

The 10 Best Undistributed Movies of 2016

Not every new movie is lucky enough to find its way to theaters. Here's a look at some of the neglected gems from this year.

[David Ehrlich](#)



Clockwise from left: "Rat Film," "My Entire High School Sinking Into the Sea," "Una," "Mister Universo"



The [distribution](#) landscape continues to evolve, with a healthy mixture of new players and stalwarts, and yet every year there are great movies that slip through the cracks. For the most part, movies that gain serious traction on the festival circuit find their way to various American buyers and usually wind up with some kind of home.

While ambitious newcomers like A24 and Amazon Studios continue to up their game while veterans such as Sony Pictures Classics keep rolling along, even they have limits to the kind of content they can gamble on.

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Usually, the movies that struggle to find homes aren't ignored so much as they're deemed non-commercial or risky. Distributors often shy away from the prospects of a "difficult" movie simply because they can't imagine a trailer for it, or because it isn't in the English language, even as today's fragmented market allows for endless innovation.

That brings us to this year's undistributed highlights, all of which deserve eyeballs beyond the insular festival circuit. Audiences eager to see any of these titles should speak up — the industry can hear you. The following list only features films that have yet to find any kind of U.S. release.

"My Entire High School Sinking Into the Sea"



"My Entire High School Sinking into the Sea"

Dash Shaw

As its unwieldy title suggests, "My Entire High School Sinking Into the Sea" is much more than your average teen disaster movie. Every image in graphic novelist Dash Shaw's animated feature delivers a dizzying, evocative reflection of restless youth. At the same time, it remains grounded in a familiar world of geeky teens, smarmy upperclassmen and disgruntled school administrators. As the archetypes swirl around the inane plot, the movie develops an intimate quality that's not unlike sifting through the scrapbook of an exuberant young mind. And that's what it makes such a nifty ride: No matter the zaniness of the plot, Shaw's film is grounded in a very real, intimate set of experiences. It's John Hughes for the Adult Swim generation, which screams crossover potential. This one's destined for cult status, assuming it finds a distributor hip to its appeal. *–Eric Kohn*

Note: GKIDS announced it purchased North American distribution rights on December 8

"Rat Film"



"Rat Film"

Theo Anthony's essayistic non-fiction feature is a brilliant riff on Baltimore's

history of class struggle that defies categorization. The movie careens from scientific observation and historical overview to spiritual inquiry with a freewheeling approach that never ceases to surprise, even as it maintains a cogent thesis. Both a chronicle of the rat infestation plaguing the city of Baltimore and a broader assessment of its urban development, "Rat Film" manages to say something real and immediate in a fresh and inventive voice. It should generate broader discussions about the way earlier periods of discrimination impact contemporary city life — the rats are an ideal metaphor — but beyond that, it's also an astonishing cinematic experience that never preaches to its audience. *-EK*

Sales Contact: rrd@memory.is

"Una"



"Una"

One of the most arresting and fiendishly difficult films of the fall movie season, "Una" should have caused a major splash when it landed at Telluride and Toronto, but the waters may have been a touch too hot for the

marketplace. Aggressively adapted from David Harrower's "Blackbird," Benedict Andrews' feature debut takes a powder keg of a play and lights it on fire, expanding and further complicating the already knotted story of a young woman ([Rooney Mara](#)) confronting the much older man (Ben Mendelsohn) who seduced her as a child. Boasting a pair of fearless lead performances and leading to an uneasy resolution that refuses to take the easy way out, "Una" dares to unravel a situation that most films would sensationalize out of timidity, and to humanize a character that most films would demonize out of convenience. In fact, that no one has bought "Una" for U.S. distribution might just be the greatest testament to its unsettling power. –David Ehrlich

Sales Contact: WestEnd Films

"Moka"



"Moka"

Swiss-French director Frédéric Mermoud's Hitchcockian drama features a powerful turn by Emmanuelle Devos as a middle-aged woman traumatized

by the death of her college-age son and driven to track down the culprit. The victim of a hit-and-run, his death is shrouded in mystery, but early on it seems as though Moka has found the culprits: a well-to-do couple living in a classy vacation town. Befriending them without revealing her intentions, Moka steadily works toward her revenge as the film develops a keen suspense around the precise nature of her plan. With its elegant pace and first-rate performances, "Moka" manages to transform the outline of another dour tale about grieving relatives into something far more gripping and unpredictable. *-EK*

Sales Contact: Pyramide International

"Hermia & Helena"



"Hermia & Helena"

Argentine director Matias Piñero's first English-language feature, in which a young woman comes to New York to work on a translation of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," is another clever look at the way contemporary characters relate to classic literature as a means of understanding their lives. With bit parts for American indie faces Keith Poulson, Dustin Guy Defa and filmmaker Dan Sallitt, it's also a welcome evolution for Piñero, whose earlier films existed within the confines of his Latin American ecosystem. Here, his style opens up to a deceptively simple look at a carefree young woman (Agustina Muñoz in a layered performance) that gives way to more emotional chords in the final act. It's further proof that Piñero is one of the most innovative filmmakers working today, and a terrific introduction to his talents that should satisfy Shakespeare fans and newbies alike. –EK

