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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## At the New York Film Festival, a Global Glimpse of the State of the Cinema

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In its second week the New York Film Festival settles down to serious cinematic business. For the most part, the 13 selections in this part of the program are worthy of the festival's past offerings and justify the program director Richard Peña's claim that the event represents a kind of "state of the cinema."

Among the must-sees from now until Thursday is [David Lynch](#)'s sadistic, fitfully brilliant "Inland Empire," a plunge down the rabbit hole of the director's imagination and a spellbinding companion piece to his masterpiece, "[Mulholland Drive](#)." Nearly as surreal a venture is the Austrian filmmaker Nikolaus Geyrhalter's "[Our Daily Bread](#)," a documentary, by turns affecting and wrenching, about contemporary food production. Other highlights include [Bong Joon-Ho](#)'s monster movie "The Host" and Johnnie To's gangster film "Triad Election," two genre pictures that boast some of the best filmmaking in the festival. Like [Pedro Almodóvar](#)'s "[Volver](#)" and Nuri Bilge Ceylan's "[Climates](#)," also playing this week, these are films that feed and sometimes blow your mind.

Mr. Lynch's latest cinematic head trip is certainly the biggest mindblower. Shot in digital video, though it is being presented on 35-millimeter film, "Inland Empire" is his most experimental feature since "[Eraserhead](#)." With this new work Mr. Lynch is simultaneously looking back at the past (both his and that of Luis Buñuel, whose influence looms large here) and to the future. Like [Michael Mann](#), whose recent work explores the new aesthetic possibilities opened up by advanced digital technologies, notably by doing away with the image's vanishing point, Mr. Lynch isn't trying to imitate the look of celluloid. Rather, he is exploiting the specific visual textures of digital video, creating images as grubby as those from a building surveillance camera and as cruelly hyper-real as a [Chuck Close](#) portrait.

The story spins a familiar Lynchian fairy tale: a blond actress ([Laura Dern](#), in a career-defining performance) lands a coveted film role and spirals down into a hallucination in which dreams become nightmares, and her leading man (Justin Theroux) wears a doo-wop swoop like Mr. Lynch, like [Nicolas Cage](#) in "[Wild at Heart](#)," like Balthazar Getty in "[Lost Highway](#)." There are whores, of course, with laughing and lurid mouths, and shadowy corridors that, in suggestively female anatomical fashion, lead to dark rooms. Mostly, though, there is Mr. Lynch, whose shards of dream logic sometimes achieve the convulsive beauty that André Breton wanted for Surrealism and, at other times, feel like the disgorged bile of an artist who has taken the brakes off his sadism.

Mr. Geyrhalter's documentary creeps into your system with more stealth. Like some of the best films at this year's festival, "Our Daily Bread" sheds light on an otherwise secret world. Mr. Geyrhalter, manning the high-definition video camera himself, casts an unblinking, nominally disinterested eye on industrial food production, from peppers grown and chemically doused in enormous sealed warehouses to baby chicks hatched on trays by the thousands, then hurtled live and peeping en masse onto conveyer belts as if they were widgets, before ending up, after a growth spurt, on hooks. The barbarism of such factory farming as well as its costs on workers and animals alike — and on the consumers whose appetites make them complicit in this horror — is devastating.

Other worlds in the festival are revealed more gently. The French veteran [Alain Resnais](#)'s "Private Fears in Public Places" brings together a handful of Parisians whose lives, initially charted out in a play by Alan Ayckbourn and adapted for the screen by Jean-Michel Ribes, intersect under the director's compassionate gaze and flurries of snow. The gifted Thai filmmaker [Apichatpong Weerasethakul](#) follows up his last festival entry, "[Tropical Malady](#)," with "[Syndromes and a Century](#)," a film with mirrored stories about two doctors, one female and country, one male and urban. Mr. Weerasethakul's unrushed rhythms and the tenderness with which he takes us through a scene work a nice counterpoint to his bold narrative ambitions. Don't be fooled by the quiet: this is one of the most fascinating young filmmakers working today.

Also screening this week are the Iranian director Jafar Panahi's "[Offside](#)," scheduled to open theatrically, an enjoyable if thin drama about some girls who sneak into a sports stadium to watch a soccer match; "The Journals of Knud Rasmussen," a beautiful-looking period story about the cataclysmic moment when Inuit shamanism met Western Christianity, from Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn, who also collaborated on "The Fast Runner (Atanarjuat)"; and "[Falling](#)," a character and generational study from the Austrian filmmaker Barbara Albert, about five female friends, who, after attending the funeral of an old teacher, open their hearts and veins to one another, along with a few blouses.

