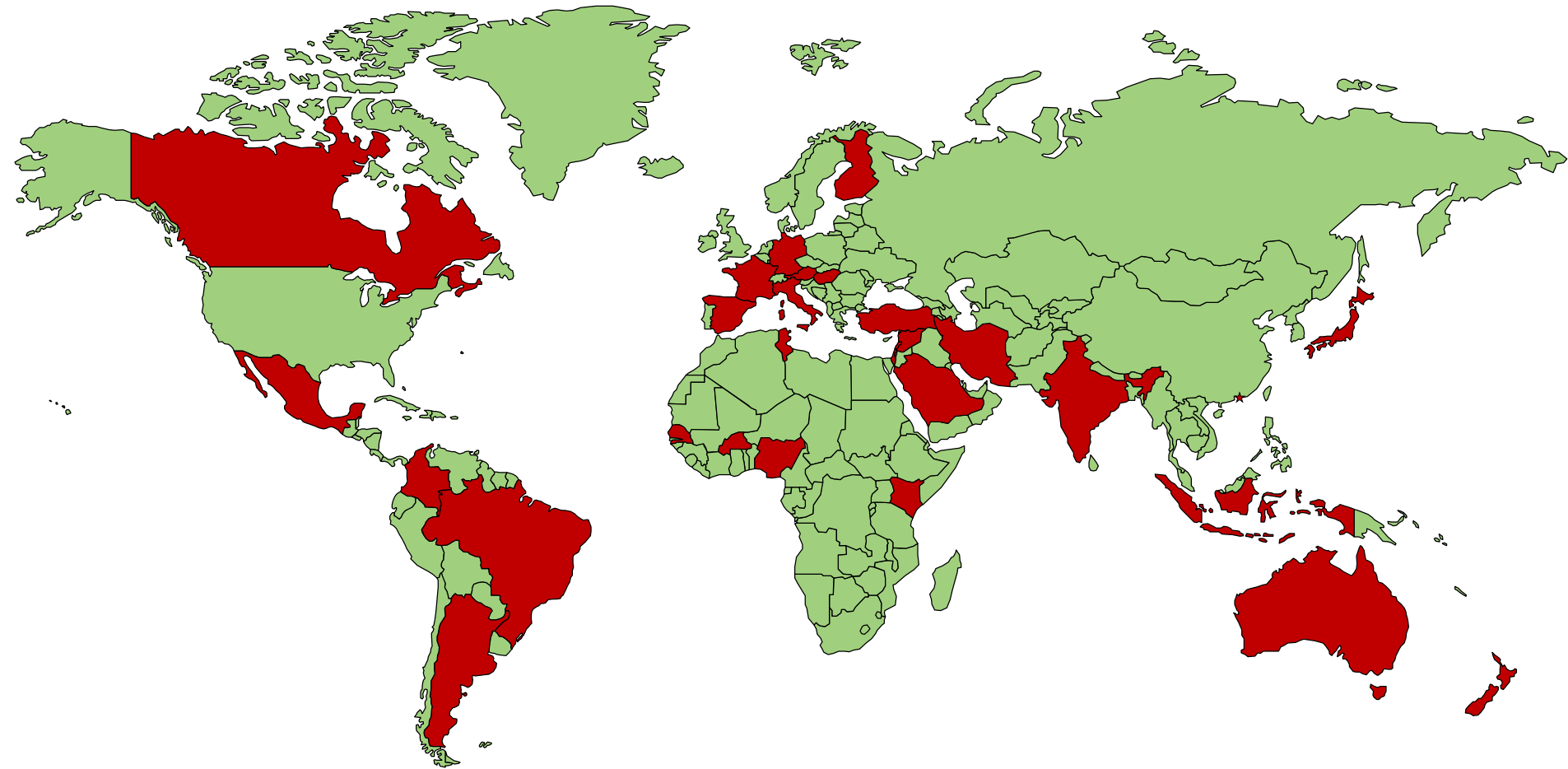
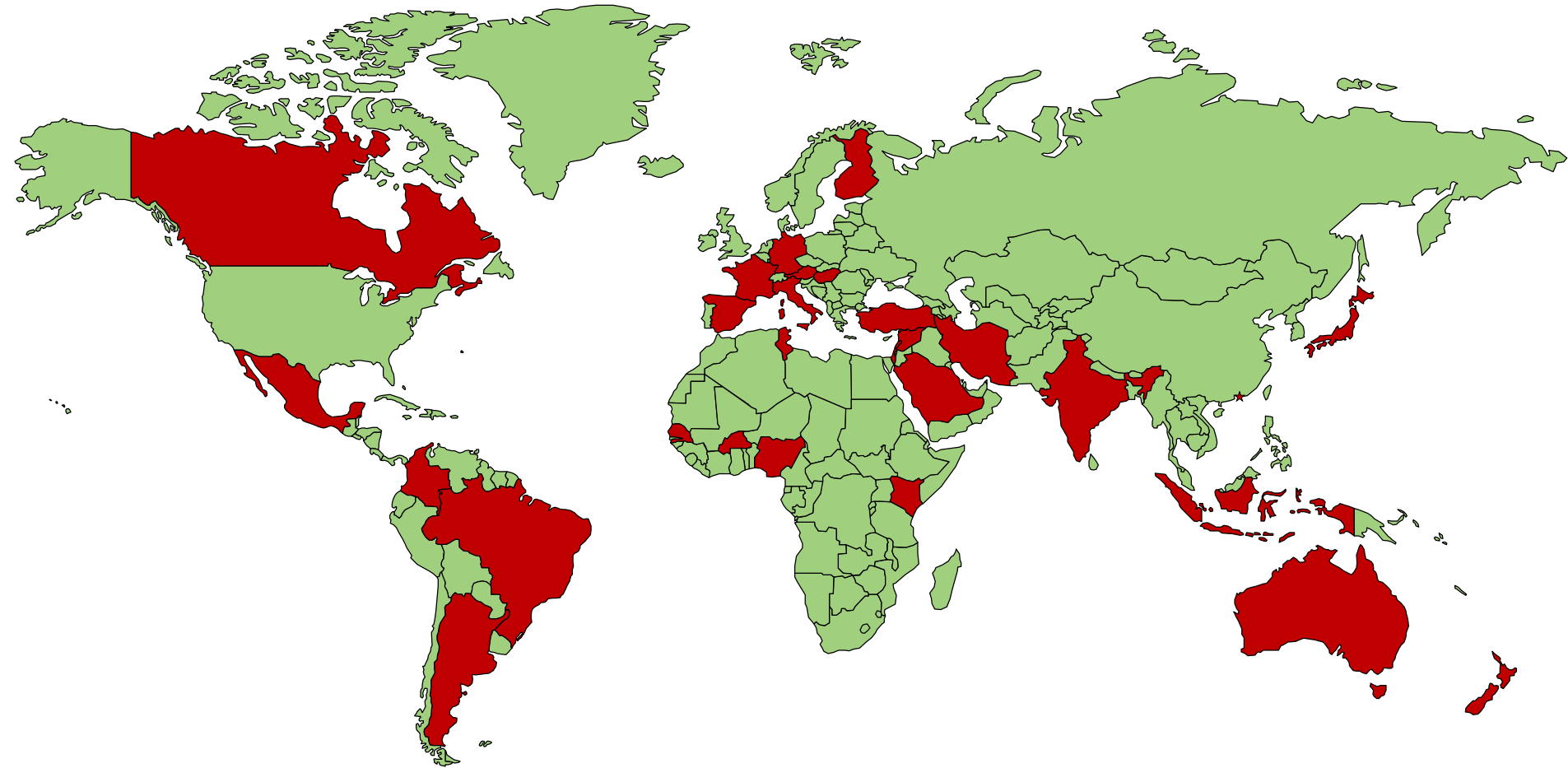


WOMEN FILMMAKERS WORLD TOUR



Nick Davis • Northwestern Alumni Association • Spring 2020

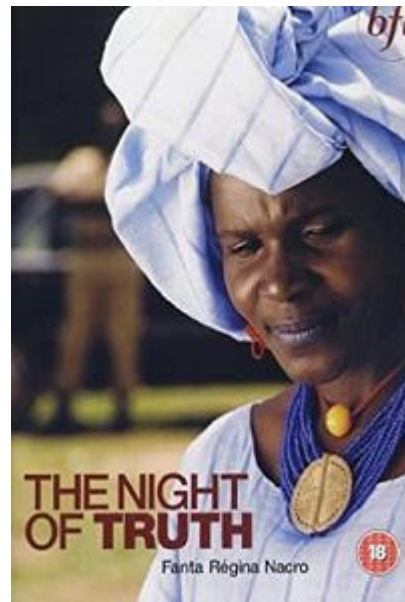
...AND ALL YOU NEED IS AN INTERNET CONNECTION!



