

2021

This was a bit strange year. Due to the pandemic in February all films had to be screened online and could be watched for 72 hours. The dates are the ones I watched the movie at home.

Monday 1-2, Opening

Riders of justice, 5, Anders Thomas Jensen, Denmark

Riders of Justice starts with a series of sad events: a stolen bike, dismissal, a train accident. Coincidence or a causal link? Data analyst Otto (Nikolaj Lie Kaas) examines the matter aided by his eccentric colleague Lennart (Lars Brygmann) and their even stranger friend Emmenthaler (Nicolas Bro). Together with professional soldier Markus (Mads Mikkelsen), who lost his wife in the train wreck, the men develop into angels of wrath.

The mission leads to a clash with a motorbike gang and many deaths. However at the end of the film, when not many bikers are left, it appears that they were not guilty. Black humor, entertaining and thought provoking!



Tuesday 2-2

Dear Comrades, 5, Andrei Konchalovsky, Russia

This black-and-white historical drama by Russian master director Andrei Konchalovsky makes it abundantly clear just how strained the relationship between private and political could be in the Soviet Union. Working with his regular screenwriting partner Elena Kiseleva, he wrote the script which deals with a bloodily repressed strike by workers in the city of Novocherkassk in southern Russia in 1962. This ruthless action by the Soviet state against a citizens' protest remained a well-kept secret: it wasn't until the 1990s that people in Russia found out what actually happened.

Lead actor Julia Vysotskaya, Konchalovsky's partner, was born in this city in 1972, but even she knew little about what actually took place there. She plays a Soviet bureaucrat who unintentionally plays a key role in unleashing the State's violence against its citizens. The impressive scenes of countless extras meeting, protesting, fighting or fleeing, provide a good illustration of how State and citizen can be played off against one another, taking on an almost timeless urgency.



Quo Vadis Aida, 5, Jasmila , Bosnia

“Don't shoot the piano player” were the famous words uttered by Dutchbat commander Thom Karremans before he toasted with Serbian general Ratko Mladić in 1995. Shortly afterwards, Mladić’s army committed genocide on the Muslim population of Srebrenica, killing over 7,000 people.

This moving, urgently needed drama by Jasmila Žbanić meticulously dissects how this conflict went from bad to worse. Žbanić’s previous films studied the lasting effects of the genocide on contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina. Now, for the first time, the director focuses on the events themselves. The fictional Aida (Jasna Đuričić), an interpreter at the Dutch UN base in Srebrenica, feels torn. She has to translate Dutch orders for the locals, yet had lost faith in the UN soldiers’ ability to de-escalate the conflict.



Wednesday 3-3

Shorta, Anders Ølholm, 4, Frederik Louis Hviid, Denmark

"I can't breathe", says Talib Ben Hassi repeatedly during the opening shot of this tense Danish thriller. The preceding events aren't shown. What counts is that the 19-year-old doesn't survive his arrest and that means trouble.

Shorta (Arabic for 'cops') tags along with two policemen during the volatile day that follows. Going against orders, the gruff, racist old hand Andersen and his more progressive colleague Høyer are in the (fictional yet very real) deprived district of Svalegården. When the pressure cooker explodes, they only want one thing: to get out, preferably with their arrestee. Easier said than done.



Bipolar, 2 Queena Li, China

In this variation on the myth of Orpheus, a young woman arrives in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. She has come as a pilgrim, she says – but in reality she doesn't have much idea of why she is here. She has been blown to Lhasa by the pain of a loss; pain she doesn't yet know how to handle. Black and white and a bit childish movie.



Carro Rei, 2, Renata Pinheiro, Brazil

A taxi company owner's son has an extraordinary connection with cars: he can talk to them. He makes friends with the car that saved him from a traffic accident as a child, but he also hears the old wrecks complain about the law banning cars over 15 years old from the roads. Together with his uncle, he converts the write-offs into futuristic vehicles that are conscious and speak. They then take on the status quo under King Car's banner. However, capitalism's zombies prove more evil than expected. I don't know, but Brazilian movies are just not my piece of cake.



