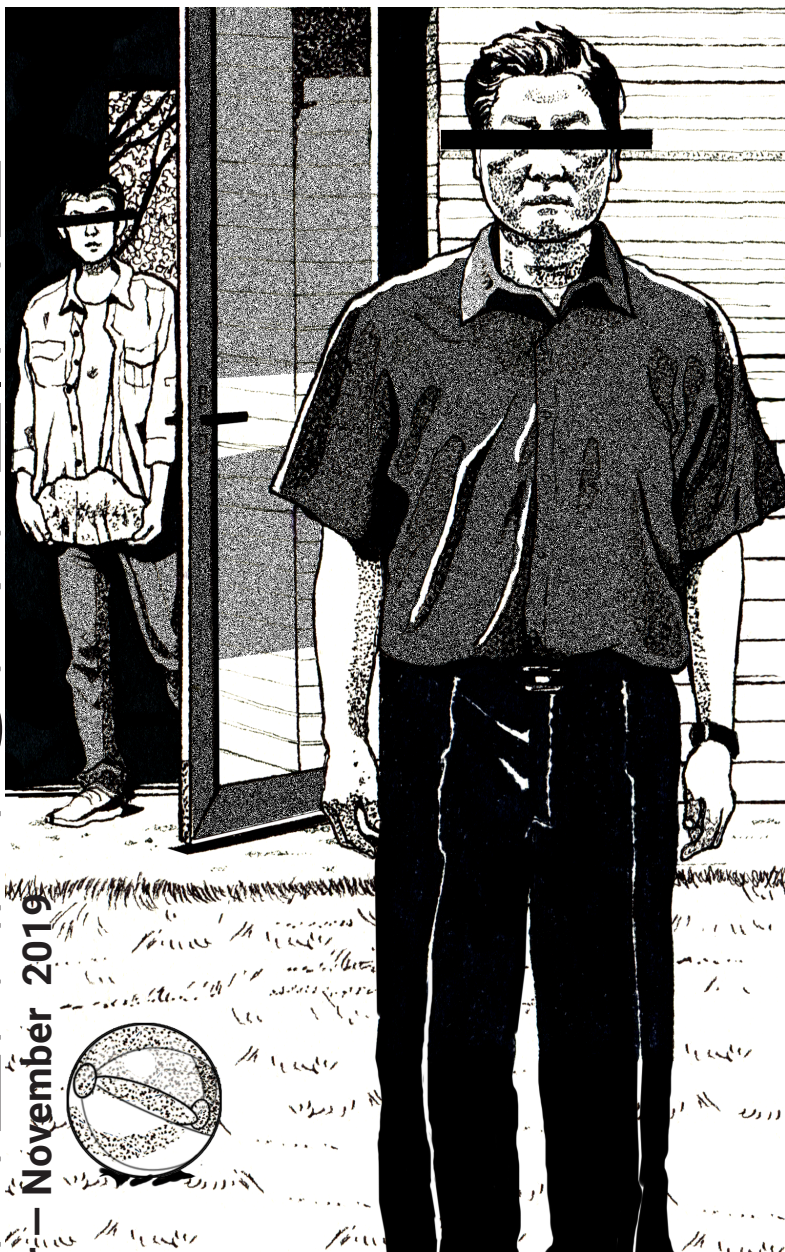


CINEMA SKYLINE

October—November 2019



Volume V
Bong d'Or

57th New York Film Festival
Reminiscing with Agnès Varda

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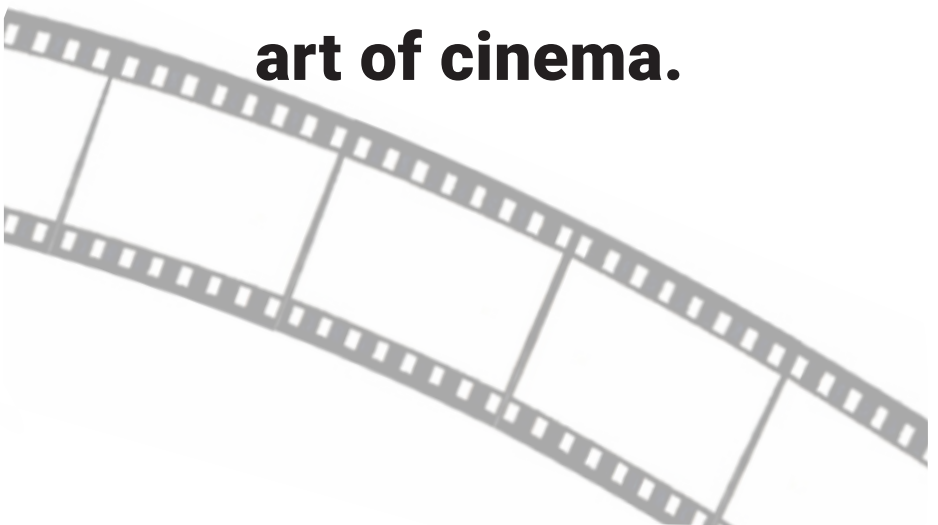
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Cinema Skyline