My portion of the itinerary for “A Day with Northwestern” was called

“The World Is Round, People!”: Global Women Filmmakers of the 21st Century

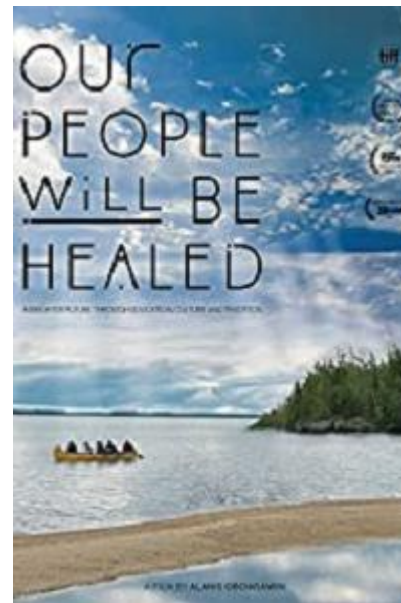
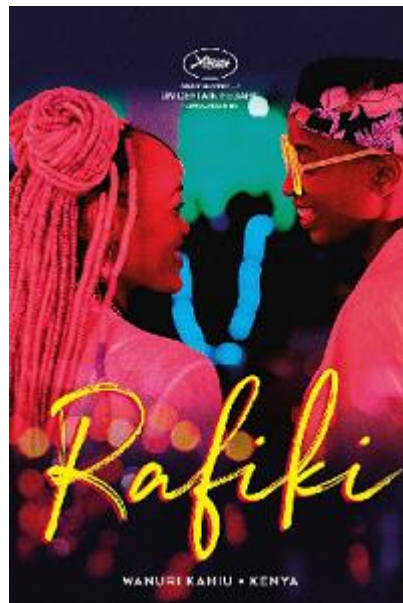
The goal of the presentation was to acquaint audiences with several ambitious, distinctive, influential women filmmakers working across six continents, and to sketch some of the aesthetic, cultural, political, and economic conditions in which they produce their feature films.



I look forward to one day sharing this material in person with the Northwestern Alumni Association and its invited guests.

In the meantime, especially as we all hunker down in our homes, prohibited from travel and thirsty for stories to engross and distract us, I've curated this list of 30 films released since the year 2000, made by 30 female directors hailing from 30 different countries, *all of which you can access through major streaming services.*

Click through for information about the films and links for seeing them.



KAINAI FIRST NATION





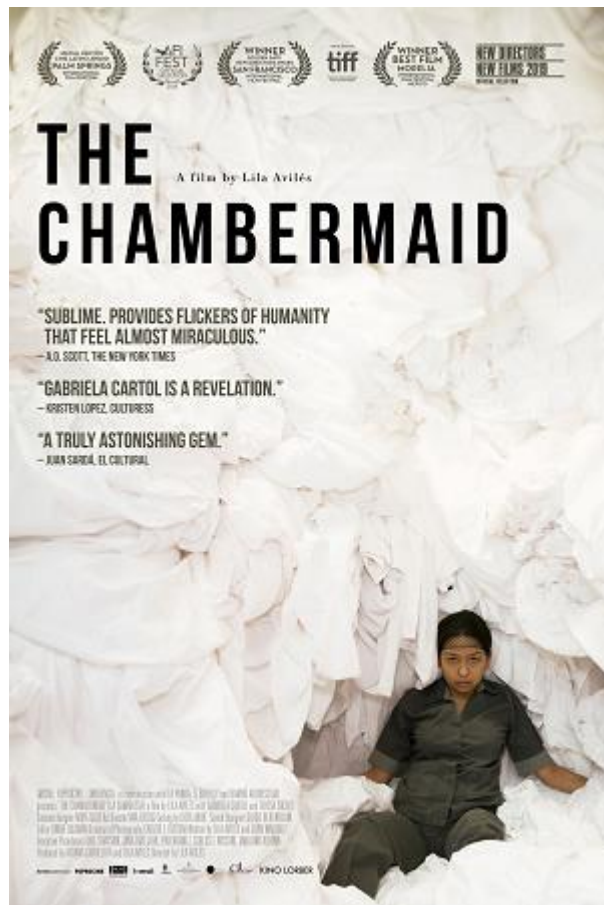
The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open (dirs. Elle-Máíja Tailfeathers and Kathleen Hepburn, 2019)

Tailfeathers, of Blackfoot and Sámi descent, co-directed, co-wrote, and co-stars in this story of two Native women from different social classes who meet in the midst of a domestic violence incident in which one is the target. In real time—the movie presents, like last year’s *1917*, as one long, continuous take—these two strangers must negotiate how to seek help for the abuse survivor while also sizing up each other’s impulses and identities. This prize-winning drama, shot in Vancouver, is a tense, moving exemplar of Canadian indigenous cinema, where women have played key roles.

Currently available:
[Netflix](#)

MEXICO





Currently available:

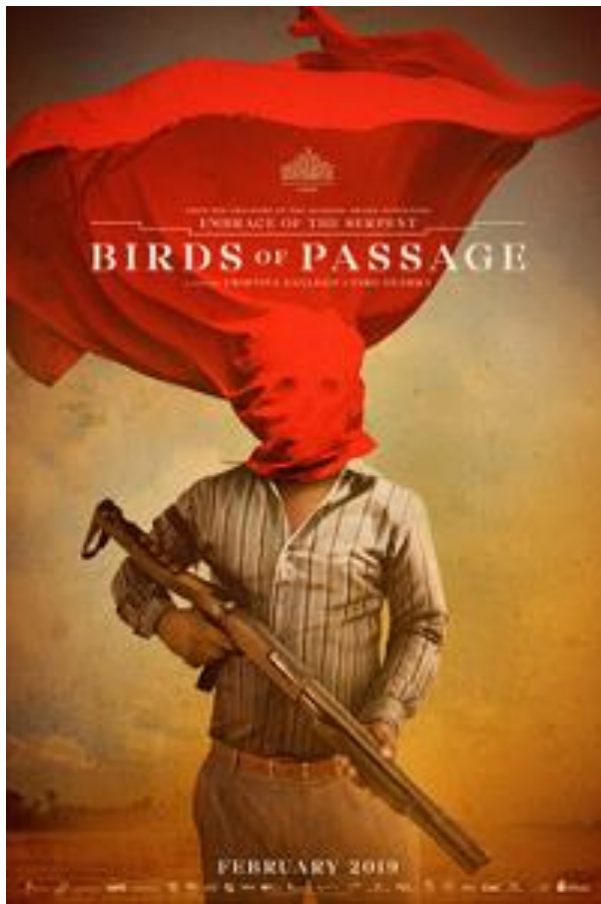
[Amazon](#), [Google](#), [YouTube](#)

The Chambermaid (dir. Lila Avilés, 2018)

Eve (Gabriela Cartol) works as a maid in an upscale Mexico City hotel, where the gap between her material and economic realities and the almost hyperbolically privileged milieu of her job grows steadily harder to manage, but also hard to articulate. Coming one year after Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma*, with its divisively glossy style and slightly aloof portrait of an indigenous Mexican domestic worker, Avilés's film offers a less overtly monumentalizing take on a similar figure in contemporary times. This film also declines to delve too far into its main character's head, but its aesthetics and thematic upshots contrast interestingly with *Roma*'s. Also of interest: Eve's shifting relations to other women she knows at her workplace.

COLOMBIA





Birds of Passage (dirs. Cristina Gallego and
Ciro Guerra, 2018)

Co-directing for the first time after building a noteworthy international career as a producer, Gallego also conceived the idea for this fresh, surprising combination of a gangster epic with an anthropological study of rarely-depicted indigenous communities. As a 1960s-era surge in the Colombian drug trade generates dizzying profits, even the isolated Wayuu enclaves are drawn into violent clashes over money and dominion. Consistently noting the pivotal roles that women play in these warring families, *Birds of Passage* is as slickly crafted, tensely scripted, and sweeping in scope as *Goodfellas*, but with a cultural and historical specificity that movies of this stripe don't always attempt.

Included with:

[HBO GO](#)

Available for purchase on:

[Amazon](#), [Google](#), [YouTube](#)

ARGENTINA





Zama (dir. Lucrecia Martel, 2017)

After only four features, starting with 2001's *La Ciénaga* and 2004's *The Holy Girl*, former Pedro Almodóvar protégée Martel has become one of the film world's most admired artists—especially renowned for the meticulous care she takes with her off-kilter, arresting visual compositions and with her hyper-detailed, frequently adventurous soundscapes. Even within a distinguished body of work, *Zama* is her crowning glory: a formally demanding, highly eccentric, increasingly dreamlike study of Europe's 18th-century colonization of South America, focused through a mid-level sentry who deludes himself that he's a titan. Not to everyone's taste, I'm sure, but if you're on its deadpan-absurdist wavelength, it's a treasure.

