

THE NARCOTIC FARM

BEHIND THE BARS OF THE NOTORIOUS DRUG PRISON

Known locally as “Narco”, The Narcotic Farm was either “The New Deal for Drug Addicts” or “a million-dollar flophouse for junkies”, depending who you asked. Set on 1,000 acres of Kentucky bluegrass farmland, it opened its doors in 1935, instigating a regime of Freud and farming to cure its prisoners of drug addiction. MCS guitar-slinger Wayne Cramer is a former inmate and he narrates this documentary, released alongside a book of archive photographs, tracing the rise and fall of a doomed experiment. Dazed decided to shoot the breeze with directors JP Olsen and Luke Walden to find out more. *Hannah Lack*

Dazed & Confused: Who told you about The Narcotic Farm?

JP Olsen: I was doing research in methadone clinics around New York City and DC for another film, and I ended up meeting former heroin addicts who were part of this jazz, hipster, dope fiend culture of the 1940s and 1950s; people who could tell stories about shooting up in the same room with Chet Baker. All of them seemed to bring up The Narcotic Farm. To that group of people, having been there meant you were the real deal – it was sort of like going to Harvard, from the point of view of a junkie. The place was packed with jazz musicians, actors and entertainers – Peter Lorre was there and Ray Charles and Sammy Davis Jr. There were writers, most famously William Burroughs, who wrote about his experiences in *Junky*. Burroughs’s son went there too, and wrote about it in *Kentucky Ham*. And Hubert Selby was there. **It sounds like some dark experiments were going on...**

Luke Walden: They were trying to figure out how drugs affect the body and the brain at every stage of drug abuse. They did some pretty crazy human experiments. Inmates were kept high on morphine or barbiturates, sometimes for days, sometimes for months. Then they had to kick cold – which is legendarily awful – so that the researchers could study that part of the cycle too. The prisoners were constantly filling out questionnaires about how the drugs were affecting them. We had a lot of fun reading the hundreds of true/false tests with statements such as *I believe I could stay awake all night driving a car*, which would typically be answered yes by people on amphetamines. But we never could figure out what people were on if they answered yes to *The room seems larger than usual today*. If anyone out there has any ideas about that, please let us know.



Did any of that research lead to useful breakthroughs?

LW: Absolutely. For one, they showed that alcohol withdrawal, commonly known as the DTs, are a genuine physical condition and not a delusion, as a lot of doctors thought at the time. They also showed that barbiturates, widely used at the time, are highly addictive and have an extremely dangerous withdrawal syndrome that can kill you. They were trying to prevent the kind of pharmaceutical addiction that happened when heroin came on the market as a cough medicine in the late 1800s, and that we see today with drugs like Oxycodone. The best-known development was Buprenorphine, the great medical hope for treating heroin addiction.

Why was it shut down in the end?

JPO: It came to be viewed as an expensive failure because there was no progress in lowering relapse rates. And this is something some deny to this day, but I believe to be true – the connection between the CIA and its funding of the research lab to conduct LSD experiments on humans in the 50s looked so bad when it came out in 1973 that there was no way they could continue. The same kinds of drug experiments are still happening today in the States. Except they’re done on ‘free’ addicts, meaning you get your free crack, get studied and sent on your way with a couple of thousand dollars.

narcoticfarm.com

BIRDS EYE VIEW FILM FESTIVAL

BLONDE SCREEN SIRENS TAKE CENTRE STAGE

“I just love finding new places to wear diamonds,” croons platinum-haired gold-digger Lorelei Lee in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the comic film which helped immortalise Marilyn Monroe. Though bling may be scarce in these cash-strapped times, those starved for a hit of peroxide need look no further than Blonde Crazy, a celebration of flaxen divas at this year’s Birds Eye View Film Festival, launched six years ago in London to support women filmmakers.

Among other iconic bombshells scheduled for screen-time in the retrospective are Diana Dors in *Yield To The Night*, Mae West as a lion-tamer in *I’m No Angel*, Gena Rowlands in the title gangster moll role of Cassavetes’s *Gloria* and Catherine Deneuve as a housewife indulging fantasies in a high-class brothel while her husband is at work in Bunuel’s erotic masterpiece *Belle De Jour*. Early silent films will also show to live music performed by the likes of dark cabaret chanteuse Patti Plinko. There’s also a mini-retrospective of feature animation films made by women that promises to be the live cinema highlight, as Warp Records ambient darling Mira Calix provides the soundtrack to Lotte Reiniger’s 1926 *The Adventure of Prince Achmed*, the oldest-surviving animated feature. Based on a folk tale from *1001 Arabian Nights*, it employs the German filmmaker’s then-newly-invented silhouette technique.