is an independent
film publication
aiming to raise
appreciation for the

art of cinema.





from the editors:

One must admit that 2019 has been a surprisingly momentous year in film culture, perhaps like no other in the past decade. From the numerous controversies steadily spurring out of festivals, hits like the *Joker*, *JoJo Rabbit*, and the universal outrage forged by the *Cats* trailer. Let us not forget the monumental clash between the Marvel Cinematic Universe and some of cinema's foremost titans, which culminated in Scorsese's Op-Ed article for *The New York Times* titled, "Martin Scorsese: I Said Marvel Movies Aren't Cinema. Let Me Explain." And, Pedro Almodóvar's now redacted response, once in *The Hollywood Reporter*, which states, "they [the MCU] can eat my entire ass."

Whether you're fixated on the headline-grabbing absurdities that permeate through the stronghold of film media, or if you would rather spend equal time and energy captivated by exceptional film criticism from fresh and diverse voices. Note that you are holding a perfectly compact zine for the latter goal. Cinema Skyline Volume V, our most extensive to date, presents a comprehensive coverage of the 57th New York Film Festival, where you can anticipate a variety of features on Main Slate selections, including internationally-acclaimed titles such as Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Mati Diop's *Atlantics*, Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (an indispensable cover piece!), and much, much more. Additionally, we have dedicated a lengthy section to NYFF57's Encore screenings, Revivals, Projections, and Shorts sidebars, featuring exclusive articles on Coppola's *Cotton Club Encore*, Béla Tarr's *Sátántangó*, and wide-ranging pieces on 2019's fiercest experimental films and narrative shorts. Plus, we memorialize the everlasting legacy of Agnès Varda as represented through her NYFF appearances and through her final film, *Varda by Agnès*. We cried, too.

Lastly, flip through to the end and you will gladly find a gamut of valuable home video selections to furnish your movie shelf. Cinema Skyline is made for film lovers, by film lovers, with an overarching goal of raising appreciation for the art of cinema. Subscribe to our newsletter and spread the word!

HEADS UP.....

FEMALE FILM FESTIVALS

..... BY ABYGAI PEÑA

This column aims to give you the news on unique film festivals hosted in the New York City area that showcase female identifying filmmakers.

First up on the list, The Reel Sisters Diaspora Film Festival. For 21 years The Reel Sisters Diaspora Film Festival has been recognizing women of color and their exceptional storytelling. Taking place this year in mid-October The Reel Sisters Diaspora Film Festival honored journalist Sandra Guzman and her role as producer for Toni Morrison documentary, *The Pieces I Am*. The documentary screened at the awards ceremony leaving audiences in tears. *The Piece I Am* tells a story about Morrison's journey as a writer through her novels. What struck me most about this documentary was the conversation around Morrison's critics, among them Sara Blackburn of The New York Times wrote about Sula:

Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality than this beautiful but nevertheless distanced novel. And if she does this, it seems to me that she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification "black woman writer" and take her place among the most serious, important and talented AmeriNovelists now working. (Blackburn)

Blackburn's comment although heinous, shed light on the lens in which critics judge the work of people of color. What better hero to be celebrated at a festival that gives due credit to women of color than Toni Morrison. Morrison understood the importance of writing about the black experience through a black lens even when white critics felt excluded from the club. Many other filmmakers followed in Morrison's wake creating short films with a ton of personal context. The theme surrounding the festival was #IGotYourBack: A Time For Holding Space & Healing which permeated the selection with stories on love, loss, sexual assault, shame, and most importantly the way we heal from these traumas. I recall a section of short films where I witnessed a handful of beautifully made films centering around sexual assault. After the films screened and the theater lights turn

on exposing staff hands setting up for a Q&A, the room felt heavy. We had just watched story after story about women trapped in abusive relationships and dealing with the aftermath. A sweet voice breaks the hefty silence and Mary Morris introduces herself as Drama Therapist who leads us in a breathing exercise. The Reel Sister's Diaspora Film Festival cares enough about audiences that they actually offered after-care, this film festival is thoughtful, perceptive, supportive, and well worth your whole weekend.



