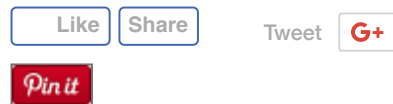




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Six must-see films from the New York Film Festival

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Oct 9, 2017



ScreenerBlog



For its 55th edition, the programmers of the New York Film Festival have come up with a lineup of films that are so compulsively watchable—each a planet with its own stars—even the flawed ones deserve a viewing. In other good news, just about all the films in the main slate have found theatrical distribution.

At roughly midpoint in the fest, the six standout films in my (incomplete) sample either open a window on the wider world (*The Square*, *The Other Side of Hope*,

The Florida Project), or burrow into intimate settings (*The Meyerowitz Stories [New and Selected]*, *Call Me By Your Name*).

American filmmakers often appear more comfortable with micro-stories of—perennial fave—messed-up families, sort of like filmed memoirs. It's as if they consider the larger world irrelevant, or balk at narratives that tackle social and political issues, or equate political films with bad B.O. Sad truth: A Parisian cab driver is apt to know more about politics than most Americans.

In his Palme d'Or winner *The Square*, Ruben Östlund (*Force Majeure*) delivers a stunner that's part art-world satire, part critique of economic inequality, and itself a kind of performance piece, like the art it lampoons. This film of ideas revolves around the unraveling of an elegant museum curator (charismatic Claes Bang), who inadvertently butts up against the angry underclass crouched just beyond Stockholm's gleaming temples of culture. Östlund is a master of menace. Just as in *Force Majeure* an avalanche ruptured family bonds, so economic inequality gnaws at Sweden's elites in

The Square. Love, in Östlund's universe, is about power, dramatized in a gob-smacking tug-of-war with a condom. (I'm told the scene required countless takes because the actors kept cracking up.) Östlund's squirmy, surreal vision will have you laughing out loud, and leave you deeply alarmed.

The Other Side of Hope by Finnish fest fave Aki Kaurismaki launches with two men from opposite points on the globe starting over: a Syrian refugee who's just surfaced in Finland—literally in a coal bin—and a cranky traveling salesman who's just dumped his wife (in a hilariously dour scene). The two men's lives converge in unexpected, often comical ways. Kaurismaki devotees will revel in his signature mix of loopy humor and a stony-faced cast of regulars (who resemble heads on Easter Island) against a backdrop of rockabilly music played by a ragtag ensemble. To the punitive Finnish bureaucracy these loveable misfits respond with small acts of kindness. Kaurismaki's humanity blows me away. As always, there's an adorable mutt.

Sean Baker's *The Florida Project* sets up camp in a milieu usually deemed beneath consideration: that of an Orlando, Florida welfare motel—colored bright mauve—on the wrong end of Disneyworld. Though short on plot, the film is powered by the ebullience of the motel's children. In this meanest of surroundings, they insist on joy. Even if the fun involves scamming tourists and setting fire to a foreclosed house. The mischievous ringleader is played, in a knockout turn, by charmer Brooklynn Prince; Willem Dafoe is warmly persuasive as the motel "manager," as he tries to steer the stunted lives of his domain away from peril.

The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected) from Noah Baumbach mucks around in the sty of family dysfunction. Dad (Dustin Hoffman) is a bitter artist who feels he has not gotten the recognition he deserves. In that he's very relatable. But he also has no qualms about taking out his frustrations on his progeny (Adam Sandler, Ben Stiller, Elizabeth Marvel) from different wives.



What elevates this (longish) film above sitcom dramedies is craft. Borrowing from Woody Allen's playbook, Baumbach churns out his hectic "stories" with hair-trigger comic timing, finding laughter even during scenes played in a hospital. When Hoffman is barred by a snotty gatekeeper from an A-list opening at MoMA, Baumbach nails just one of the many humiliations New York metes out daily. As Hoffman's ditzzy alcoholic wife, Emma Thompson is perfection. I enjoy Baumbach's French mannerisms—he likes to end a scene mid-expletive—but maybe the tic is wearing a bit thin.

An aside: A female programmer who interviewed Baumbach after the screening remarked that it was hard to see how the male characters in his film could appeal to women. Baumbach was not amused.

Luca Guadagnino (*I Am Love*) is in the business of manufacturing enchantment. He does it through an ear for music that conveys emotional turbulence (like that of contemporary American composer John Adams), sumptuous Italian locales, gorgeous actors, unabashed romanticism, a sensuality that

permeates every frame. Yet how to explain the magic of *Call Me By Your Name*? A story of summer love, it charts the slowly ripening romance between 17-year-old Elio (Timothée Chalamet) and Oliver (Armie Hammer), an Adonis of a grad student whom his professor father has invited to their vacation home in Northern Italy. The film sets in action an expertly orchestrated tease: When will the two finally get it on? The exquisite screenplay by James Ivory (*Maurice*)—he's now 89!—reflects an unerring feel for the nuances of burgeoning attraction. Not a snippet of dialogue rings untrue. In reflecting on lost happiness, the film resonates across sexual identities. Especially impressive is Armie Hammer, who has not been so lucky with past films (*The Lone Ranger*), but blossoms under the direction of Guadagnino. It's gratifying to see him run with the part of Oliver, a character with reserves of mystery.

Note: In my many years in graduate school, I never saw a student who looked like Armie Hammer.

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