Thursday 4-3

The North wind, 5, Renata Litvinova, Russia

The matriarchal clan led by gorgeous Margarita (Renata Litvinova) enters a turbulent period when her son loses his beloved fiancée. Using the structure of a repetitive ritual, the action spans years but takes place mostly during the annual gatherings of Margarita's extraordinary family in their mansion on New Year's Eve. Margarita believes in the magical 13th hour that can break the eternal circle of repetition, defeat death and bring her much-awaited love.

The North Wind is an artistic tour de force by cult actress, scriptwriter and filmmaker Renata Litvinova. A romantic, baroque and decadent Gothic fairy-tale, it is full of fantastic characters, peculiar objects and exuberant clothes, as well as myriad oddities and surprises. Echoing legendary makers of Russian cinematic extravaganza Kira Muratova and Rustam Khamdamov, Litvinova creates a unique universe in which the mind-blowing set and visual design serves as an entrance to a penetrating reflection on love and (female) fate.



Lone wolf, 4, Jonathan Ogilvie, Australia It's not exactly what the Minister of Justice wants to be doing: watching an endless stream of video footage. But a former police officer is very insistent. Together, all this footage – from hidden cameras, phone taps, Skype sessions and security surveillance – can tell an interesting story.

Lone Wolf relocates a classic book by Joseph Conrad to a near-future Australia where every aspect of daily life can be spied on by the government. The focus here is on an obscure bookstore where a group of environmental activists are meeting in secret. Idealistic Winnie and her boyfriend Conrad want to disrupt the G20, but aren't aware that they are possibly being lured into a trap.

The main question remains long unanswered: why does the minister need to see this footage? Director Jonathan Ogilvie cleverly builds up to the answer. Its sharp dialogue and smart camerawork make Lone Wolf both an exciting political thriller and an emotion-laden drama.



Mitra, 5, Kaweh Modiri, Netherlands

Is it her? Scientist Haleh isn't certain. She has never actually seen Leyla, the woman who betrayed her daughter, but that voice ... Almost 40 years later, she can still recognise that voice. Can't

she? Opportunity arises for Haleh to avenge her daughter's execution. How reliable are memories of traumatic events? And how sweet or useful is revenge?

Dutch-Iranian director Kaweh Modiri sows doubt in viewers while stubborn Haleh (Jasmin Tabatabai) is convinced she is right. She determinedly enters the life of Leyla, who has just fled to the Netherlands and lives in a flat with her young daughter. Mitra is based on Modiri's own life: his sister Mitra was executed before he was born. He acutely alternates between the sandy-blue of Iran in 1982 and the dank, dark Netherlands. A wonderfully shot drama about motherhood that doubles as an atmospheric political thriller.



Pebbles, 4, P.S. Vinothraj, India

The inhabitants of the village Arittappatti in southern India depend entirely on agriculture, which has suffered terribly due to a long drought. The fields have become deserts and the skinny livestock eat the last leaves. The women catch and roast rats or wait for hours until it is their turn to pull muddy water from the well. The men hang around, play cards and sleep.

One of the latter is Ganapathy, a chain-smoking drunk with a permanent frown. His wife has fled the home and his domestic violence, but he is determined to fetch her back from her village.

He forces his young son to join him. At his in-laws, Ganapathy causes a terrible scene and in revenge, his son tears up the money for the return bus journey. This is the start of a 13 km walk on one of the hottest days of the year.

A constant sense of anger and the threat of violence raise the temperature even more in the desolate landscape, filmed as beautiful, yet forbidding. The father-son relationship is deeply disturbed, yet they are inexorably drawn together. It seems next to impossible that the still-innocent boy will go down the same path his father did. Their pointless journey illustrates the disruptive influence of grinding poverty. Great shot of rural south India and great acting.



Friday 5-3

First Cow, 4, Kelly Reichardt, US

"If this was a place for cows, God would have put 'em here", a scruffy cowboy in 1820s Oregon grumbles. But this doesn't stop a rich Englishman from having one such beast shipped over. The animal becomes the focus of a blossoming friendship between Cookie, the timid cook for a group of rough-and-ready trappers, and Chinese immigrant King-Lu. They secretly slip out at night to milk it, and Cookie uses the stolen milk to bake incredibly popular

pastries. It looks like the modest dreams of these two marginalised characters might just be inching within reach.