I had the opportunity to attend FFFest's second annual film festival where the focus was more of a best of women in film rather than a round of most recent pictures. Notably, this festival showed obscure international feminist classics like *Women Without Men* dir. Shirin Neshat, *Organ* dir. Kei Fujiwara, *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* dir. Shin'ya Tsukamoto with cinematography and costuming by Kei Fujiwara, and *Honey & Ashes* dir. Nadia Fares. FFFest deserves praise for their international selection and their commitment to increasing the numbers of women in film. Their efforts were integrated into the festival program with two panels; *How to Break Into Film and Navigate Your First Film Deal* and *Women in Film Programming* both holding an illustrious group of professional women in film.

I was able to catch a screening of the controversial Iranian film, *Women Without Men* dir. Shirin Neshat. This film was adapted from a novel with the same title and invokes beautiful Iranian imagery while telling a story about four women seeking their own power and agency. Definitely a must see if you can find it.

ATLANTIQUE

The Heart of the Ocean

BY ABYGAI PEÑA

Atlantics (“Atlantique”) is quickly becoming a fan favorite evident from the film’s premiere at Cannes and taking home a Grand Prix. Making Senegalese-French Director Mati Diop the first ever female black director to premiere at the Cannes Film Festival. The film is a love story that deals with class and poverty in Dakar, Senegal. The opening scene is actually a protest held by Suleiman (Ibrahima Traore) and other young men who are working to construct a new commercial building for the city yet, have not been paid for their labor for months. Left without resolution or procurement Suleiman and his coworkers decide to head to Spain to scout out better prospects. We are introduced to the pair; Suleiman and Ada (Mama Sané) sharing a youthful kiss at an abandoned beach house on the coast of Dakar. Ada is clearly upset after she hears about Suleiman’s departure to sea later that night at a party. Ada’s anxiety ramps up everyday during his absence and her arranged marriage to wealthy Omar (Babacar Sylla) does not help her mixed feelings or concern on the matter. Meanwhile, throughout her wedding festivities her friends fall ill for days lending them over to a possessed state.

Ada wades through the water of her own desires and finds that she is marrying Omar whom she does not love and feeling the grief of her loss of Suleiman. There is so much oceanic imagery in *Atlantics*. Ada and Suleiman are shown meeting by the coast of the ocean that eventually takes Suleiman away from her. The ocean in the film is all powerful and omnipotent as it makes decisions on behalf of the fate of our protagonists. It is the volatile waters of the ocean that swallow up Suleiman and his friends. Yet, they do not die in vain. Somehow the mystical powers of the ocean enchants Suleiman and his crew and allows them to walk among the living, taking up a nightly residence in the bodies of Ada’s friends. The ocean serves as an interesting counterpart to the patriarchal society of Dakar which demands that the poor are exploited with no pay while the wealthy (Omar) are able to afford luxuries like marriage, weddings, and wives. From poetry to fisherman folklore the ocean has always been referred to as a woman. It was interesting to see both of these gender dynamics oppose one another in the film. On one hand we are witness to the strife *Atlantics*’ characters are experiencing under the thumb of a corrupt patriarchal capitalist structure and nature’s reaction, to wash over humans with mortality which is embodied by a classically feminine ocean.



Romance has long been entangled with the supernatural. Stories of famous star crossed lovers have permeated art, literature, and film since the medieval period with Tristian and Isolde which evolved to *Wuthering Heights*, *Romeo & Juliet*, and before we knew it Edward and Bella. This story is one we have seen time and time again but, when Mati Diop decides to use uncertainty and misdirection we are left with a classic universal trope revitalized. Uncertainty is well ingrained in the plot of *Atlantics* as it follows Ada who lives impoverished in Senegal. Ada's position does not allow her to access information freely. In the beginning of the film we are shown her outdated phone which she uses to communicate with people she chooses like, her friends and Suleiman. But, when Oscar arrives in Dakar to claim his bride he gifts her a brand new iPhone that serves as a device for unwanted messages from a sickly detective. Ada is forced to live in a world that is inaccessible to her because she is viewed as a commodity. The detective is investigating Suleiman's disappearance and questions Ada frequently, follows her, harasses her, and worst of all brings into question her chastity right before her wedding. Diop makes us so uncomfortable when Ada is forced to go to a doctor to make sure she's still a virgin. And, rightfully so, this scene only further drives home the gender politics in Senegal. Diop illustrates the choices that some women have to make in order to survive; marry someone you don't love just to have a home and food but, only if you are a virgin. Not long ago, the United States was no different in its expectations of women.

