

San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 4

Maggie's Plan, Frank & Lola, along with Dreyer's Vampyr (1932)

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This is the fourth and final article on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, April 21–May 5. Part 1 was posted May 11, Part 2 on May 13 and Part 3 on May 17.

Maggie's Plan

Maggie's Plan, the latest movie by Rebecca Miller (born 1962), daughter of playwright Arthur Miller, is a light romantic comedy centered on a circle of New York academics. It opens May 20 in the US.

Maggie (Greta Gerwig), a counselor to student artists at the New School, decides to have a baby. But with no current mate and a propensity to micromanage her life, she chooses artificial insemination. Her prospective donor is Guy (Travis Fimmel), a self-proclaimed “pickle entrepreneur.” Beneath his disheveled exterior (complementing Maggie’s) lies a minor math whiz—a fact that will play an important role in the movie’s final twist.

Maggie’s well-oiled life schedule is on track until she meets John (Ethan Hawke), an adjunct professor, the “bad boy” of “fictocritical anthropology” (a postmodern trend that claims to blend fiction, theory and criticism), who is shifting to novel writing. John pursues the down-to-earth Maggie as a refreshing alternative to his high-maintenance, self-centered Danish wife Gretchen (Julianne Moore), a tenured Columbia University professor. (John: “Every relationship has a rose and a gardener. She’s the rose. I’m the gardener and I don’t have a green thumb.”)

Falling in love with John was not part of Maggie’s scheme, but three years down the road she is living and raising a child with him. (He is the presumptive father, although Maggie was in the process of inseminating herself when John showed up and won her heart.)

John’s self-centeredness takes its toll. Maggie begins to formulate another “plan” that will rearrange relationships in what she considers a more appropriate manner. Adapted from an unpublished novel by Karen Rinaldi, the movie also includes Bill Hader and Maya Rudolf as Maggie’s best friends.

The well-heeled, utterly self-involved milieu present in *Maggie's Plan* cries out for scathing satire, something Miller largely sidesteps. Moore is entertaining as an upper-middle

class shrew with an offbeat Scandinavian accent (particularly when she pronounces “ficto”) and Gerwig is a semi-charming guide in this comedy of morals. In essence, the movie pokes “lifestyle” fun at its characters, but never tackles the reactionary content of “fictocriticism” nor the charlatanry of individuals like Slavoj Žižek, whom Miller finds deserving of a mention.

Significant portions of academia have moved sharply to the right, often turning to various “identity” claims in their vicious pursuit of privileges and advancement. In fact, the New School and Columbia are centers for such goings-on. The presentation of the bumbling, sometimes not-so-well meaning, but essentially harmless individuals (“pure and a little bit stupid”) in Miller’s film hardly does this quite foul process justice.

But, unintentionally perhaps, *Maggie's Plan* certainly does show that poverty and homelessness in New York (Miller’s camera is tilted upward and away from these realities) do not keep this social layer awake at night.

Frank & Lola

Michael Shannon and Imogen Poots star in this dark, psychosexual thriller written and directed by Matthew Ross. Frank (Shannon) is a talented chef working in Las Vegas who falls madly in love with Lola (Poots), a budding fashion designer.

Sensing that Lola has secrets, Frank turns obsessively jealous, bordering on violent. While Lola’s new boss concerns Frank, more troubling is the questionable past she shares with a rich Frenchman (Swedish actor Michael Nyqvist). The talented cast throws off a few sparks, but the cinematography can only turn down the lights, it cannot salvage this foolish, self-important movie.

Les cowboys

A very loose adaptation of John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), French filmmaker Thomas Bidegain’s *Les cowboys* begins in 1994 at an American West-themed fair in France. The 16-year-old daughter of Alain (François Damiens) goes missing. Then ensues a decades-long search that extends from

Belgium to Syria, Afghanistan and Yemen, covering the period of September 11, 2001 and the “war on terror.”

The hunt consumes two generations of Alain’s family. Islamic fundamentalists are a stand-in for Ford’s persecuted Native Americans. John C. Reilly has a cameo as a shady American smuggler in a work that, less directly and forcefully than Ford’s, argues for tolerance.