Dead and Beautiful, 3, David Verbeek, Nederland

Quite a contemporary look, those black face masks worn by the five twenty-somethings out hunting among the Taipei nightlife. But what they actually hide are their Dracula fangs. One of David Verbeek's most ambitious productions, *Dead & Beautiful* was already in the pipeline when he presented *How to Describe a Cloud* at Rotterdam in 2013. Both films have a role for the spiritual, which in this vampire drama contrasts sharply with the vacuous world of Lulu and her friends, who fill the inner void with extravagant experiences. With unforeseen consequences.

After a weird night, five bored, super-rich friends find out they are vampires. Panic! Is this really what they have become? Can they still trust one another? Each and every one goes to extreme lengths to find out. This take on the vampire genre plays generously with societal tension and expectations at a meta level. The opulent but eerie locations and impressive cityscapes are mesmerising, yet function as a backdrop for themes such as violence, isolation and innocence.



The last farmer, 5, M. Manikandan, India,

Octogenarian Maayandi is the last active farmer in his remote village in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. His farm work, his fields and livestock are enough for him, and he refuses to sell his land to a property developer. But Maayandi's pleasantly predictable way of life comes to an abrupt end when he is wrongly accused of killing three peacocks – the national symbol of India – and burying them on his property.

While his case takes Kafkaesque twists and turns, the incarcerated Maayandi worries mainly about his crops, sown as tribute to the gods and an entreaty for rain. Farming traditions passed down from generation to generation could be lost forever as Maayandi remains absent from the farm. Until the other villagers join together to take action.

This parable about the impending loss of ancient traditions skilfully interweaves dramatic scenes with dry humour. The striking soundtrack accompanies fairy-tale footage of the peacock-studded surroundings.



Sweat, 4, Magnus, vamn Horn, Poland

Sylwia is a fitness phenomenon and influencer. She has hundreds of thousands of followers, a beautiful apartment and a dog, Jackson. Her whole life is about workouts, posting and her bond with her loyal supporters.

The film opens with energetic, scintillating shots of a group class at a mall. This reveals the extent of her impact and how much love she gives to her fans. She shares everything with them – even her despair and loneliness, something her manager doesn't take kindly to. Her perfect life is upended when she is confronted by a stalker, a pathetic man with whom she shares more than she would care to admit.

The dynamic camera follows every move made by Sylwia – a role that seems to suit impressive actress Magdalena Kolesnik's hard



body to a tee – minutely registering the cracks that appear in her meticulous facade and slowly revealing the human behind it.

Saturday 6-3

As we like it, 2, Chen Hung-i and Muni Wei, Taiwan

As We Like It, a reworking of Shakespeare's play, tells of the love blossoming between Orlando and Rosalind, who is disguised as a man. Filmmakers opted for the lovebirds to be played by women, thereby referencing Shakespeare's era when women were banned from the stage and all roles were played by men.

This colourful, but childish film follows Orlando and Rosalind and three other potential couples in their search for one another. All set in an internet-free neighbourhood in the bustling metropolis of Taipei where there is no rush and people consciously live together. Fairy-tale settings, magical meetings, cryptic messages, but also fights, kidnappings and family feuds. The film upends the binary world, making it a loving spectacle with plenty of music and doll-like design.



The Cemil show, 4, Baris Sarhan, Turkey

When he auditions for the remake of a classic Turkish film, Cemil is rejected almost immediately. He returns to his job as a security guard at a large shopping mall, where he finds out that his colleague is the daughter of veteran actor Turgay Göral, who once played Cemil's dream part. When Göral dies an ignominious death, Cemil promptly immerses himself in his life's work. In the meantime, the mild-mannered protagonist is taunted and humiliated from all sides to such an extent that he increasingly withdraws into Göral's acclaimed villainous role.

This slightly absurd, darkly comic drama makes use of various film formats. 'Archival footage' of grainy classic Turkish black-and-white films, shot by director Bariş Sarhan, is interspersed with Cemil's tormented life in the present. The film starts slow and not very interesting, but gradually gets better and is at the end even exciting.



