

# SHORT TAKES

## Dogs of Democracy

Mary Zournazi's *Dogs of Democracy* begins by acquainting viewers with the numerous stray dogs of Athens fed irregularly by various persons, including Greeks, who are themselves being fed through social agencies. The images and experiences of the dogs seamlessly merge with the lives of Athenians coping with the Greek economic crisis. A middle-aged man laments, "We are the stray dogs of Europe." He adds that just enough aid is given to forestall random violence, but the Greek standard of living is allowed to deteriorate without much hope for change. Later in the film, director Zournazi visits refugees stranded on Greek islands and sees their plight as an international parallel to that of the Greeks. *Dogs of Democracy* has a hero: Loukanikos, a dog who achieved fame by marching with antiausterity protestors. Without any prompting, Loukanikos voluntarily came to the head of marches and faced off against the police. A touching moment in the film involves an elderly protestor fleeing advancing police lines. She cannot walk rapidly and feels vulnerable. Loukanikos comes to her side, slows his pace to hers, and acts as her bodyguard. Although later fed and housed by activists, Loukanikos soon dies from being repeatedly kicked by police and from inhaling excessive amounts of the tear gas and chemicals used against demonstrators. Greeks consider him a martyr. One man thoughtfully states, "Loukanikos was the symbol of revolt and purity." While *Dogs of Democracy* has many sad and dark moments, it celebrates resistance to injustice. (Distributed by Ronin Films, email orders@roninfilms.com.au.)

—Dan Georgakas

## Filmworker

On the set of Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*, actor Leon Vitali, who played Lord Bullingdon, became intrigued by all that goes into making a film. So, he shifted his career to working behind the camera, becoming Kubrick's assistant—a job he held for decades. Director Tony Zierra's lovingly made documentary, *Filmworker*, respectfully charts Vitali's work for Kubrick, from his help in casting to learning color timing and checking film prints. Vitali even appeared as Red Cloak in *Eyes Wide Shut* while also managing the elaborate production. Vitali is an ingratiating raconteur. He describes working with five-year-old Danny Lloyd on the set of *The Shining*, and how Kubrick gave Vitali presents one Christmas, then phoned him hours later with a list of production concerns. Vitali worked fourteen-hour to sixteen-hour days, and looks suitably exhausted, but his enthusiasm comes across in his interviews, which are enhanced with fabulous photos and film clips. There are the expected remarks about Kubrick's perfectionism, and actors including Ryan O'Neal, Lloyd, Matthew Modine, and R. Lee Ermey repetitiously recount doing multiple takes. In contrast, when Tim Colceri describes being recast from Gunnery Sergeant Hartman in *Full Metal Jacket* to playing a doorgunner instead, there is some insight into the director's process. Vitali does address Kubrick's temper, which provides an interesting parallel with Vitali's experi-

ences—corroborated by his siblings—with their own abusive father. *Filmworker* celebrates Vitali's contributions—and by extension, the work of others in these largely thankless but important jobs. When this documentary closes with a bitter-sweet coda about a Kubrick retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—Vitali is unacknowledged and not invited—one understands the unheralded work done by men like Vitali to create a legacy like Kubrick's. (Distributed by Kino Lorber, www.kinolorber.com.)—Gary M. Kramer