Les demons

Set in Montreal in the late 1980s, the trials and tribulations of adolescence form the basis of this petty, drama-starved work by Quebec filmmaker Philippe Lesage.

According to the festival’s notes, Lesage asserts there is “something very polished in the way we tell stories now that I found quite boring. We try to remove everything that might be a little too risky.” The director has failed to avoid the boring—except for a title that does not deliver—and added a “risk” factor that takes the form of brief, non-integrated sequences involving a pedophile.

This year’s festival screened a few older black-and-white films that were a delight to watch.

Cast a Dark Shadow

Based on the play *Murder Mistaken* by Janet Green, *Cast a Dark Shadow* is a taut 1955 crime thriller directed by British filmmaker Lewis Gilbert. Dirk Bogarde is Edward “Teddy” Bare, a black widower. (“If he had any more wives, he’d have to sleep in the bathroom.”)

The remarkable Margaret Lockwood plays Teddy’s new target, after he takes care of his previous wife Monica (Mona Washbourne), mistakenly thinking she will disadvantage him in a new will she plans to execute. Lockwood’s Freda Jeffries is a savvy, rich widow, a former barmaid who “ended up marrying the gov’nor.” Nonetheless, after Teddy’s dastardly ways lead to his demise, Freda laments: “It’s the only time in my life my heart ruled my head.” Very understandable when it comes to Bogarde!

While not earthshaking, it is a compelling, psychologically complicated piece, which, like many of that period, was created by thinking beings for other thinking beings. Bogarde and Lockwood are fascinating to watch, leaving this reviewer craving more.

Vampyr

Vampyr, the 1932 masterpiece by Danish filmmaker Carl Theodor Dreyer (1889-1968), is an unnerving, early sound film. Critic Robin Wood described *Vampyr* in 1974 as “one of the most dreamlike movies ever made, one of the few to capture successfully the *elusiveness* of dream ... Dreyer has here created a visual style unlike that of any other film, including any of his own.” Dreyer’s filmography includes 14 feature films, made over 45 years.

At the Berlin premiere of the film, Dreyer stated that he “just

wanted to make a film different from all other films. I wanted, if you will, to break new ground for the cinema. That is all ... I have broken new ground.”

The film’s eerie menace is derived largely from intangible elements: otherworldly sounds and hallucinatory images created by famed cinematographer (and future director) Rudolf Maté. Through minimal dialogue and storyline, the filmmakers present a disoriented and disorienting world engulfed in the mist.

A young itinerant, Allan Gray, arrives at a remote village home to an old chateau. There, young women are being preyed upon by an ancient, blind female vampire. Her procurer of victims is the town’s evil doctor. But guided by a book on vampirism, Allan is able to vanquish the dreadful undead creature and end her reign of terror—life and love triumph over death.

There are indelible pictures here: a coffin with a glass square in its top that frames the gaunt visage of its corpse—as it is hauled away, we suddenly view the shadowy tree tops overhead *from inside the coffin*. Ghostly dancing figures mysteriously appear; the deranged doctor meets his end by suffocating in a flour mill with ominous grinding wheels. Then there are Allan’s out-of-body wanderings; the eroticism of the vampire’s infected prey; and a vampire whose absence is as unsettling as her presence ...

Dreyer is quoted as saying: “At the time I made *Vampyr* I had been living in Paris for four or five years. In Paris at that time, you couldn’t help but be caught up in the excitement and the imagination which the various artists and movements created, whether ‘cubism,’ ‘dadaism,’ ‘surrealism,’ or what have you. I knew several painters and I was involved in discussions with and about them. So, of course, I was influenced, but by the excitement, the energy, the variety of work, not by any particular painter or movement. At the time of *Vampyr*, I was ‘over head and ears’ in interest in abstract art.”

Filmed in France, Dreyer shot alternate versions of key scenes in different languages. Three-quarters of a century after its making, *Vampyr* still disturbs and mesmerizes.

Concluded

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