

## Our guide to the Chicago Underground Film Festival

The 19th annual fest opens Thursday night at Gene Siskel Film Center



The wild video art of Lindsay Denniberg's *Video Diary of a Lost Girl*

**T**he 19th Chicago Underground Film Festival runs Thursday, May 31, through Thursday, June 7, at Gene Siskel Film Center, 164 N. State, 312-846-2800. Tickets are \$11, \$7 for students, and \$6 for Film Center members. Following are selected programs; for a full schedule see [cuff.org](http://cuff.org).

**Andrew Bird: Fever Year** Toward the end of this concert documentary, singer-songwriter Andrew Bird says, "Music swallowed me whole. I am what I do." Indeed, amid beautifully shot, almost lyric footage from a two-night stand at Milwaukee's Pabst Theater in December 2009, video maker Xan Aranda shows Bird writing, rehearsing, and talking about music. The performances are consistently lovely and inventive, and Aranda gives a sense of Bird's solitary creative process. Yet aside from showing how physically frail Bird is, the documentary doesn't reveal much of him personally, which could be the point. As he says himself, there's no difference between who he is onstage and off. —**Peter Margasak** 80 min. Aranda attends the screening. Thu 6/7, 8 PM

**The Fourth Dimension** Commissioned by Grolsch Beer, this anthology film collects three shorts about the title concept, which most of the artists interpret simply as "time." Harmony Korine (*Trash Humpers*) directed "The Lotus Community Workshop," whose star attraction is Val Kilmer delivering a loopy motivational speech to a crowd of middle-American losers in a bowling alley. Aleksei Fedorchenko (*Silent Souls*) directed "Chronoeye," about an esteemed Russian mathematician who's trying to invent a time machine, and the free-spirited woman in the apartment overhead who keeps distracting him with her dance routine. The sole knockout, however, comes from the filmmaker with the shortest track record: Jan Kwiecinski, a native of Warsaw and a recent graduate of the London Film School. His apocalyptic drama "Fawns" follows four young pals as they romp around an evacuated town, a civil defense siren rising and falling in the distance and news broadcasts warning of a cataclysmic flood. Nothing drives home the idea of time more powerfully than watching it run out. In English and subtitled Russian and Polish. —**J.R. Jones** 105 min. Thu 5/31, 8 PM

**Girl Model** Fueled by righteous anger, this 2011 documentary shows the process by which Russian fashion agencies lure teen and preteen girls to become models in Japan, then exploit them for all they're worth. Directors David Redmon and A. Sabin cut back and forth between two story lines, one involving a pair of naive recruits from Siberia and the other focusing on a 30-year-old former model who now works as a talent scout. The latter, trapped in an industry she despises, describes having seen her peers lapse into drugs and prostitution, and her confessions are so articulate in their self-loathing that they recall the "in-yer-face" plays of British writer Sarah Kane. This may be rough around the edges, but it's hard to shake. In English and subtitled Russian. —**Ben Sachs** 77 min. Sat 6/2, 4 PM

**Heavy Girls** This 2011 German comedy proves that quirkiness can take a movie only so far. Sven, a portly, middle-aged banker, lives with and cares for his mother, who suffers from dementia, but during the day he entrusts her to Daniel, a tubby orderly. One afternoon the mother manages to wander off, and as Sven and Daniel search for her, they give in to their repressed mutual attraction. Thanks to their body types, their awkward love affair sometimes feels like a comedy sketch from the cable show *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* The movie is perfectly enjoyable—the characters are sympathetic and well drawn, the story funny, the cinematography tastefully naturalistic—but there's not enough going on beneath the surface to sustain interest. Axel Ranisch directed. —**Drew Hunt** 77 min. *Ranisch attends the screening.* Fri 6/1, 8 PM

**I Have Always Been a Dreamer** The first five minutes of this experimental feature are breathtaking: extreme low-angle shots, accompanied on the soundtrack by ambient noise and confessional interviews, depict downtown Detroit as alternately scary, ridiculous, and poignant. The sequence sets the tone for an impressionistic city symphony comparing the city (where filmmaker Sabine Gruffat lived for several years) with the rapidly growing Dubai. The cities are presented as two sides of unsustainable urban growth—Dubai representing overdevelopment and Detroit the void that follows after the bubble bursts (tellingly, the movie's title comes from a Henry Ford quote). Gruffat's narration is rooted in precise sociological observation, and her use of Steadicam, slow motion, and long shots gives the imagery an abstract, even mythic quality. Not all of the visual flourishes work, but the ones that do use big-screen photography more effectively than many Hollywood productions. —**Ben Sachs** 78 min. *Gruffat attends the Sunday screening.* Sun 6/3 and Tue 6/5, 8 PM

**Master Plan** In this tranquil, nuanced documentary about managed housing, director Robert Todd begins by shooting the interiors, exteriors, and immediate surroundings of three private homes and then comparing them with various examples of "social architecture": corporate housing, an army base, a homeless shelter, housing projects, and finally a correctional facility. In each sequence, individuals involved with the structures—residents, academics, community organizers—comment on topics ranging from the wood selected for the floors to how prisons are designed to prepare inmates for the outside world. In the end Todd proves that residential infrastructure, and the thought that goes into it, can be just as complicated as the people who inhabit it. —**Tal Rosenberg** 62 min. *Todd attends the screening.* Sat 6/2, 2 PM