Mati Diop is skillfully showing us a universal portrait of love and romance through her native Senegalese lens. I found this film beautiful, eerie, and educational. It's not often where we have access to a film from a different side of the world that turns out to be not much different from our own.

****Abygai Peña is a filmmaker and critic who examines culture through an intersectional feminist lens.***

The Kinky Sensibilities of Liberté

BY ABYGAI PEÑA

The jury is out on Albert Serra's recent production, *Liberté* (2019). Critical reception has seized up Serra's story for a lack thereof. A comment from critic Marshall Shaffer reads, "there must come a moment in *Liberté* where all the sex becomes numbing." Which sums up the thoughts of many critics when discussing the film.

It's hard to ignore the inherent use of sexuality as the main indulgence for expelled libertines: Madame de Dumeval, the Duke of Tesis, and the Duke of Wand, who find haven in the woods and seek the support of well known "free thinker" from Germany, the Duke of Walchen. Key points surrounding freedom, open mindedness, and *Liberté* or liberation as the title suggests are all related to the main characters and their desires for a sexual escape from the conservative court of Louis XVI. Even if your tastes are that of a high fashion porno, *Liberté* is still sure to leave you unsatiated. The film is not sexy; its attempts at eroticism lack sensuality. The sexual acts in question are void of pleasure which has been replaced with something more obscene... Novelty.

The irony of *Liberté* comes wrapped in a disappointing, misogynistic package. Typical. The film centers around the feverish libidos of a pack of men, both aristocrats and servants. The camera voyeurs the seemingly shocking sexcapades in an empty forest where cicadas sing and the female orgasm is nowhere to be found. *Liberté* exploits kinks like piss play, BDSM, and voyeurism to shock audiences rather than introducing contemporary ideologies from the fetish community. This is all to say that *Liberte* is exploiting kink culture as a shallow and two-dimensional ritual. Leah Peterson writes about their experience with the kink in *Salty*—an authority on sex topics—"In the kink community, I found a totally different way to consider power, consent, and exploration. I found myself attracted to this community of people who operated with an enthusiastic yes, where everything was based on consent." In Peterson's article titled "*Experimenting With Kink Helps My Emotional Healing*" they point to consent as the engine driving them toward sexual liberation. Peterson identifies vulnerability and control as other aspects that have made kink a healing experience for them writing, "In kink — and especially bottoming



— I'd given my consent to someone I trusted to do things to my body and I knew they would stop if I wanted them to. I was in control, even though I had surrendered to them." This revelation points to one of the biggest fallacies in *Liberté* which focuses on pushing boundaries of comfortabilities rather than sexual exploration as freedom. This focus is evident when we take into account the cold and austere interactions of the men and women in *Liberté*.

Although there are plenty of women in this film who are included in a majority of the screen time, their appearances have little to no character development. What is more shocking is that their value and appeal is decided by the male aristocrats who forcibly push their desires on Madame de Dumeval and the other female characters.

Liberté might be about sexual freedom... if you're a rich, white man. *Liberté* presents sexual gratification as a gendered experience. Only men in this film come or even express their desires. Although the male gaze is nothing new, in fact, catering to male sexuality dominates the film industry. *Liberté* is exemplary in how it overplays narrative driven by male desire, this film actually makes sex boring. In today's media we have access to more representations of people who engage in kink. Today, Dominatrices and Stripper have voices. Among them Letharia, a Dominatrix based in Austin, TX operates in as a kink professional yet, maintains true to their non-binary gender identity. In their article for *Salty* titled "*My Life As A Non-Binary Sex Worker*" they write, "Part of my responsibility as a sex worker is holding space for vulnerability and practicing empathy with my clients, the vast majority being cis men. I get very up close and personal with the wounds of toxic masculinity, and view my practice as healing work." From Letharia perspective cis male clients who seek out kink services are attempting to explore realms of their sexuality that have been repressed by patriarchal values whereas *Liberté* chooses to glorify toxic masculine ideas as form of liberation. It seems as though the libertines in the story are only descending into the woods to move farther and farther away from freedom.