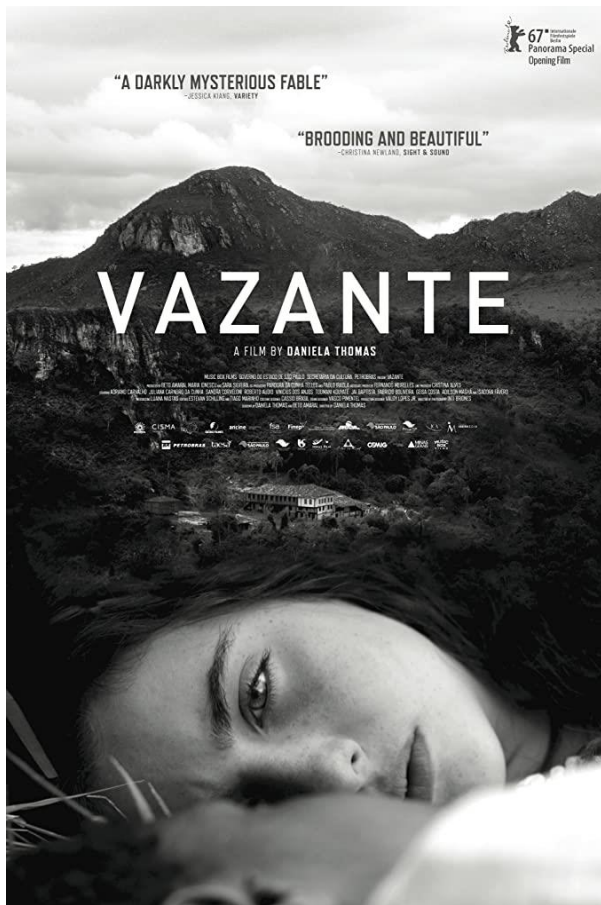
Included with:
[Amazon Prime](#)

Available for purchase on:
[Google](#), [iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

A longer piece I wrote:
[Best Films of the 2010s](#)



BRAZIL



Included with:

[Amazon Prime](#)

Available for rental on:

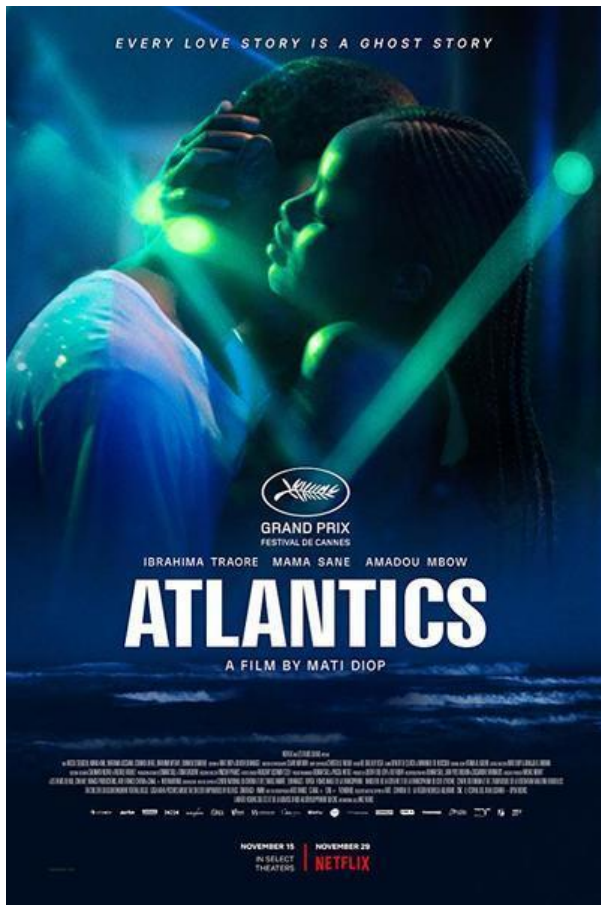
[Google](#), [iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

Vazante (dir. Daniela Thomas, 2017)

Thomas, a close collaborator for many years with fellow Brazilian Walter Salles (*Central Station*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*), assumed directing duties by herself for the first time with this disorienting period epic. In early 19th-century Brazil, a plantation master loses his wife in childbirth, promptly marries her niece, then heads out on another slaving expedition. Left alone in isolation, the young and powerless wife cannot help but compare her lack of freedom to that of the African-descended slaves around her, even as the film makes clear that their plights are not identical. Like *Zama*, this film marshals a dreamlike, almost ghostly style to pose questions about colonial and patriarchal violence over time.

SENEGAL





Atlantics (dir. Mati Diop, 2019)

French-Senegalese director and co-writer Diop became the first black woman *ever* to compete for the main prize at the Cannes Film Festival, and she nearly won, placing as runner-up to *Parasite* at the final ceremony. If anything, I like her movie even better—a shape-shifting political/romantic mystery with supernatural elements. When her secret, working-class boyfriend sets out on a dangerous boat journey to seek work in Europe, Senegalese teen Ada has no option but to marry the rich man her family has selected for her. The night of her wedding, her bed spontaneously combusts. Around that time, local building developers who've been stiffing their workers start being haunted. Could these events be related?...

Currently available:

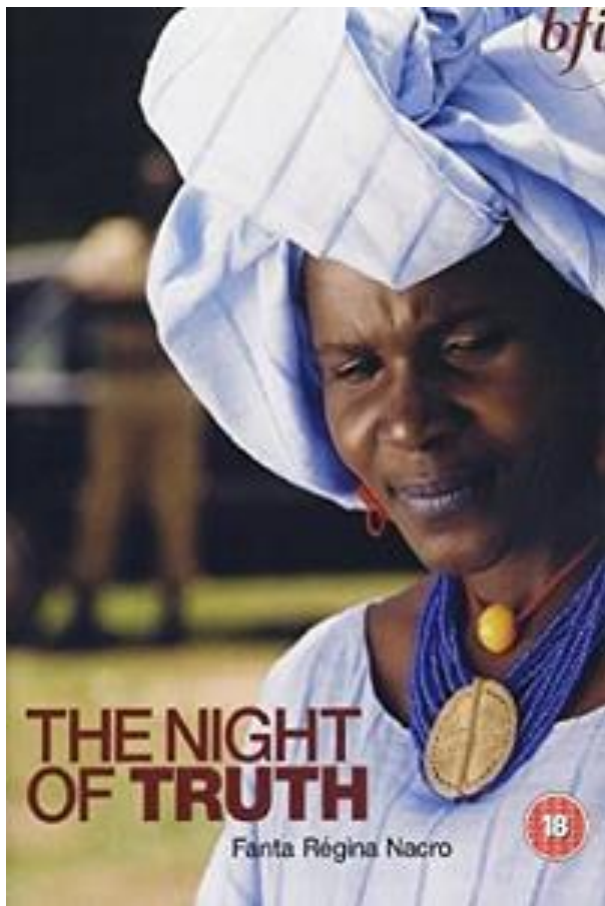
[Netflix](#)

A longer piece I wrote:

[Best Films of the 2010s](#)

BURKINA FASO





The Night of Truth (dir. Fanta Régina Nacro, 2004)

Burkina Faso is one of several West African countries with a long and thriving tradition of narrative filmmaking, even though U.S. film distributors do a terrible job of promoting their work here. Nacro, the first Burkinabe woman to make a steady career in cinema, started as a film editor and a director of distinguished shorts before making the leap into features with this story, focused on the leaders of two tribes, who are trying to broker a peace accord after ten bloody years of warfare within the fictional country they both inhabit. Exploring politics of factionalism without relying on any specific nation's history, Nacro also offers a powerful vision of how divided peoples might reunite.

Currently available:
[Fandor, via Amazon](#)

NIGERIA





King of Boys (dir. Kemi Adetiba, 2018)

Adetiba began as a popular TV presenter and spokesperson across Nigerian broadcasting. It surely helped her career that her father is a powerful figure in that country's media industry. After leaving that work to study at the New York Film Academy, she became her own cinematic force to be reckoned with, following up her well-received romantic comedy *The Wedding Party* (2016) with this very different, extraordinarily popular thriller/drama about a female business mogul who decides to enter the cutthroat world of national politics—where she proves able to dish out as much as she receives, if not more. Adetiba's interest in exploring how much women risk in seeking positions of authority may not be coincidental.

Included with:

[Netflix](#)

Available for rental on:

[Google](#), [iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

TUNISIA





As I Open My Eyes (dir. Leyla Bouzid, 2015)

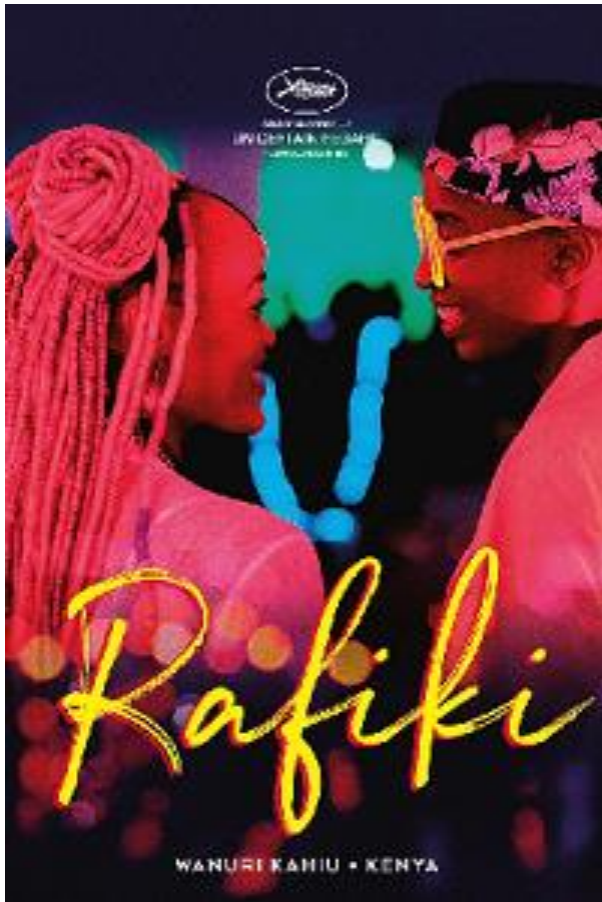
Like Iran's Samira Makhmalbaf or the U.S.'s Sofia Coppola, Tunisia's Leyla Bouzid had the advantage of being the daughter of an already-established director. (Her father is the noted filmmaker Nouri Bouzid.) However, like these other women, she announced a distinctive style and independent talent with her first feature. Filmed and set in the wake of the Arab Spring protests—amid signs that this liberating victory might be short-lived—this richly-lensed drama follows a gifted high school student who risks a possible career in medicine, as well as her conservative mother's ire, by becoming the vocalist of a band that plays risky, protest-themed songs. The music is as memorable as the story, images, and stellar performances.