These last three selections pass muster, but one of this week's indisputable standouts is "[Paprika](#)," the latest eye-popping anime from [Satoshi Kon](#) ("[Millennium Actress](#)," "[Tokyo Godfathers](#)"), which, despite the dizzying spirals of its overly compressed narrative, offers continued evidence that Japanese animators are reaching for the moon (and other far-out destinations), while most of their American counterparts remain stuck in the kiddie sandbox with their underage audiences.

One film that is a must to avoid, this week or any other, is Tahani Rached's "[These Girls](#)," a grim, infuriatingly exploitative documentary from Egypt about glue-sniffing street children, that, like too many nonfiction films of this unexamined sort, turns the misery of other people into an excuse for the audience's voyeurism.

Good, bad and sometimes just blah, most of the selections in the coming week support Mr. Peña's assertion that the festival represents something like the state of the art. Too bad the fine art has to share precious shelf space with white-elephant frippery like "[Little Children](#)" and "[Marie Antoinette](#)." Along with the similarly audience-friendly film "[The Queen](#)," which was released in theaters the day after it opened the festival, these selections feature the bulk of the recognizable faces in the event. All three are red-carpet bait, the sort of star-gazing entertainments that attract the mainstream-media attention that is so crucial for festivals from Cannes to Los Angeles. All three are also being released by a studio or studio division, and are among the small set of English-language films that will dominate awards chatter until the Oscars in February.

Given the increasing competition for the audience's attention, it would be easy to justify putting any one of these three in the festival: films like "The Queen" sell tickets (and newspapers), and probably make board members happy. But it is harder to justify programming all three in a festival with just 25 slots in its the main section. The New York Film Festival isn't a grab bag; it's an elitist event for film lovers willing to shell out as much as \$40 a show. In a D.I.Y. world with too many choices, including an estimated 600 film festivals, some of which have seriously deep pockets and no qualms about pandering to their audiences, elitism is a virtue. It's also this festival's greatest strength.

The public's appetite for serious work of the sort that has defined the New York Film Festival since its inception in 1963 has diminished, at least in theatrical terms. The generation that watched [Jean-Luc](#)

[Godard](#)'s "Masculin Féminin" at the festival in 1966 and continues to get to [Lincoln Center](#) this time of year, still sometimes frequents its local art-house theater. Not so, apparently, that generation's progeny: a similarly large and dedicated younger audience for filmmakers like Mr. Weerasethakul, whose films show at prestigious festivals the world over, racking up ecstatic reviews along the way, has yet to emerge in America. That said, the vanguard of fiercely engaged cinephiles blogging online about the latest in Korean cinema suggests that a new generation of passionate filmgoers could emerge with more nurturing.

There are a multitude of complex, interconnected reasons why foreign-language cinema has taken such a hit, including its displacement by American independent film in the public's over-multimedia-stimulated imagination. In this climate small distributors are finding it difficult to take chances with challenging, difficult, thoughtful (each adjective another kiss of death) foreign-language films, even when individual titles come equipped with glowing notices and the imprimatur of a world-class festival like Cannes. When even well-received American independent films like "[Old Joy](#)" and "[Mutual Appreciation](#)" are facing a tough market ride, it becomes increasingly difficult for a director like Mr. Weerasethakul to get a toe in the distribution door. His films don't look, sound or play like the usual Hollywood or Sundance fare; they are, like their director, sui generis.

It's great that "Syndromes and a Century," which has yet to find an American distributor, is on the menu this year; too bad that the entire program isn't similarly adventurous. It has always been the case that some good films, like [Jia Zhang-ke's "Dong"](#) and [Tsai Ming-Liang's "I Don't Want to Sleep Alone,"](#) both of which showed at recent festivals, don't make it into the New York lineup. Festival programming is always a matter of timing, taste, desperation, politics and logistics, not to mention worthiness. But if the New York Film Festival is going to remain relevant in these difficult movie times, it needs to work harder to secure the best, and it needs to nurture a new audience, not just dine out on the faithful. Whether it scales up or retains its modest proportions, it needs to embrace the very exclusivity that makes it occasionally maddening and generally indispensable.

### Unspooling in Gotham

The 44th New York Film Festival, presented by the [Film Society of Lincoln Center](#), continues through Oct. 15. Most films are shown at Alice Tully Hall, except the closing-night film, which will be at Avery Fisher Hall. Tickets range from \$16 to \$40 (\$10 student rush tickets may be available at the box office the day of the screening) and are available at [filmlinc.com](#) or (212) 721-6500. Information: (212) 875-5050.

Special programs include a directors' dialogue series at the Kaplan Penthouse, and at the Walter Reade Theater, screenings devoted to jazz and avant-garde films, as well as a Janus Films retrospective and a salute to filmmaking in New York City. Kaplan Penthouse information: (212) 721-6500; Walter Reade Theater information: (212) 875-5600.

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