## Leaning Into the Wind: Andy Goldsworthy

In this follow-up to *Rivers and Tides* (2001), German director Thomas Riedelsheimer documents the oft-commissioned British photographer/sculptor Andy Goldsworthy as he investigates nature on foot, connecting with it so profoundly that you will want to also. More importantly, the film shows us what it means to be an artist. As Goldsworthy walks, he gets inspired to create, using leaves, bark, rain, snow, and stones (some so big they require lifting by heavy machinery). A meditation on the impermanence of everything, his work is often ephemeral (although photographed), such as when the wind blows away the leaf pattern he has laid out on a branch or when he rises from the ground during rain, his body's imprint quickly disappearing. Goldsworthy's art can be jolting, such as a branch painted bright yellow lying in a forest, or an almost invisible part of the landscape, such as a wall of boulders moving in an undulating line across terrain. You may know the artist from his 2004 "Stone Houses" exhibit on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's roof garden or his "Storm King Wall" in New Windsor, New York. His comments about his work, often heard in the film, don't always illuminate, but words aren't his medium, nature is. In the film, nature's sounds, such as water, birds, and wind, are hypnotic, enhanced by Fred Frith's lovely instrumental score. *Leaning Into the Wind* reminds us of nature's beauty at a time when it often seems that our attention has been completely diverted, even destroyed, by high technology. Riedelsheimer's earlier film about Goldsworthy, *Rivers and Tides*, is an excellent introduction to the artist and includes a not-to-be-missed interview with the director about the difficulty of creating a work of art about someone else's art. (Distributed by Magnolia Pictures, www.magnoliapictures.com.)—Valerie Kaufman

## RBG

Betsy West and Julie Cohen's *RBG* features unprecedented access to Associate Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her inner circle. The result is an illuminating portrait of the celebrated litigator that is only marginally hampered by its effusive lack of objectivity. *RBG* is an unabashed valentine to our nation's second female Supreme Court Justice and cause célèbre of American politics. At times the film panders a tad heavily-handedly to the "Notorious RBG" persona of social media memes. In the process, it sadly ignores prime opportunities to critique the at-times-superficial, commodified adoration

exhibited by many of her younger fans. The film is at its strongest when it suspends trendy attempts to flatter and instead deep dives into Ginsburg's impressive legal career. Several noteworthy cases Ginsburg argued as a lawyer before the Supreme Court are profiled to compelling effect, and the film deftly charts her career's trajectory from ambitious law student to one of the nation's most esteemed legal advocates for women's rights. *RBG* also reveals sides of Ginsburg the public never sees: the curious art lover, the two-time cancer survivor who still hits the gym at eighty-five, and the devoted "Bubbe" and mentor to granddaughter and Harvard Law School grad Clara. The film also effectively incorporates video and audio of Justice Ginsburg's late husband Marty Ginsburg, resulting in a profound meditation on marriage, equality, and partnership that delightfully inverts the classic woman behind the man trope. *RBG* is a worthy entry in U.S. judicial scholarship and a mandatory history lesson for anyone sporting a "Notorious RBG" T-shirt, but take note: the filmmakers' judgment of Justice Ginsburg is decidedly biased with scant quarter given to dissenting opinion. (Distributed by Magnolia Pictures, www.magnoliapictures.com.)

—Mary Bowen

## TransMilitary

Recent research by the Williams Institute has found there are 15,500 transgender individuals serving on active duty or in the National Guard or Reserve forces. Economic hardship, the prospect of an education and professional training, and the hope for bias-free treatment stirred by the military's blindly pragmatic "Uncle Sam Needs You" attitude, explain why transgender people, according to the same study, "are about twice as likely to have served in the armed forces than non-transgender adults." In *TransMilitary*, which premiered at the 2018 SXSW Festival, directors Gabe Silverman and Fiona Dawson tell the stories of four individuals, Senior Airman Logan Ireland, his wife Corporal Laila Villanueva, Captain Jennifer Peace, and First Lieutenant El Cook, as they cautiously lobby top brass for a right to serve and be recognized for who they are. They help convince the military to lift the transgender ban and, upon succeeding in 2016, try to make it stick to its guns in withstanding pressure from the Trump Administration to repeal the decision. Their shared agenda belies the different challenges each of them faces. While Logan and Peace succeed in winning the military's support and admiration (Logan hopes to become an officer, Peace is promoted to Captain), Logan's wife is ousted with the option of honorable discharge, which indicates that female transgender troops have a similarly difficult stance in the military as do cisgender women. Despite such pithy observations, the film's advocacy agenda of upholding the military as a test case for social justice and inclusivity keeps it from questioning the price its subjects willingly pay for their inclusion: the upholding of the biological gender binary in their self-image, the reinforcement of heteronormativity in their lives, and a blind acceptance of the military's fraught role. (No distributor for the film at the time of writing; for further information, contact eric@cineticmedia.com.)—Roy Grundmann