Currently available:

[Google](#), [iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

KENYA





Currently available:
[Amazon](#), [iTunes](#)

Rafiki (dir. Wanuri Kahiu, 2018)

Dismayed by local audiences' and Western financiers' seemingly inexhaustible yearning to see images of African misery, filmmaker Kahiu set out to craft an aesthetic she calls "Afro bubble gum," telling hopeful stories and filling the screen with the kinds of luscious neons and pastels that we almost never see in movies set in her part of the world. *Rafiki* isn't all flowers and sunshine; not only does it tell a story of love between women, making them vulnerable to communal violence, but the film itself was suppressed by Kenyan authorities even after its popular premiere at Cannes. Just as the script fights for an ambiguously optimistic ending, however, Kahiu managed to get her movie onto screens around the world, including in the U.S.

INDONESIA





Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts (dir. Mouly Surya, 2017)

Indonesian cinema doesn't have much of a "Spaghetti western" tradition, much less from an explicitly feminist standpoint, but at age 37, third-time film director Mouly Surya decided she'd change all that. Styled very close to a *Django Unchained*-type homage, *Marlina* begins with the harrowing rape of a rural woman living temporarily by herself. The three subsequent "acts" cover her pursuit of the men who perpetrated this assault, plus her refusal to suffer fools along the way. The stunning wide-screen vistas of Indonesia yield immense visual interest but also suggest a national allegory, where a whole culture is indicted as a kind of lawless frontier, especially for women.

Included with:

[Amazon Prime](#)

Available for rental on:

[iTunes](#)

AUSTRALIA





The Babadook (dir. Jennifer Kent, 2014)

Jennifer Kent's inventive, unnerving tale of a haunted children's book achieved a global impact, critically and commercially, that is extremely rare for a debut feature, a horror movie, *or* an Australian independent. With creepy effects work that suggests a handmade object—miles away from the conspicuously synthetic CGI now customary for this genre—Kent constructed a bogeyman that has already passed into pop-cultural legend, popping up everywhere from protest marches to Pride parades. But, like *Rosemary's Baby*, Kent's film is grounded in intense characterization, centering a mother still mourning her husband and struggling to raise her emotionally volatile young son, who is processing his own grief.

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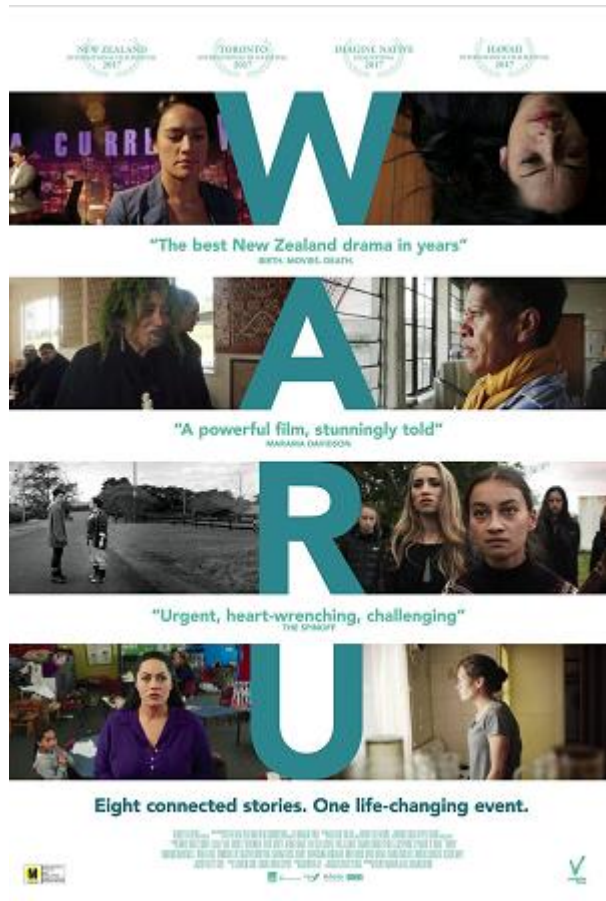
[DIRECTV](#), [Showtime](#)

Available for rental on:

[Amazon](#), [Google](#),
[iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

NEW ZEALAND





Available for rental on:
[Amazon](#), [Google](#),
[iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

Waru (eight different directors, 2017)

Waru represents both a bracing formal exercise and a major groundbreaker for Native cinema, as the first feature entirely produced by Maori women writers, directors, and producers. The story unfolds in eight installments, each casting different light on the inciting incident—the mysterious death of a young eight-year-old boy named Waru on a Maori reservation. (“Waru” is the Maori word for “eight.”) Each vignette is filmed as a single shot, with none of the digital trickery that enables this illusion in a film like *1917* or even *The Body Remembers*... Ranging in subject from spiritual practices to systemic racism and patriarchy to a tight community’s failure to protect its most vulnerable members, *Waru* is brave, rare, ambitious, unforgettable.

HONG KONG





Currently available:

[Amazon](#)

A Simple Life (dir. Ann Hui, 2011)

Breakthroughs for women directors in the People's Republic of China took time (and few of the most auspicious examples are currently easy to stream), but Hong Kong and Taiwan have historically been more accessible. Hui's career counts as major for *any* filmmaker anywhere, having won Hong Kong's Best Director prize six times and worked in a range of genres from historical epics to melodramas to martial-arts thrillers. The extremely moving *A Simple Life*—about a man taking care of his family's longtime housekeeper after she suffers a stroke—was so successful that Hui reversed her announced retirement. Hui's second film to win Hong Kong's awards for Best Picture, Director, Actress, Actor, *and* Screenplay.

JAPAN





Available for rental on:

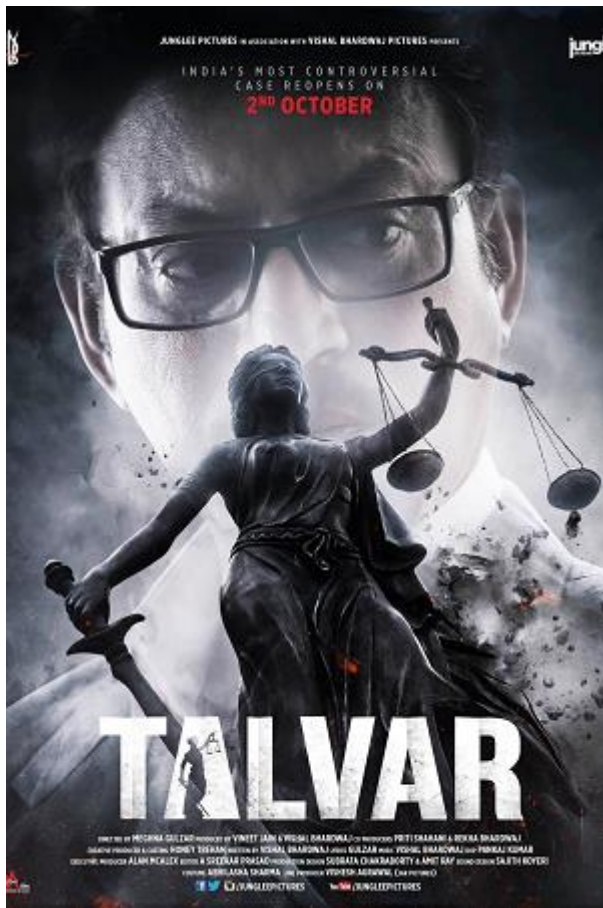
[Amazon](#), [Google](#),
[iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

Sweet Bean (dir. Naomi Kawase, 2015)

Japan's is another prolific and storied cinema that was conspicuously slow to support work from women filmmakers. By far the most renowned is Naomi Kawase, a former maker of documentaries who transitioned into scripted features, many of them reflecting her Buddhist conceptions of nature and life/death cycles. Kawase has competed at Cannes five times and even won the runner-up prize for *The Mourning Forest* (2007), but not one of these movies secured U.S. distribution—further proof of structural failings in world cinema culture. *Sweet Bean*, an audience-friendly, food-centered story starring Kirin Kiki of *Shoplifters*, was her one movie to find a berth in U.S. markets, where it did quite well.

INDIA





Talvar (dir. Meghna Gulzar, 2015)

Gulzar is another member of a distinguished family of artists; her father, a renowned poet and lyricist, is best known to many Americans for collaborating on the Oscar-winning songs of *Slumdog Millionaire*. She built her own separate career in filmmaking for nearly 20 years before achieving her first critical success with *Talvar*, a suspenseful drama based around a real-life, still-unsolved murder, one of whose victims was a teenage girl. (The star, Irrfan Khan, may be recognizable to more than Indian film fans, having starred in U.S. productions like *The Namesake* and *Life of Pi*.) Though Gulzar found even greater acclaim for her next film, *Raazi* (2018), *Talvar* is emblematic of her enthusiasm for projects linked to social justice.