Gagarin (surprise movie), 2, France

Disappointing movie for and with youngsters about an apartment complex in Paris, that has to be demolished. It was opened by Yuri Gagarin somewhere in the 60s? Two teenagers make a kind of rocket type environment in the flat and struggle with their first love.



The year before the war, 4, David Simanis, Latvia

1913, the world is about to be radically transformed. Soon, millions of men will march, singing, into the trenches. At this moment of feverish anticipation, Peter from Latvia – who always claims his name is Hans – is roaming around Europe. He starts out as a simple doorman in Riga, but becomes embroiled in the revolutionary plans of communists, anarchists, proto-fascists and nationalists. His odyssey through Europe leads him to the 'Lebensreform' community at Monte Verità in Switzerland, and to imperial Vienna. He is shot at and forced to commit murder, has a romance with the spy Mata Hari and is psychoanalysed by Sigmund Freud.

The Year Before the War is a historical thriller with a surrealist twist. Director Simanis embraces erudite hyperbole through playful references to key historical figures and the history of Russian and German cinema. The result is an atmospheric analysis of an era that still has great relevance; an era when new, utopian ideas heralded the 20th century.



Black Medusa, 4, Youssef Chebbi, Tunisia

Nada is a young woman leading a double life. During the daytime she's quiet and reserved, but after dark she dives into the nightlife of Tunis and picks up men. First, she lets them tell their stories – as she doesn't speak, she acts as a kind of confidante – then beats the hell out of them. When a new colleague, Noura, arrives at her workplace and Nada finds a mythical knife at the home of one of her victims, events are unleashed over which Nada has less and less control and the killing starts.

Black Medusa is not only a portrait of an angry young woman in post-revolutionary Tunisia. The directors also sketch a portrait of Tunis: a city that combines cold, faceless office buildings with exuberant night life. Great shots, acting and music.



Sunday 7-3

Drifting, 3, Jun Li, Hong Kong

Just out of jail, Fai finds a spot on a street corner where other homeless people welcome him. But he doesn't get much time to settle in. The police soon chase them away, and their possessions disappear into a garbage truck. Young social worker Ms Ho thinks it's time to fight this in court. In the meantime, Fai and his friends have other concerns.

'Ordinary Heroes: Made in Hong Kong' was an IFFR theme last year. Drifting, based on a real-life incident that took place in 2012, is a perfect follow-up. Shot during the period of intense protests on the streets of Hong Kong (which are not shown, although they were an influence on the film) and against a backdrop of the contrast between luxury high-rise buildings and makeshift huts under viaducts, Jun Li paints a committed, human picture of a marginalised group, showing friendship and solidarity, conflict and tragedy.



Liborio, 3, Nino Martinez, Sosa, Dominican Republic

Starting with a poor farmer, this story ends in revolt. Olivorio ('Liborio') Mateo disappears without trace during a hurricane in the year 1908 in the south of the Dominican Republic. His family and fellow villagers think he is dead, but he suddenly reappears, returned from heaven on a mission. From then on, his prophecies and healing powers expand his group of followers, and he retreats with them into the mountains to start a commune in freedom.

In seven scenes, Liborio manifests the spirit of this messianic figure and the people who are inspired by his lessons to this day. This sensory tale of the origins of a community that combines spirituality and the struggle for self-determination consists of multiple, interwoven perspectives. Immediately after its foundation, the community aroused the authorities' suspicions and, after the 1916 American invasion, tensions developed into an armed struggle.



El Perro que no calla, 3, Ana Katz, Argentina

His neighbours are at the end of their tether. Every time Sebastián is away from home, his dog howls fit to break your heart. So should he take the lonely mutt with him to the office? Sebastián's employer won't hear of it. And giving up his work is not an option, even if it isn't exactly making this thirty-something's life any easier.

In *El perro que no calla*, the young Argentine hops listlessly from job to job. He never complains, but his unease is plain to see. Lead actor Daniel Katz doesn't need words to express this: an awkward embrace, staring momentarily into space while talking to someone is enough. Sebastián's passive attitude at times seems comical, although the tribulations he endures are certainly worthy of our sympathy.