**OK, Good** A struggling actor (Hugo Armstrong, who also cowrote and produced) gradually comes unhinged in this visually scrupulous but loosely plotted character study. To illustrate his mental breakdown, Armstrong and writer-director Daniel Martinico shun such typical screenwriting conventions as exposition and story arc; instead they supply images of the actor's painfully routine existence, which consists mainly of unsuccessful auditions for moronic TV commercials and solitary downtime in his barren apartment. Armstrong's performance is central to the film—he inhabits the role with the sort of ease his character seems incapable of—but after the first 40 minutes or so, the film becomes complacent in its existential ennui and veers toward a bleak denouement too reminiscent of a Michael Haneke film to be coincidental. —**Drew Hunt** 79 min. *Martinico and Friedling attend the screening.* Sat 6/2, 6 PM



**Palaces of Pity** In this beautiful, vaguely sinister art film, two teenage girls compete for the affection of their regal grandmother and, after she dies, for ownership of her grand estate. Portuguese writer-directors Gabriel Abrantes and Daniel Schmidt don't have much use for the medium shot: their movie tends to alternate between suffocating close-ups of the handsome girls and staggering long shots of them isolated against the

harsh natural and architectural landscape. (In one case the two extremes are combined when a girl's profile is superimposed upon the yawning expanse of a dam.) The sense of history as a gray, oppressive force is underlined by the grandmother's dream of medieval Portugal: in one scene a knight in chain mail hangs upside down from a tree, and in another a young Arab is burned at the stake for his homosexual romance. —**J.R. Jones** 59 min. *Abate attends the screening.* Sun 6/3, 6 PM

**📺 Two Years at Sea** The first feature-length effort by noted experimental filmmaker Ben Rivers demonstrates such mastery of the image that it's worth seeing for the textures alone. Shooting on black-and-white celluloid, he creates a hazy, granulated look that suggests an old daguerrotype come to life, which feels appropriate considering his subject is a human anachronism. Former sailor Jake Williams (whom Rivers first documented in the 2006 short *This Is My Land*) lives a solitary life in the Scottish wilderness, scavenging for food and constructing items from industrial refuse. This is filled with gorgeous natural imagery, but it isn't an environmentalist statement or even a straight documentary: in one of the more audacious sequences, Williams gazes in wonder as his trailer floats to the top of a tree. —**Ben Sachs** 90 min. *Mon 6/4, 6 PM*

**📺 Video Diary of a Lost Girl** Elevated by its wild video art, weighed down by its tiresome comedy, this horror fantasy by Lindsay Denniberg manages to conjure an original vision despite regurgitating many of the ideas and images of older movies. An eye-rolling video clerk (Priscilla McEver) falls for a mugging, perpetually quipping indie boy (Chris Shields, insufferable) but can't reveal her deep, dark secret: she belongs to an ancient race of women, each of whom preserves her immortality by killing a man at every full moon. Denniberg incorporates footage from various horror standbys (*Nosferatu*, *Carnival of Souls*, *Night of the Living Dead*) and pays copious tribute to silent goddess Louise Brooks (whose *Diary of a Lost Girl* is referenced in the title). But as Denniberg has explained on a fund-raising website, her more proximate influences are the tongue-in-cheek dreamworlds of David Lynch, Guy Maddin, and David Cronenberg. —**J.R. Jones** 91 min. *Denniberg attends the Sunday screening.* Sun 6/3, 8 PM, and Thu 6/7, 6 PM

**Zero Killed** Between 1996 and 2007, Polish filmmaker Michal Kosakowski asked more than 160 people to act out their murder fantasies on camera; he turned the results into a German video installation called *Fortynine*. This documentary includes excerpts from the videos and follow-up interviews with participants, some of them contacted many years later. As you might expect, the murder scenes are gripping, their sadism and bloody chaos often accompanied by austere classical music. But the interviews don't always pan out. Rather than reveal whom they were supposed to be killing, why they wanted that person dead, or how they chose their preferred method of slaughter, the respondents stick to comfortable generalities about the human capacity for violence, and their observations can be rather banal. The angry impulse to kill may be universal, but only the particulars bring it home. In English and subtitled German. —**J.R. Jones** 81 min. *Sun 6/3, 1 PM, and Wed 6/6, 8 PM*

[Movie Sidebar archives »](#)

Tags: [Movie Sidebar](#), [Chicago Underground Film Festival](#), [Andrew Bird](#), [Xan Aranda](#), [Harmony Korine](#), [Aleksandr Fedorchenko](#), [Jan Kwiecinski](#), [David Redmon](#), [A. Sabin](#), [Axel Ranisch](#), [Sabine Gruffat](#), [Robert Todd](#), [Daniel Martinico](#), [Gabriel Abrantes](#), [Daniel Schmidt](#), [Ben Rivers](#), [Lindsay Denniberg](#), [Michal Kosakowski](#)

---

Like 75 Tweet 13 4 Share

---

## RELATED STORIES

---

### Learning through seeing: an interview with experimental documentarian Sabine Gruffat

An interview with experimental documentarian Sabine Gruffat about her feature *I Have Always Been a Dreamer*

by Ben Sachs

---

## RELATED FILMS

---

### Andrew Bird: Fever Year

Rated - Documentary, Music documentary

### The Fourth Dimension