



Underrated Films Screened at the Cannes: Lost Gems or 'Too Good' for General Audiences?

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The underrated films screened at Cannes
(*The Lighthouse* screened at the 2019 Cannes)
Source: Telegraph (all images for reference)





The quintessential celebration of cinema, the Cannes Film Festival, serves as the historical timeline of films that have progressed the art of motion picture. Since its continuous run for over seventy years, Cannes has become home to films that need to be illuminated to audiences due to their strong merit, not mere commercial popularity. Such films include works from various national cinemas, produced in numerous languages across the globe. For instance, the films *Ash Is Purest White* (a Chinese-language film), and *Manto* (a Hindi-language film) are two in the long line of foreign-language feature films to be screened at Cannes (Mazumder, 2018).

The factors that classify such films as 'underrated' or generally overlooked are their casts and crews that depend on the sole element of merit, or the lack of promotions and capital grounds to create international buzz around them. Cannes has become a leading propeller for lesser-known directors and their films from underrated national cinemas and has screened thousands of such films. We will dive into five selected films screened at Cannes that can be classified as 'underrated' yet portray high artistic quality.



The critical yet underrated foreign-language films, *Ash Is Purest White*, and *Manto* were screened at the 2018 Cannes

Source: The Quint





A question that may prompt the minds of audiences is, “What exactly are underrated films, and what is their value against popular and commercially successful films?” Films that are produced in mainstream cinemas (for instance, Hollywood and Western European cinemas) have a strong outreach to global audiences with billion-dollar capital support from giant studios such as Walt Disney Studios and Warner Brothers. Popular films suffice to popular demands in terms of plot, design, and marketing, often compromising on the elements of experimentation and criticality in filmmaking.

However, several films from different corners of the world might not even receive a chance to be released or promoted due to a lack of popularity compared to popular films (box office collections-centric films). Thus, the scene of current cinema makes it crucial to highlight artistic and genuine films beyond box-office and streaming platforms.



Irish film *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* screened at the 2017 Cannes

Source: IMDb, and Irish Independent





In the league of underrated films that were screened at Cannes, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017) emerges as the superior one. Even though the film received a lukewarm IMDb score (a trusted source of film ratings - Internet Movie Database) of 7.7 out of 10, the film led to great critical acclaim for its Greek director, Yorgos Lanthimos (Film Companion, n.d.). The Academy-nominated director has his roots in experimental theater - a personal aspect that is also reflected in the conceptualization and 'chameleon-like' cinematography in his film.

The film's overall visuality changes its shades akin to a chameleon because it interestingly switches between a variety of visual themes and color saturations. It ranges from deep gray settings, low-light warm settings, to well-lit natural settings. Each palette carries its distinct subject theme - from initial innocence in the plot to growing fear and horror. Such visual concepts and versatility are very rare in cinema. Accordingly, certain critics and niche audiences argued that the film deserved to win the Palme d'Or at the 2017 Cannes Festival (Harrison, 2022).



The varied color palette and visual brilliance in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*

Source: Screen Rant, and IMDb





The film is an unprecedented, psychological horror film that lacks jumpscare but not a grotesque and thought-provoking plot. It depicts the story of a renowned surgeon and his family, as their idyllic lives take a strange turn from social pride to horrific blackmail because of a grave mistake made by the surgeon in the past. Unfortunately, the thriller film's performance at the box office was lukewarm. It can be assumed that low-key promotion with the intent to maintain the mystery of the film might be a factor for its low commercial performance.

The film features a phenomenal star cast of great critical acclaim - Barry Keoghan (listed as one of the greatest Irish film actors by The Irish Times), Academy-nominated A-list actor Colin Farrell, and one of the highest-paid actresses in the world, Nicole Kidman (Film Companion, n.d.). However, even an A-list star cast couldn't propel the film with a complex and experimental plot line into commercial success. A similar phenomenon of a talented star cast in yet another underrated film can be observed in the Korean-language film *Okja* (2017).



***Okja*'s A-list star cast couldn't lead the film to commercial popularity**

Source: The Film Experience





***Okja* (2017) - A Korean film that was not commercially successful yet was commemorated at Cannes (themes of animal conservation, and science fantasy)**

Source: The Guardian

Okja (2017) is a Korean-language science fantasy film directed by Academy Award-winning director Bong Joon-ho (Film Companion, n.d.). The film was one of his early attempts in the global film market at creating stories surrounding characters of his national origin. The film touched upon various aspects of nature conservation in the form of a sentimental story, where a young girl tries to save her best friend (*Okja*), one of the new-found species, from capitalist forces.