****Abygai Peña is a filmmaker and critic who examines culture through an intersectional feminist lens.***



VARDA BY AGNÈS

Reminiscing With

Varda By Agnès:

How I Became a

Post-Mortem Fan

BY ABYGAI PEÑA

Agnès Varda is a NYFF sweetheart having shown some of her most innovative work at the festival. Starting with the 5th New York Film Festival which screened *Far from Vietnam* (1967) as the closing night film. *Far from Vietnam* (1967) introduced Varda as one of the quintessential French New Wave filmmakers as it was co-directed by Varda, Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, William Klein, Joris Ivens, and Claude Lelouch. Ten years later Varda reappears and opens at the 15th New York Film Festival with one of her most subversive films, *One Sings, The Other Doesn't* (1977) which is commonly referred to as a feminist musical that sings an anti-abortion song, though I suspect that this is probably limiting. Up next, *The Gleaners & I* (2000) joins the mainslate at the 38th New York Film Festival which is a documentary about gleaners in the french countryside. This film marks Varda's inaugural use of a digital camera to capture her subjects. This all brings us to 2019 where Varda's last film *Varda By Agnès* was not only shown but, Film at Lincoln Center dedicates the entire 57th New York Film Festival to Agnès Varda. Varda is not a name I heard frequently until I moved to New York City last year. While living in the Midwest, my first interactions with Agnès Varda came through my discovery of Director Jacques Demy, her husband. It was a roundabout way to learn about a legend but, there was also an element of excitement at play. I learned of Jacques Demy after watching one of my favorite films, *The Love Witch* (2016), which is directed by the fabulous Anna Biller who drew a ton of inspiration for her film from Demy's vibrant fairytale, *Donkey Skin*. From Biller to Demy to Varda. My curiosity led me to Varda which seems very in line with her mercurial attitude.

Varda By Agnès was introduced at this year's 57th New York Film Festival by Varda's daughter Rosalie Varda who said, "Think about three words that she loved so much which was inspiration, creation, and sharing." This seems encompasses so much of her legacy and in a way those three words are that of a mentor reminding us all to seek out our interests, make our dreams a reality, and share our work with others. Varda's final film is an autobiography that is comprised of her lectures, which she gave on stage intermixed with narration, and clips from her previous films and art installations. I understand that narration is a hallmark of Varda's films. The posthumous nuance gives a reminiscing story rather than a guide on how to look at her work. Varda never tells us how to feel, only shows us



her efforts and the intentions of her long and illustrious career. Through watching her final film I have learned so much about her personality and charm which comes through as she narrates the film for us like she's tucking us in and reading us a bedtime story that we will soon pass on to someone else. Varda was meant for our modern era of meme. Surprisingly, her whimsical way of marrying fiction and documentary especially when using still art in motion picture fits well with our current humor climate. This is best displayed in her retrospective use of *The Beaches of Agnès* (2018) where she is shown sitting stately in her old age watching children and seagulls run a muck around her, and transitions to paper cut outs of seagulls methodically placed around Varda. So much of that type of lighthearted sense of humor is prevalent throughout the entire documentary. What a way for a

filmmaker to go out, leaving us this a deeply personal representation of their own thoughts and feelings on their legacy. Varda will live on because she has already spoken the meta-language we've all come to be familiar with.

Varda By Agnès also gives us a firsthand account of Varda's installation and artwork. Film was not Varda's first forte, she started her career as a photographer who shot mostly for theater productions namely, Varda was the official photographer for Théâtre National Populaire in France. Varda's early work as a photographer informs her films, and even her later work with *Varda By Agnès* where there is a playfulness added with transitions from moving image to still. Varda herself speaks on this style for *Sight & Sound*, vol. 25 in 2015, saying, "I take photographs or I make films. Or I put films in the photos, or photos in the films." Varda actually started her film career well into her adulthood directing *La Pointe Courte* (1954) when she was 26. With no film education or experience Varda relied heavily on her experience as a photographer to shape her early work. Even in the early days Varda was combining fiction with documentary elements; in *La Pointe Courte* (1954) she uses both professional actors and residents in the town, *La Pointe Courte* where she filmed. There's plenty to say about Varda's resourcefulness, the way she makes films with what she has at her disposal. One of the many reasons Varda continues to be a source of inspiration for emerging filmmakers. Varda was able to bring her experience as a photographer to her films successfully because she understood how to build a composition. Varda was often the director, cinematographer, and editor of her own work which functioned to give us something that is uniquely Vardaesque; charming, beautiful, quirky, and inspired. All of her experiences and skills served to inform her film and that is illustrated to us with *Varda By Agnès*, where nothing was wasted. Varda's style and personality has drawn us to her

but, so do her ideas.