Included with:

[Netflix](#)

Available for rental on:

[Google](#), [iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

IRAN





Ava (dir. Sadaf Foroughi, 2017)

Iranian cinema, one of the world's oldest and most beautiful filmic legacies, has always included successful women filmmakers and even an explicitly feminist counter-tradition, hampered in many respects by the Ayatollah's takeover in 1979 but still sustained in many forms today. Government censorship and, even harsher, widespread economic sanctions have severely constrained Iran's highly-lauded film industry. Many directors now work outside the country, including Iranian-Canadian Foroughi. Her debut feature *Ava* profiles a headstrong schoolgirl in Tehran with an over-protective mother and a penchant for self-sabotage. Foroughi is as bold in her visual choices as in her impressively audacious storytelling.

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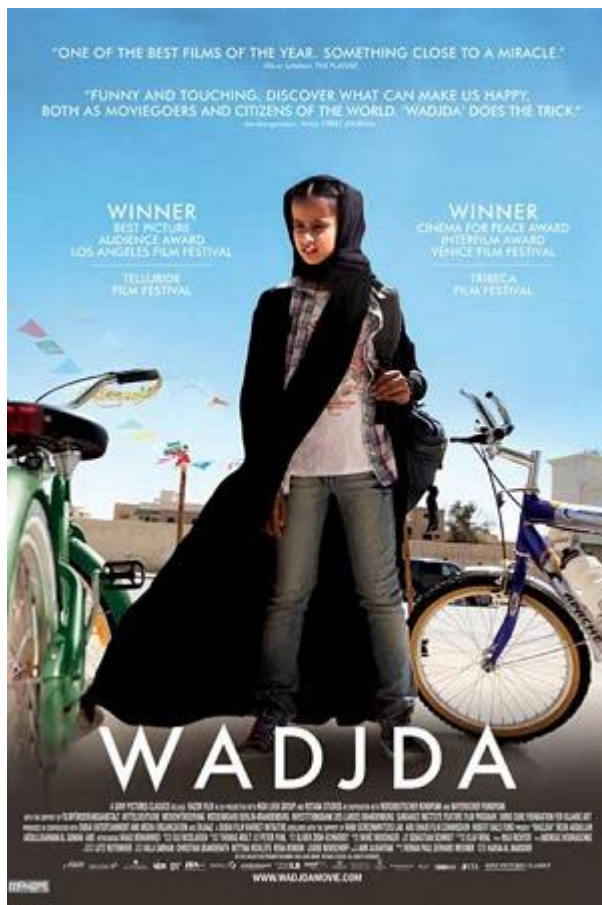
[Amazon Prime](#)

Available for rental on:

[Grasshopper](#), a *great* and under-patronized service!

SAUDI ARABIA





Wadjda (dir. Haifaa al-Mansour, 2012)

Wadjda (“Wah-jih-duh”) was the first full-length feature film produced entirely within Saudi Arabia, much less the first scripted feature made by a Saudi woman. Supported with funds from a Saudi prince, *Wadjda* pointedly centers itself on an impetuous female character—a 10-year-old girl who sets her sights on a green bicycle that she’s determined to ride, despite protests from her society and even her own mother that this would be an indecent activity for a young girl. She also sets about raising the money to buy the bike herself. Al-Mansour’s success with *Wadjda*, which played all around the world, was remarkable enough, but she has already released two *more* features, including one about Mary Shelley.

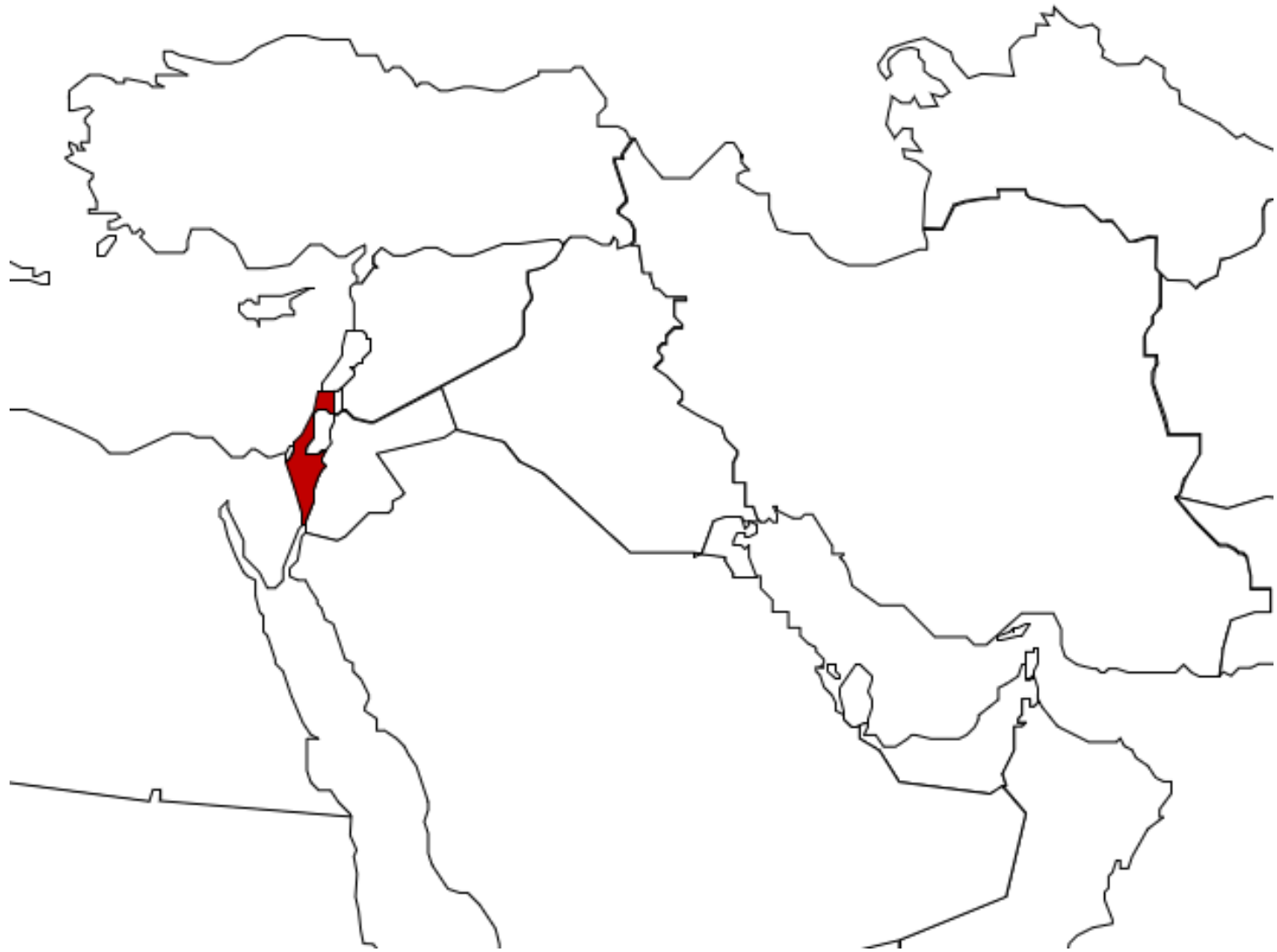
Included with:

[Criterion Channel](#), though this excellent service rotates most titles every month

Available for rental:

[Amazon](#), [Google](#), [iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