American director Tim Burton's *Dumbo*

Source: Collider





Okja draws parallels with a popular film with a similar plotline and themes of wildlife conservation - Tim Burton's *Dumbo* (2019). The distinction that *Okja* creates is its nuanced storytelling that appears highly realistic, even with the presence of a fantastical animal character. The film tries to establish a ruthless journey for the two protagonists (an innocent human, and a rare, endangered animal) against the modern and corrupt world of humans.

The cinematography of *Okja* is composed of muted colors with many great scenes of high impact; the texture of shots and camera handling in the film seem 'intentionally coarse' to provide an unfiltered effect to the story. The thought-provoking film was screened at the 2017 Cannes Festival but was shockingly booed by the audience for a straight 10 minutes (apparently due to the wrong aspect ratio during screening) (Tiffany & Le Segretain, 2017). The A-list star cast of *Okja*, comprising Hollywood actors Tilda Swinton, Jake Gyllenhaal, and Steven Yeun, couldn't save the film from underperforming commercially. The cases of these two films suggest that many times even acclaimed actors and directors cannot save a film if it's not 'easily digestible' for general audiences.



***Portrait of a Lady on Fire*: A critically acclaimed French film on queer identity
(also a nominee for the Palme d'Or prize at the 2019 Cannes)**

Source: Screen Rant





Such an appalling reaction from the audience for *Okja* at Cannes raises a pivotal question regarding critical films and their future, “Are general audiences not qualified for experimental and art-house films?”. If we frame the context simply, “Are these films ‘too good’ for general audiences?”

It leads us to the common paradox of ‘critically acclaimed yet not commercially successful’. Most audiences lack the attention span, predisposition of an artistic aptitude, or depth to comprehend experimental and critical films. Many films that are screened at Cannes or win the Palme d’Or are conveniently boxed into the category of ‘niche films’ (layered, complex films that serve a very specific portion of viewers) by popular audiences as they might lack the conventional entertainment quotient.

Some great films that have become milestones in terms of cinematic storytelling yet couldn’t receive the deserved appreciation and credit are the French film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), the American-British film *The Lighthouse* (2019), and the Indian film *The Lunchbox* (2013) (Ten, 2022). Thus, the Cannes Film Festival and many other global film festivals secure a haven for such underrated gems to be produced and screened without commercial pressure.



**Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* premiered at the 1994 Cannes:
one of the few 'commercial and critical' successes**

Source: Screen Rant





However, certain gems have also been missed at Cannes. Certain acclaimed films that were screened out of competition at the Cannes Film Festival are *Kill Bill Volume 2*, *Past Lives*, and *E.T. Extra-Terrestrial*. Intriguingly, Hollywood's blockbuster director Steven Spielberg's *E.T. Extra-Terrestrial* is considered one of the finest and most ground-breaking sci-fi films in cinematic history, yet it didn't receive the honor of being screened at Cannes. It can be argued that these films had already received public acceptance and commercial popularity and, thus, didn't essentially need commemoration by a film festival.

All three films have also been nominated for major international awards such as the Academy Awards, and Golden Globe Awards (Clifton, 2023). On the contrary, the purpose of the Cannes Film Festival is to celebrate and provide opportunities for films that stand on similar cinematic standards to economically strong films like *E.T. Extra-Terrestrial* and yet are not acknowledged enough.



**Steven Spielberg's magnum opus failed to be screened
at the Cannes: *E.T. Extra-Terrestrial***

Source: Parade





The cases of the underrated films that were screened at Cannes suggest a huge lack of 'critical film appreciation' among audiences. It is also important to note that several films that are often categorized as niche, art-house work, or underrated face many challenges to score a substantial audience and gain credibility. This phenomenon of substantial attention from global audiences comes easily to mainstream blockbuster films, however, the case of underrated films and their artists depicts a drastic contrast. Due to the rampant commercialization of film industries and related fraternities, a filmmaker with a lack of capital but innovative ideas might not stand a chance against multinational-production global films.

However, it is safe to say that the collective audiences are gradually shifting from the preference of feel-good one-time-watch films to critical films that expand their perspectives and artistic experiences. The driving factor behind this transformation in audiences' perception is the production of exceptional niche films such as *The Lighthouse*, and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* that surpass elite productions with great experimentation and relatability quotient to common people's lives and struggles.

Thus, the exposure of global film festivals in becoming a platform for unseen, untapped filmmakers with their unique foreign-language films becomes all the more essential. The leading one of all festivals, the Cannes Film Festival, has consistently provided an expansive platform to many critical films that do not appeal to popular distributions. In true context, the reception by audiences towards a film can make it worthy of having a legacy, beyond screening and festivals at any film event. Thus, it's the responsibility and judiciousness of audiences to cultivate a deeper acceptance of niche films that might not be great one-time watches but can leave a strong impact and provide a lasting cinematic experience.





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