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"Wet Woman in the Wind"



"Wet Woman in the Wind"

In the seventies and eighties, Japanese production company Nikkatsu

launched a series of “pink films,” called the Roman Porno series, which gave directors a tremendous amount of creative freedom as long as they included a certain amount of sex scenes. To commemorate the 45th anniversary of the Roman Porno, the studio commissioned five new pink films, the first of which goes beyond the call of duty. Akihito Shiota’s “Wet Woman in the Wind” is less softcore porn than cheery romcom, the oddball tale of a seductive woman (Yuki Mamiya) who stalks a reclusive forest dweller and playwright (Tasuku Nagaoka) in a sly game of sexual cat-and-mouse. Their surprisingly charming showdowns suggest “Secretary” by way of Ernst Lubitsch, and a series of prolonged orgies take on a brilliant degree of slapstick ingenuity. Sex sells, but this movie proves that it can be a great cinema as well. At a lean 80 minutes, “Wet Women in the Wind” could easily find an audience in limited release alongside a retrospective of the films that inspired it — and if Nikkatsu keeps this up, the studio may have its hands on the most exciting new franchise out there: art porn with an emphasis on the art. —EK

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“Marija”



“Marija”

The title star of Swiss director Michael Koch’s debut feature is a wandering Ukrainian immigrant (Margarita Breitkreiz) who scrapes by as a hotel maid

while aspiring to open her own hair salon. When she's suddenly fired, she's forced to follow a series of desperate measures to claw her way back to some modicum of progress. Koch relies heavily on the Dardenne brothers' playbook for documentary realism, with gritty handheld camerawork creating a queasy intimacy with Marija's conundrum as she debases herself — sexually and otherwise — while keeping an eye on the ultimate goal. But even as the language of her journey follows some familiar beats, Breitzkreiz endows this tense character study with a credible urgency that makes it one of the year's most powerful looks at the crisis of the working class. At a time when that crisis has become a global talking point, "Marija" couldn't be more topical. -EK

Sales Contact: Luxbox

"Mister Universo"



"Mister Universo"

The spirit of Italian neorealism is alive and well in Tizza Covi and Rainer Frimmel, the bittersweet tale of a circus community, and yet the plot suggests Todd Browning's "Freaks" by way of Frank Capra: A young lion

tamer struggling to find motivation for his work embarks on a quest to find the former Mr. Universe champion who inspired him long ago. When the tamer loses his good luck charm in a nasty prank, he also loses his center in life; it takes a charming elastic woman from the same troupe to help him get it back. Their sweet courtship provides the emotional center for this affecting tale, which is also rich with exciting circus imagery that gives the intimate quest an expressionistic backdrop. Both emotionally accessible and cinematic, "Mister Universo" endows its bizarre setting with warmth. *-EK*

Sales Contact: Be for Films, info@beforfilms.com

"I Had Nowhere to Go"



"I Had Nowhere to Go"

In the 98 minutes of "I Had Nowhere to Go: Portrait of a Displaced Person," there are about 10 minutes of visuals. The rest of the experience takes place on a black screen as accompanying audio tracks doing the legwork. It's a bold gamble by director and veteran installation artist Douglas Gordon ("24 Hour Psycho"), but a big part of the experience stems from the ever-

engaging storyteller at its center. Narrated by legendary avant-garde film diarist Jonas Mekas, now 93 and livelier than ever as he recollects his wartime experiences, "I Had Nowhere to Go" attempts to encapsulate the journeys of a man known for capturing images through their absence. Though not always the sum of its compelling ingredients, "I Had Nowhere to Go" applies an appropriate degree of cinematic innovation to one of the medium's greatest advocates. Viewers up for a unique challenge specific to the movie theater will not be let down. It's a stretch to label this one a commercial effort worthy of distribution efforts — until you consider the demand for theatrical events that provide audiences with unique experiences they can't replicate at home. On that front, "I Had Nowhere to Go" delivers in spades. —EK

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"Fishing Bodies"



"Fishing Bodies"

As stories of the migrant crisis in Europe dominated international headlines earlier this year, "Fire at Sea" became the defining movie to capture the tragedy of lives lost in transit up close, but it wasn't alone. At just over an hour, the audacious "Fishing Bodies" provides a subtler access point for examining the situation from multiple angles. Much of the movie takes place on an Arab fishing trawler off the coast of Sicily, where a small team of fishermen babble about troubled times while dealing with radio reports of sinking boats. These emergency situations rupture the mundanity of their daily rituals, but they aren't the only way director Michele Pannetta explores this troubling situation. The movie regularly cuts to the parallel experiences of an Arab refugee living in an abandoned boat at the port while dreaming of the home he left behind. This contrast provides an intimate look at the psychological turmoil behind a catastrophe too often reduced to statistics. As a conversation piece, it could be a constructive tool for impacting policy by humanizing the issue, and deserves an audience to spread the word. –EK

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