The Fashion Films section of female shooting talent will include new work from London-based fashion photographer Toyin, New York photographer Jamie Isaia and experimental filmmaker Monica Elkely, and *Whip It*, Drew Barrymore’s much-anticipated skater-derby directing debut, will also get its premiere. *Carmen Gray*

The Birds Eye View Festival takes place March 4-12
birds-eye-view.co.uk Image courtesy of the BFI



FILM OF THE MONTH:
45365

SMALL-TOWN AMERICA GOES UNDER THE MICROSCOPE IN THE ROSS BROTHERS’ DEBUT DOCUMENTARY

If you’ve spent time in any prosperous Middle American town, you’re bound to recognise the spirit of these innumerable, unrenowned settlements in Sidney, Ohio. If you haven’t, the Ross Brothers’ debut documentary, *45365* – titled after their hometown’s postal code – is an excellent primer. The film is a series of short vignettes captured over a nine-month period, from the County Fair and Applefest to the opening of a new bridge, from teenagers congregating under the school bleachers to a Gospel prayer service. The local media’s never-ending coverage of the high school football team and commentary by an affable local radio DJ offer the film’s only narrative continuity. The cast of characters reads like a who’s who of modern day Anytown,

USA: a hard-campaigning judge seeking re-election; a high school football coach, optimistic about this year’s team; a cop who knows the names of everyone he confronts; a semi-reformed drinker scrapping with the law, and his son who’s just started his own criminal record; teenagers rapping to Krunk; a young couple breaking up over mobile phone; an older couple falling in love all over again to Air Supply.

Bill and Turner Ross have taken a page out of Errol Morris’s book of vérité; artfully treading the line between filming with affection and keeping a knowing distance. But unlike other Morris docs such as *Vernon*, *Florida* or *Gates Of Heaven*, no back stories are given and there’s almost no talking to camera, resulting in the startlingly candid immediacy that won the Ross brothers Best Documentary at SXSW. The glimpses of town life offer little by way of revelation. You never find out who wins the election or the big football game, but it hardly seems the point. *45365*’s resistance to narrative arc gives events a cyclical, timeless quality; a sense that no matter the outcome this time, it’ll all come around again, which is a revelation all its own. *Ananda Pellerin*

45365movie.com

FILM REVIEWS



SHE, A CHINESE

Dir: Xiaolu Guo
This Warp X production is soundtracked by a mixture of Chinese punk and PJ Harvey collaborator John Parish’s lush score. Xiaolu’s graceful film follows the trajectory of an enigmatic young Chinese girl who escapes from her village backwater to the big city. Stumbling into prostitution and a tempestuous relationship with a mafia hitman, she eventually finds her way to London with a stash of cash found under a mattress, entering into a platonic marriage with an elderly British man and a not-so platonic affair with a worker at her local takeaway. Guo, who is an acclaimed author as well as filmmaker, brilliantly explores ideas of alienation in China’s younger generation, leaving us with a wide-open ending that she says mirrors the unknown destiny of China: “Risky, mysterious and provocative.” *Hannah Lack*

Out on Feb 26



M
Dir: Fritz Lang

Lang’s noir classic and cinema’s first child killer probably needs no introduction, but this DVD release of his shadowy thriller comes with the original 1932 British release, lost for 70 years. An English-speaking version that has different takes and different actors – apart from Peter Lorre, who is still the mournful-eyed serial killer with that creepy off-key whistle – it will make an intriguing addition, if your German Expressionist film collection has space for one more. There’s also a great interview by Peter Bogdanovich with Lang, discussing the film that, with its indictment of capital punishment, mob mentality and the landscape of an unbalanced mind, did not go down well with the Nazis and precipitated Lang’s departure from Germany for Hollywood in 1934. *Hannah Lack*

Out on DVD Feb 22



THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ALICE CREED

Dir: J Blakeson
J Blakeson’s first feature is being hyped as the debut equivalent of Danny Boyle’s *Shallow Grave*. It’s a smartly scripted, brutal drama, with just three actors and some claustrophobic, one-room locations. The set-up follows two cellmates – Eddie Marsan taking the lead as an older, ruthless villain, and Martin Compston as the slippery, younger sidekick – who devise an intricate plan to kidnap the daughter of a millionaire (Gemma Arterton). It won’t come as a surprise to reveal that all doesn’t go to plan. But with the premise in place, Blakeson attacks it with inventive style as the balance of power teeters and scraps of unexpected information start to suggest everything isn’t quite as it seems. Even the occasional departure into the unreal don’t ruin this one. *Hannah Lack*

Out on March 12



NO WAVE: UNDERGROUND ‘80 BERLIN – NEW YORK

Dir: Christoph Dreher, Ellen El Malki
Filmmakers Dreher and El Malki have gathered an impressive list of interviewees for their documentary covering the music scenes in Berlin and New York, circa 1980. Dreher, himself a member of experimental post-punk band Die Haut, makes house calls to the likes of Nick Cave, Blixa Bargeld, Jim Jarmusch, Lydia Lunch, Thurston Moore and Wolfgang Müller, who wax poetic about a sensibility for which musical ability was optional, and statement was paramount. While there was plenty of cultural exchange between the two cities, Dreher’s assertion that Berlin was effectively a “suburb” of New York is clunky and unconvincing. Still, it’s worth a watch for the well-sourced archive footage. *Ananda Pellerin*

Out later this year