ISRAEL



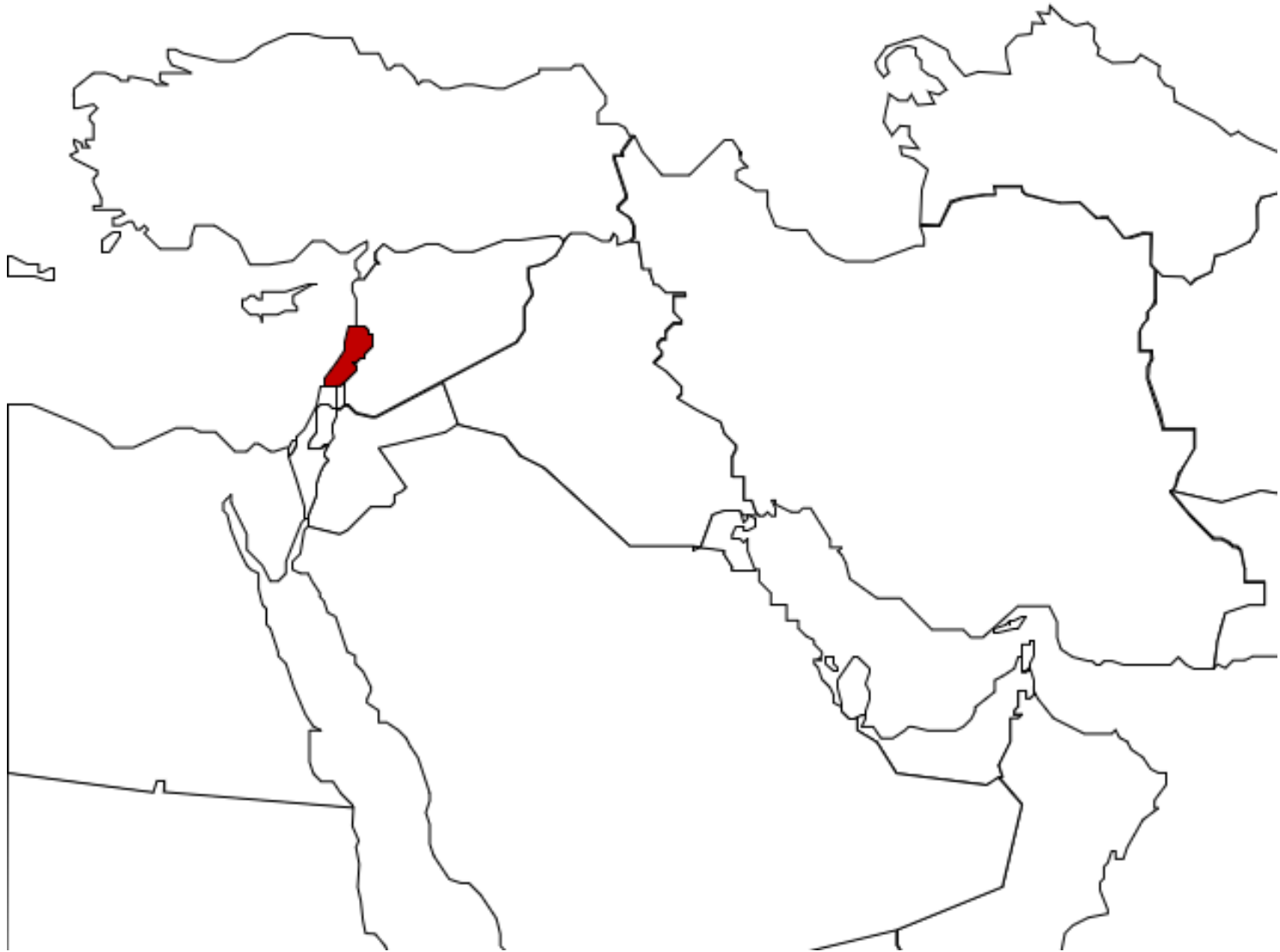


Available for rental:
[Google](#), [iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem (dirs. Ronit and Shlomi Elkabetz, 2014)

Ronit Elkabetz, award-winning actress in such acclaimed Israeli films as *Late Marriage* (2001) and *The Band's Visit* (2007), also took up directing before her death of cancer at age 51. She and her brother Shlomi collaborated on a trilogy of films about Viviane Amsalem (played by Elkabetz), a spirited woman trapped in a volatile marriage and thwarted in her escalating pursuit of a *gett*, the only form of divorce sanctioned by traditional Jewish law. The final film in the trilogy attained the most visibility outside of Israel, attracting several awards and raising the profile of divorce law as an ongoing feminist issue. It translates fully even if you haven't seen the prior installments.

LEBANON





Capernaum (dir. Nadine Labaki, 2018)

Labaki started out as an actress and music-video director before making a fairly quick, prodigious transition into feature filmmaking with *Caramel* (2007), a comedy set in a beauty salon, and *Where Do We Go Now?* (2010), an update of the *Lysistrata* myth, blending drama, comedy, and musical numbers. That film won the Toronto Film Festival's People's Choice Award, an auspicious honor previously given to *Amélie*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Precious*, and *The King's Speech*. Her third feature, an Oscar nominee, is astounding in scope and ambition, following a young boy (the *amazing* Zain al Rafeea) who sues his parents for bringing him into a terrible world, then starts to bond with a homeless Ethiopian refugee and her infant son.

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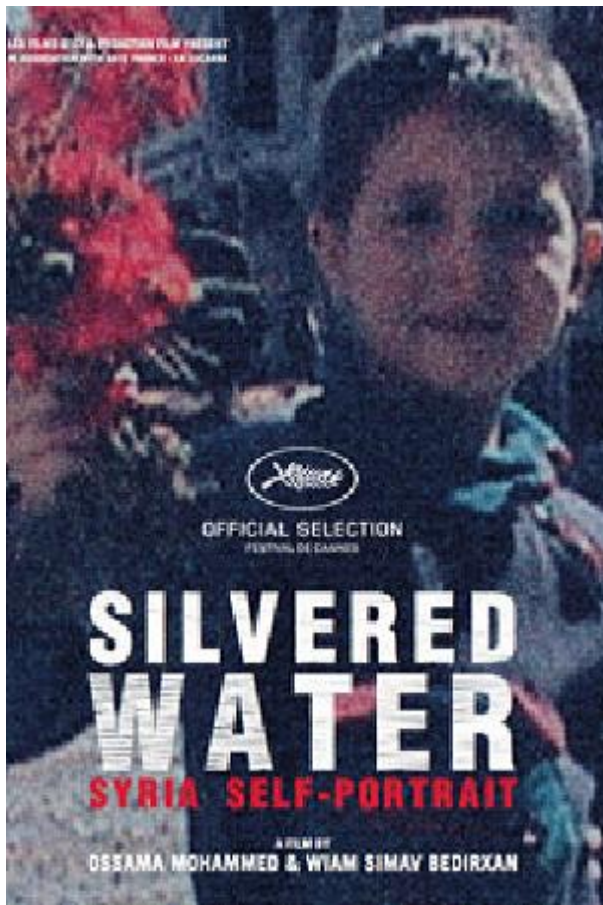
[DIRECTV](#), [STARZ](#)

Available for rental on:

[Amazon](#), [Google](#),
[iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

SYRIA





Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait (dirs. Ossama Mohammed and Wiam Simav Bedirxan, 2014)

Bedirxan, an elementary school teacher by trade, became a filmmaker of necessity when she refused to leave her home city of Homs after Assad's regime began its vicious attack on Syria's own citizens. Intent on broadcasting the city's suffering to a wide audience, Bedirxan secured an illegal camera and sent footage to Ossama Mohammed, a well-known Syrian director who had already fled to France. Their collaboration stands as one of the earliest and most powerful chronicles of Syria's nightmare, including footage from several other Syrians as well, much of it submitted anonymously. Very tough but important and inspiring viewing.

Available for rental:
[Google](#), [iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

A longer piece I wrote:
[Best Films of the 2010s](#)

TURKEY





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this excellent service rotates
most titles every month

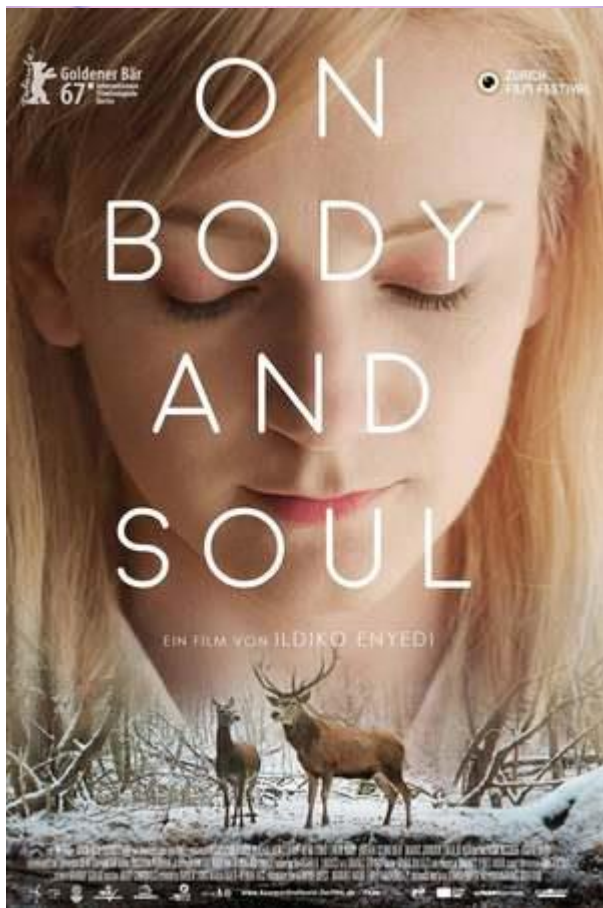
Available for rental:
[Amazon](#), [Google](#),
[iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

Mustang (dir. Deniz Gamze Ergüven, 2015)

The best-known and most highly acclaimed film directed by a Turkish woman is actually French. First-time director Ergüven moved to France during childhood and developed the script with support from the Cannes Film Festival (though some of the production funds also came from Turkish and German sources). The plot concerns five young sisters in rural Turkey whose relatives are concerned about their casual interactions with boys. They thus instigate a domestic lockdown and a campaign to get all five sisters married off. While some critics have questioned *Mustang*'s portrait of Turkey as unilaterally patriarchal, even abusive to girls, this stirring drama amassed a huge global audience, fomenting valuable debates.

