hasn't been given more opportunity to direct is a great loss; she is currently in post-production on her third feature *Mom and Other Loonies in the Family*.

— *Suzy Gillett*

## 94. Isan Special

*Mingmongkol Sonakul, Thailand 2002*

The first (and so far only) feature by the producer of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Mysterious Object at Noon* is a true one-off. A bus leaves from Bangkok's Mhor Chit for Isan, the huge northeastern province. It's a full-moon night. Rain starts to fall. Then it happens: the passengers are suddenly lip-syncing a radio soap opera. It's about a bitchy

supermodel, cheated out of her money and reduced to working in a hotel: the story is absurd and torrid, crammed with superstitions and fruity stereotypes. At rest-stops and when the driver changes a fat tyre, normal conversation resumes. There's no denouement, no rational explanation. It could be a comment on Thai pop culture or on the Thai class system. Or the passengers could be revealing their secret desires. Or is something supernatural going on? Mingmongkol spills no conceptual beans, but she layers the physical and metaphorical journeys with considerable wit and humour.

— *Tony Rayns*

## 95. Elle est des nôtres

*Siegrid Alnoy, France 2003*

The title of Siegrid Alnoy's drama literally means, 'She's one of ours', and the line – also translatable as 'She's a jolly good fellow' – comes from a drinking song that tests the individual's qualifications for membership of the social tribe.

Alnoy's film follows the experiences of Christine Blanc (her surname suggesting a 'blank'), a temp moving from office to office in a French provincial town. Anxious to belong – anywhere she can – Christine latches on to Patricia, her contact at the temp agency, as a possible friend; but it's only through a sudden act of violence that she at last enters the social order.

An unnervingly chilly, detached style – both visual and sonic – together with a superbly enigmatic lead performance by Sasha Andres, make this one of cinema's most trenchant inquiries into the workplace as a zone of alienation, and one of the great recent depictions of a woman in crisis.

— *Jonathan Romney*

## 96. Tarahumaras

*Raymonde Carasco, France 2003*

Raymonde Carasco (1939-2009) was a writer and filmmaker, who documented the Tarahumara people of north-west Mexico. Inspired by Eisenstein and Antonin Artaud's creative travels in the country, in 1931 and 1936 respectively, she made a series of trips to Mexico with her husband Régis Hébraud, beginning in the summer of 1976.

Shooting entirely in 16mm, she devoted 18 films to creating a detailed portrait of the Tarahumara, from *Divisadero 77* or *Gradiva Western* (36 mins, 1977) to the final monument entitled *Tarahumaras 2003, the Crack of Time*, which was divided into five parts: 'The Before: the Apaches' (38 mins), 'Childhood' (44 mins), 'Initiation: Gloria' (48 mins), 'Raspador: el Sueño' (42 mins), 'La Despedida' (50 mins).

With the help of the shaman Ceverico, the main protagonist of *Tarahumaras 2003*, Carasco keeps coming back to a mysterious and complex dimension: the mind in all its multifaceted variety, including dreams, images, visions and thoughts. Carasco invented an ethnology of mental experiences.

— *Nicole Brenez*

## 97. Day Night Day Night

*Julia Loktev, US/France/Germany 2006*

The feature debut of Russian-born Julia Loktev is as unforgettable as it is almost unbearable. Its first part, grey and anti-spectacular, shows an ethnically indeterminate young woman being prepped to carry out a suicide bombing by masked men in an anonymous hotel room. Its second part, amid the dazzling neon and shrieking soundscapes of New York's Time Square, tracks her as she tries to accomplish her bloody mission.

To think of this as a 9/11 film is a red herring; its real antecedents are Yoko Ono's *Rape* and Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (both 1969), both of them disturbing and conceptual ambulatory pieces set in big cities. In its rigorous focus on the repetitive and coercive ways women's bodies are disciplined, it also bears the imprint of Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975). Thrilling, isolationist and deeply disturbing, it suggests we consider suicide bombing as a form of performance art.

— *Sukhdev Sandhu*

## 98. German + Rain

*Yokohama Satoko, Japan 2007*

Accept no Japanese substitutes, Yokohama Satoko is the real deal. Her debut feature centres on an indomitable misfit, 16-year-old Yoshiko, alone since her parents divorced.

She'd like to be a singer-songwriter, but small-town life offers her no breaks. So she and a young German guy work as assistant gardeners, and she takes a side-job giving music lessons to three primary-school boys, one of whom wants to be a girl. The plot turns on her botched entry in a music competition and her one-woman-army reprisals against a local paedophile.

Yokohama financed the film herself, using the prize money she won for a student short, and became one of the few Japanese independents to catch the attention of the f9lm industry; many other young women are looking to follow her example. German + Rain is wildly inventive and comic, and its centre of gravity is its celebration of its dumpy, belligerent heroine.

— *Tony Rayns*

## 99. Behind the Rainbow

*Jihan El-Tahri, Egypt/South Africa 2009*

Egyptian flmmaker El-Tahri's feature-length documentary provides a crucial record, in extraordinary detail, of the transformation of the African National Congress (ANC) from a liberation organisation in exile to a ruling party in government.

The film builds an analytical picture of the end of apartheid, the negotiations leading up to the frst democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, and Nelson Mandela's presidency. It explores the growing rivalry between Thabo Mbeki, who succeeded Mandela as president in 1999, and Jacob Zuma, president since 2009.

The film highlights allegations of corruption against Zuma, and their outcomes, providing an important historical thread to continuing discontent during his subsequent presidency. El-Tahri incorporates several forms of representation, including interviews with key players in the ANC's history; rare, archival footage of the ANC in exile, and police brutality within South Africa; as well as aesthetically constructed dramatic visualisations.

— *Jacqueline Maingard*

## 100. Middle of Nowhere

*Ava DuVernay, US 2012*

## Middle of Nowhere (2012)

Ava DuVernay was the first African-American female director to earn a Golden Globe nomination for *Selma*, but was controversially overlooked in the Academy Award's Best Director category even as *Selma* was nominated for Best Picture. So although her name might chime with a certain amount of Hollywood fanfare, there's still a case for saying that the elegant layers of Ava DuVernay's artistry remain under-appreciated. This is emphatically true with regard to the underrated grandeur of *Middle of Nowhere*, DuVernay's second feature and a curiously under-seen gem, having had only a limited US release and – save for the odd festival outing – no theatrical release at all in the UK.

The Los Angeles-based drama centres on medical student Ruby (Emayatzy Corinealdi) who finds her life put on pause while she dutifully awaits the return of her incarcerated husband – that is, until she meets Brian, charmingly played by David Oyelowo. Their tentative romance, which DuVernay expertly choreographs with quietly paced sophistication, takes Ruby beyond the 'nowhere' of despair and solitude. It's a poignant exploration of womanhood, love, betrayal and ultimately renaissance, enchantingly spun in lavender and sepia tones by DP Bradford Young

— *Jan Asante*

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