

Film

Venice Film Festival report — Tilda Swinton stars in Almodóvar's latest; Nazi guilt and denial documented

Covid has had an impact on the annual festival, but much remains unchanged



Tilda Swinton in Pedro Almodóvar's 'The Human Voice'

Raphael Abraham SEPTEMBER 3 2020

Venice is no stranger to masks. Usually they are beloved features of the Carnival — and of souvenir stands selling imitation tat. This year at the Venice Film Festival their purpose is more functional but even more essential. Premiere galas — which are both carnival and circus — have taken on the appearance of masquerade balls, gowns and tuxedos accessorised with masks concealing not the eyes and nose but the nostrils and mouth.

It is tempting to hold all of this up as a symbol of the topsy-turvy nature of 2020 but the truth is that this year's festival so far seems not so different to previous editions — and for that everyone here can be grateful. That it has gone ahead physically at all (the first major film festival to do so) is a cause for tentative celebration. There may be fewer stars, big movies and attendees, but much is unchanged: the carpet is still red, the Adriatic still blue and there are still far too many daily screenings for any two-eyed human to take in. Will the quality be there too? Nothing for it but to roll up the sleeves, liberally apply hand sanitiser and get stuck in.



Cate Blanchett and Matt Dillon, front left and right, at the opening ceremony on September 2 © Alberto Pizzoli/AFP/Getty Images

One of the first big names to show her face, or some of it, was Cate Blanchett, president of the competition jury (was her mask a homage to her clandestine appearance in Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*? Sadly not). She was followed swiftly by Tilda Swinton, stepping off a boat making a Wakanda salute in tribute to *Black Panther* star [Chadwick Boseman](#).

The first real ripple of excitement greeted Swinton's appearance in Pedro Almodóvar's *The Human Voice*. Jean Cocteau's 1930 play has already inspired a Rossellini film, a Poulenc opera and Almodóvar's 1988 breakout hit *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. Now he has revisited it more straightforwardly for his first English-language movie, a half-hour drama starring Swinton as a woman left to stew at home alone and confront her errant lover in an agonisingly one-sided phone conversation. Almodóvar has adapted freely and with an eye on the present: Swinton's co-stars are an iPhone, a pair of AirPods and a dog. The technology may be up-to-date but the themes of suffering, desire and fortitude are timeless and recognisably Almodóvar. So are the surroundings: Swinton stands in what looks like a replica of the director's own Madrid apartment, now familiar to anyone who saw last year's [Pain and Glory](#).

As she gradually reveals the extent of her emotional unravelling, Swinton is as irresistibly magnetic as ever, her performance more heightened and theatrical than usual but in keeping with the material and the *mise en scène*. When the camera pulls back to reveal that she is standing in a stage set, it only enhances the sense of loneliness and isolation. Swinton is every bit the ardent Almodóvar heroine and this short film whets the appetite for a more fulsome future collaboration between the Spanish director and Scottish star.

★★★★☆



Aris Servetalis in 'Apples' © Bartosz Swiniarski

A less convincing portrait of relationship breakdown was the festival's opening film *Lacci* (*The Ties*), a laboured saga of marriage and looming divorce Italian-style, but from Greece came *Apples*, an intriguing puzzle of a picture. Very much in the vein of what has been dubbed the Greek "weird wave", it may also delight admirers of Swedish absurdist Roy Andersson with its drily humorous tableaux.

Christos Nikou's film follows a man who suffers an acute memory lapse and is sent off to begin a new life with a face as long as one of El Greco's and a similar air of buoyant enthusiasm. His doctors allocate him tasks and require him to document his exploits: ride a bike; see a horror film at the cinema; have sex in a nightclub toilet. As he begins taking unsmiling Polaroid selfies and submitting them for approval and we become aware that he is surrounded by a growing network of fellow amnesiacs doing similar, the whole thing comes to seem like an elaborate Instagram allegory. To what end? You'll have to watch it to find out. But don't count on it.

★★★★☆



In 'Final Account', perpetrators and bystanders look back on the Nazi era © 2019 Focus Features LLC and Storyteller Distribution Co., LLC

The documentarist Luke Holland, who died earlier this year, spent more than 10 years assembling *Final Account* from hundreds of interviews with Nazi perpetrators and bystanders already well into their eighties and nineties. Clear-eyed and unsensational, he has left an invaluable trove of first-person testimonies that often goes over well-trodden ground yet finds something new. Meeting his interlocutors — who range from high-ranking SS men to camp guards and local residents — mostly in their own homes, with tea trays and refreshments ready, retrieves them from monstrous history and makes more immediate the big question: how could they?

Most are matter-of-fact, many themselves incredulous about how it all came about, even when recognising their complicity. As the film wears on, Holland's questioning becomes more direct and incisive with the focus moving from collective to personal guilt. One remorse-stricken former Nazi sits down with a group of young people at the site of the Wannsee Conference and finds himself in heated confrontation with a rightwing youth.

Yet with others there is a sense of simply saying the right thing. Eventually, one man is overcome with teary-eyed nostalgia recalling the camaraderie in his SS squad before outing himself as a Holocaust denier. Another grows defiant, revealing his enduring admiration for Hitler and still-treasured Nazi medals and insignia. The mask of propriety has slipped. Holland reminds us — if recent images of neo-Nazis storming the steps of the Reichstag haven't already — of another disease that demands constant vigilance.

★★★★☆

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