HUNGARY





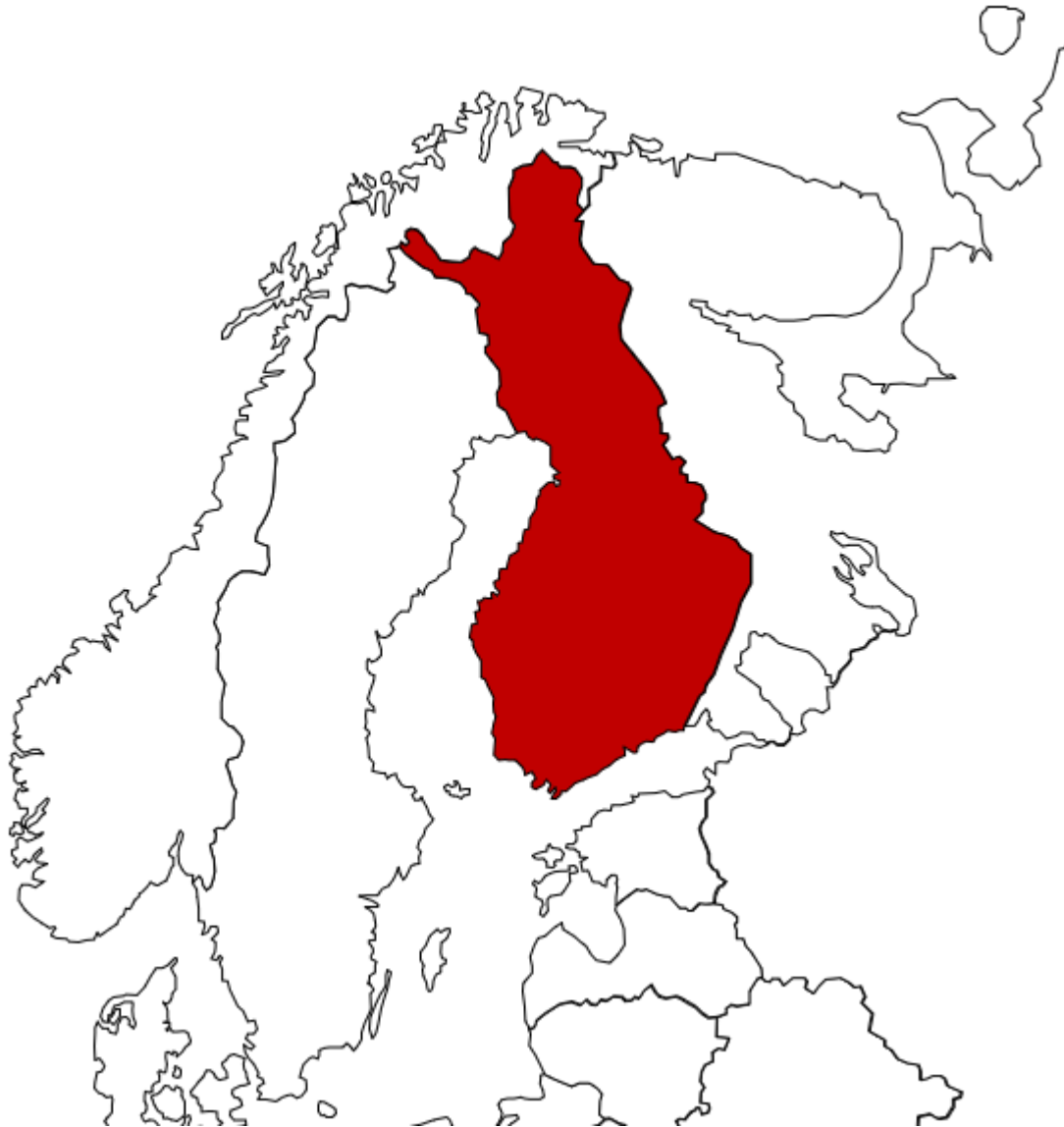
On Body and Soul (dir. Ildikó Enyedi, 2017)

Enyedi is a former conceptual artist who transitioned to film around the time the Iron Curtain fell. She releases a feature about once per decade, but they consistently draw major awards. Her most recent work won the top prize at the Berlin Film Festival—alongside Cannes and Venice, one of the world's three most eminent competitive festivals—and was eventually nominated for the Best International Film Oscar. The surrealist premise involves two employees at the same meat processing plant, one autistic and one physically disabled, who realize they are sharing the same dreams, in which they both appear. An enigmatic, up-and-down quasi-romance proceeds from there.

Currently available:

[Netflix](#)

FINLAND





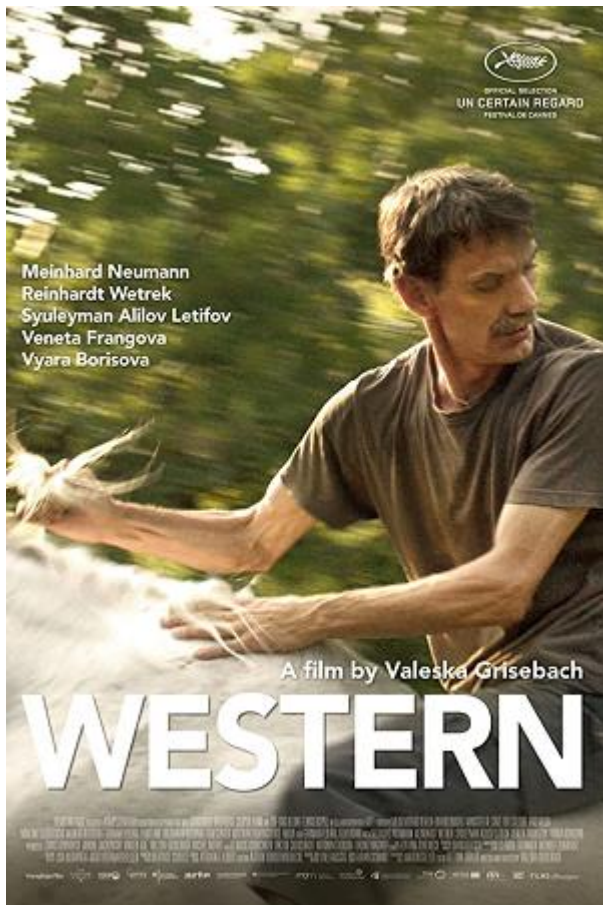
Currently available:
[iTunes](#)

Maria's Paradise (dir. Zaida Bergroth, 2019)

Finland may be less famed for its film culture than its closest neighbors, Sweden and Russia, but from the eccentric dramedies of national hero Aki Kaurismäki to the famous Midnight Sun Film Festival, the country has a robust cinematic pulse. Bergroth has grown into one of its most auspicious recent talents, and Chicago has been a great place to follow her progress. Her movie *The Good Son* (2011) won the New Directors Competition at our city's festival; her latest, *Maria's Paradise*, played there in the fall. The stranger-than-fiction plot concerns an orphan who falls under the dangerous sway of a real female cult leader in the 1920s, leading to a contest over freedom and power where women hold all the key roles.

GERMANY





Western (dir. Valeska Grisebach, 2017)

For excellent reasons, commentators often allege that we won't see richer, more complex female characters in cinema until more women writer-directors get more opportunities to make films. I share that opinion but also believe that women often perceive men and all-male communities in ways other observers do not, and that cinema could use more of that insight. A case in point is this stunning drama, simple yet profound, tracking high-noon tensions between a German construction crew and the small Bulgarian town where they are working. This allegory of economic and social tensions in contemporary Europe is also a trenchant character study of a deep introvert with a shady past, plus an incisive look at how men interact.

Included with:

[Amazon Prime](#)

Available for rental on:

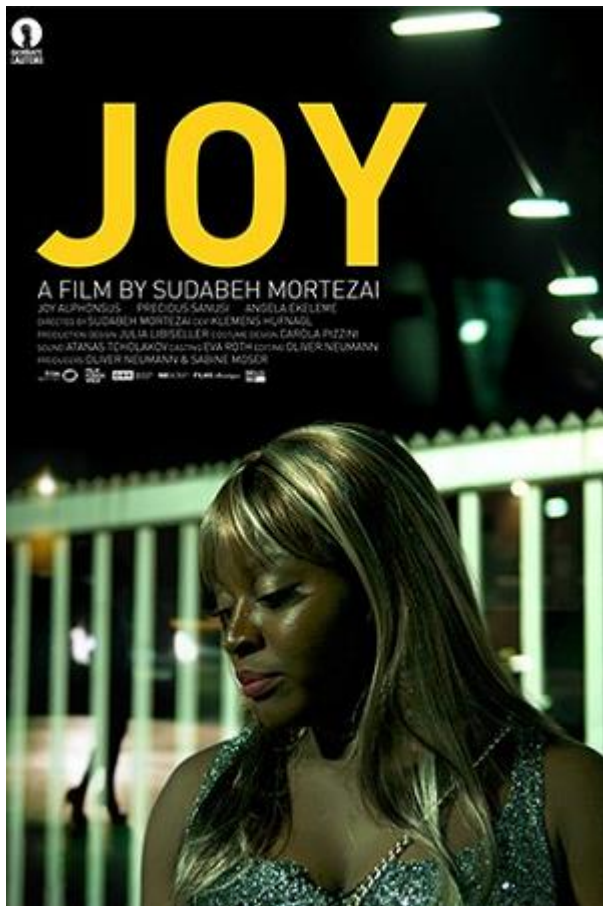
[Google](#), [iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

A longer piece I wrote:

[Best Films of the 2010s](#)

AUSTRIA





Currently available:

[Netflix](#)

Joy (dir. Sudabeh Mortezaei, 2018)

Not famous as a paragon of racial diversity, Austria has nonetheless had greater recent success than most at keeping far-right populists from claiming top government positions, while trying to preserve progressive social gains. In both story and production, *Joy* challenges typical images of Austrian society. Written and directed by an Iranian immigrant, *Joy* centers around Nigerian women arriving in Vienna, frequently forced to undertake sex work as a survival strategy. The title character has a complex epiphany as ever-younger girls become her colleagues, working for the same female pimp. Rejected from Oscar contention for being “insufficiently Austrian,” this is top-flight cinema that won awards in many places.