Let's talk about Varda as a feminist filmmaker. Though some critics think of her as a feminist filmmaker because she creates stories about female protagonists and has covered topics about bodily autonomy, Varda herself has never claimed to be peddling feminist ideology through her work. This type of casting seems more likely to come from the normalized narrow lens of critics who have categorized her work as feminist just because she is showing a woman's perspective. The reality is that any story that involves a well-rounded representation of a woman is no more feminist than a balanced, high-context description of a car is attempting to champion automobile equality. Though Varda's career has helped shape and normalize roles for women in film, her representation of women is empathetic to the lived experience many women go through and feel personal in that way. Varda's groundbreaking depiction of women is a perception built on her refusal to ogle with her camera. Varda's impact for equality did not necessarily live in her films but, rather, in her presence as a successful woman in the film industry. It is Varda's existence that is subversive in the industry which is why we can pinpoint a type of feminism in her documentaries. Varda often gives us her voiceover and brings us along as she makes her discoveries. Varda took up space in her films and used intuitive devices like voiceover or composition as tools to give us refreshing depictions of women. Varda seemed personally aware of inequalities and injustices of marginalized groups which led her to document the civil rights movement while living in California at the time with her husband, Jacques Demy. In her short documentary titled *Black Panthers* (1968), Varda follows the aftermath of Huey P. Newton's arrest for John Frey's murder, documenting protesters and interviewing a few Black Panthers. Clearly, Varda is aware of the difficulties and injustices other marginalized groups must face. I think when it comes to her portrayal of women we must notice her ability to use her lens without fetishizing her female subjects. Especially, among all of her male peers in the French New Wave, Varda stands out with her ability to give personhood to female characters. Is that feminist or is that just stepping out of the norm, a learning male lens.

Varda's career spans several decades containing a huge body of work that is best summarized in her own way in her final film *Varda By Agnès*. What I have learned from Varda is to trust my intuition as creative, show my sense of humor, and to never stop being curious. I felt such a loss, learning about Agnès Varda so recently, and then hear about her death. She left us at 90 years old with so much to dissect and learn from and I am not the only one that feels this way. In New York City, we will all have the opportunity to educate ourselves with Agnès Varda's filmography as Film at Lincoln Center has announced a holiday series beginning December 20 through January 9. This series is a retrospective on Varda's film career including her features and shorts. If you started with her final film, like me, this could be a great opportunity to take what you've learned from *Varda By Agnès* and experience her work first hand as arranged by Film at Lincoln Center.

****Abygai Peña is a filmmaker and critic who examines culture through an intersectional feminist lens.***

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Notes of An American Film Director at Work (Alamy); *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (Museum of Moving Image); *Mister America* (Magnolia Pictures); *An Elephant Sitting Still* (KimStim); *45 Seconds of Laughter* (HBO); Film at Lincoln Center/57th New York Film Festival logos; *Bacurau* (Kino Lorber); *Varda by Agnès* (mk2 films); *First Cow* (A24); *The Traitor* (RAI); *Pain and Glory* (Sony Pictures Entertainment Motion Picture Group); *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Pyramide Films); *The Wild Goose Lake* (Memento Films); *The Lighthouse* (A24); *Joker* (Warner Bros. Pictures); *Liberté* (Memento Films); *Fire Will Come* (Pyramide Films); *Beanpole* (BTeam Pictures); *Atlantics* (mk2 Films); 2019 film festival logos: 76th Venice Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, Il Cinema Ritrovato, Cannes Film Festival, Podernone Silent Film Festival, Gramado Film Festival; *Lessons of the Hour*, Isaac Julien - Metro Pictures; *Beyond Zero 1914-18*, Icarus Films; *Toni Morrison: The Piece I am*, Sundance Institute; *Kansas Atlas*, Peggy Ahwesh

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