ITALY





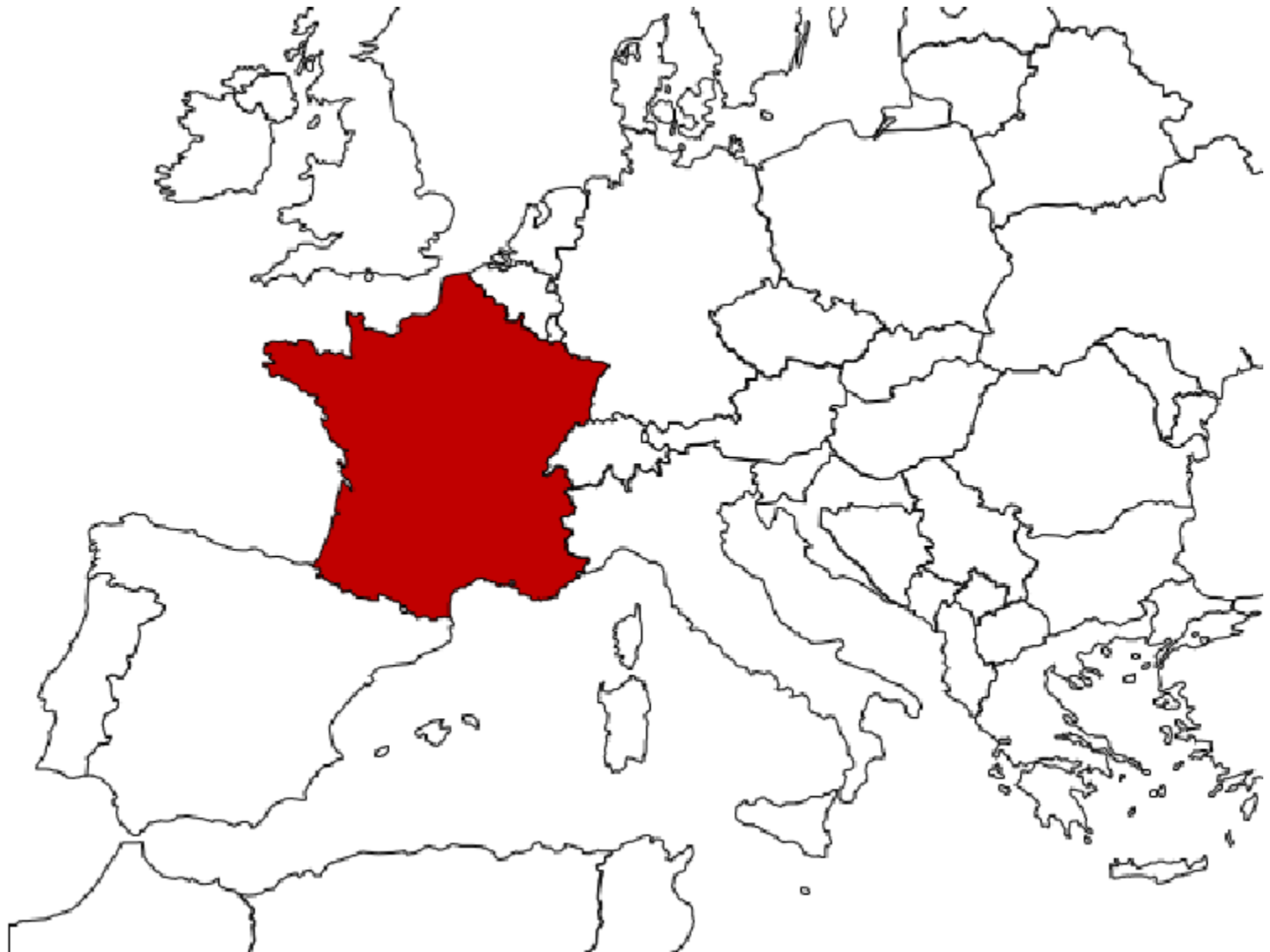
Currently available:

[Netflix](#)

Happy as Lazzaro (dir. Alice Rohrwacher, 2018)

If I were compiling a list of the most talented film directors to emerge in the last decade, Rohrwacher would be at or near the top. Her attention to rustic Italian lifestyles remains a signature across her three features, but they show amazing range in other ways. *Corpo Celeste* (2011) and *The Wonders* (2014) are both fantastic, but perhaps her peak thus far is *Happy as Lazzaro*, which starts as a portrait of a farming clan working in antiquarian style and in rural isolation in the 1970s. After a strange event, hard-working farmhand Lazzaro wakes from a sleep and finds himself in the socially and economically downcast of Italy of 2017. A slippery and engrossing modern fairy tale.

FRANCE





Available for rental on:

[Amazon](#), [Google](#),
[iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

A longer piece I wrote:

[Best Films of the 2010s](#)

Things to Come (dir. Mia Hansen-Løve, 2016)

Actress Isabelle Huppert, best-known for her boundary-pushing and sexually explicit work in movies like *The Piano Teacher* (2001) and *Elle* (2016), seemed like an unexpected match with director Hansen-Løve, who specializes in soft-spoken, frequently youth-centered dramas like *Goodbye, First Love* (2011) and *Eden* (2014). The collaboration coaxed out the best in both, with Huppert starring as a philosophy professor going through an unexpected divorce. Around the same time, a former pupil resurfaces in her life, challenging some aspects of her work in which she has taken pride. If you can imagine *Something's Gotta Give* re-written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, you're somewhere in the vicinity of this great movie.

SPAIN





Summer 1993 (dir. Carla Simón, 2017)

Like *Capernaum*, the Lebanese film on which this “world tour” previously alighted, *Summer 1993* contains two of the most extraordinary child performances I have ever seen. However, unlike the production scale and elaborate techniques on display in *Capernaum*, *Summer 1993* is the kind of intimate, character-based drama where you can easily forget the camera, or the presence of anyone behind the scenes. Frida (the incredible Laia Artigas), a city girl newly orphaned at six years old, is sent to live with rural relatives. As idyllic as her new home life is, she’s understandably confused about where her parents have gone, jealous of her younger “sister,” and challenged by other feelings she can’t express. Every note perfect!

Available for rental on:

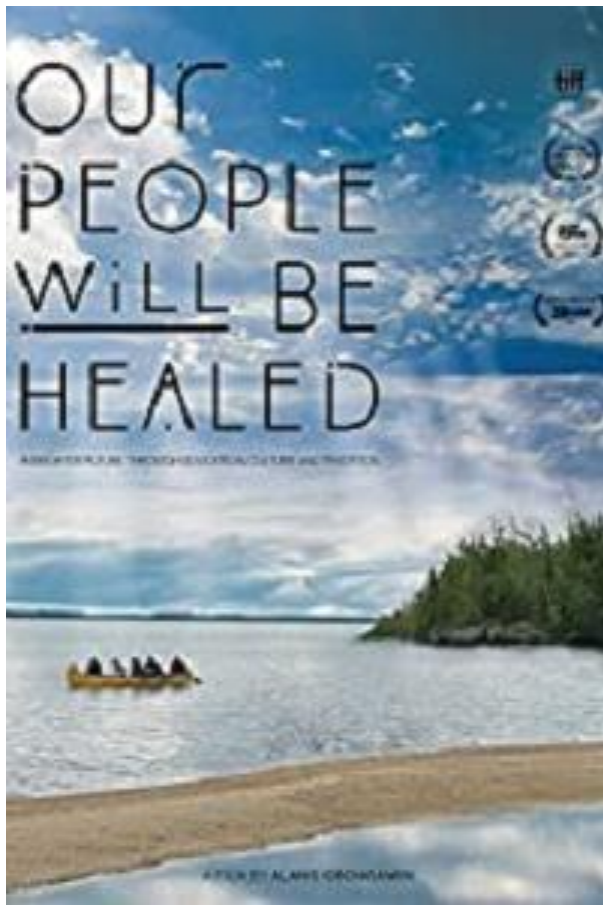
[Amazon](#), [Google](#),
[iTunes](#), [YouTube](#)

A longer piece I wrote:

[Best Films of the 2010s](#)

ABENAKI FIRST NATION





Included with:

[Amazon Prime](#)

Streaming for free:

[Nat'l Film Board of Canada](#)

A longer piece I wrote:

[Best Films of the 2010s](#)

Our People Will Be Healed (dir. Alanis Obomsawin, 2017)

And we complete our world tour right back where we started, among indigenous Canadian filmmakers. This is the only documentary I've included in this list, so take it as a gesture to the extraordinary wealth of nonfiction cinema by women. Furthermore, by contrast to the recently-emerging talents who dominated my selections, Obomsawin is a living legend: this was her 50th documentary, premiering shortly after she turned 85, and she hasn't stopped yet! It's also one of her most uplifting studies, profiling a school for indigenous students in what many know as Manitoba. That school seems to be reversing a long, grim history by supporting these pupils through graduation.

I hope you enjoy any of the movies I've included that you have time and interest to watch—and of course, there are legions more!

Since I elected to highlight more or less contemporary films, I have omitted scores of women who have expanded the world of movies since their invention. We will honor them when the time comes for my intended lecture, while digging further into some of these recent films.

In the meantime, please stay as healthy and protected as possible, and feel free to write me at nicholas-davis@northwestern.edu.

