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FILM, FINE ARTS, SOCIAL SENSITIVITY

2024, THE YEAR OF PC CINEMA, A CRITICAL OVERVIEW 1.

RAMELL ROSS: *NICKEL BOYS*, 2024 (AND A FEW INTRODUCTORY WORDS)

Compared to the impressive richness and quality of films in 2023,¹ 2024 was a significant step backwards. Cinemas were flooded with mediocre horror pastiche films that tried to appear innovative by incorporating socially relevant and politically correct themes, but these attempts usually resulted in embarrassing failures due to a complete lack of thought and formal innovation, as well as forced didacticism. In contrast, 2023 was the year of sensory cinema, showcasing sophisticated cinematography and innovative, experimental visual representations that highlighted the connections between film and the visual arts. This long-standing shift towards anti-narrative and intermediality, focusing on perception and sensory experience, was evident in the best films of the year.

Nickel Boys deserves a special mention: the film's first-person perspective and detailed visual observations, reminiscent of Malick's *The Tree of Life*, had the unexpected effect of alienating viewers rather than fostering empathy. It's as if the creators hadn't considered this themselves; I read a great interview with the screenwriter of *The Nickel Boys*, who talked about how they focused on evoking empathy through the use of the first-person point of view: they talked about their film as an 'empathy machine'.² *Nickel Boys* is an adaptation of Colson Whitehead's book about a real-life institution near which mass graves have been unearthed. The limitations of the first-person POV make it difficult to convey identity and a linear narrative. Much of the criticism of the film highlights that these fragmented, overly artistic images and lack of focus created an 'alienating effect'. I attempted to address this issue by proposing the concept of an 'attacked, broken identity'. A more detailed analysis of Malick's powerful influence on contemporary arthouse cinema would be needed here, as this influence is not always positive. The *Tree of Life* itself sometimes gives the impression of universalist kitsch enlarged to cosmic proportions, despite its undeniable sensitivity and sensuality. However, in this case, the main problem is not the sentimentality, but the first-person point of view itself, which disturbs and subverts us by robbing us of our identity. But isn't the film about black people being robbed

¹ See: Csilla Markója: Film vs Fine Art. 2023, the year of the cinema of perception, a critical overview, 1-2. *Enigma*, 2024, no. 118. 145-156., no. 119. 141-151.

² A term probably coined by Ebert from Deleuze's 'desiring-machine'. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/awards/story/2024-12-17/nickel-boys-co-writer-joslyn-barnes>

of their identity? Isn't it about the attack on identity? And doesn't the gesture at the end, where the survivor assumes the identity of the deceased in protest as he searches for the past, refer to that? This has the opposite effect to that intended by the creators, but I think there is a deeper truth to it. I always think of the black boy looking down. He never really dares to look around. The first-person point of view reveals the unintended consequence of not daring to feel that the world is ours; of not taking possession of it on a perceptual level; of not owning the world – because others say it's not our narrative. How would we then see the whole of history with these eyes? While we can debate the success of the experiment, it is a thoughtful and independent attempt to address the serious issue of segregation without resorting to sentimentality or graphic violence. This is a great achievement. The *Nickel Boys* was one of the best film experiences of the year, and its director, RaMell Ross, is definitely one to watch in the future.

The merits of *The Substance*, of the other great movie this year, became truly apparent in the context of *The Ugly Stepsister*. It lacked all the brilliant elements of Fargeat's work. It is worth comparing the endings of the two films. By the end of *The Substance*, Elisamonstro explodes in pain, literally covering people with her inner struggles – but this merely stains Hollywood's shiny face and star system. This depicts the expectations imposed by the entertainment industry and the intractability of the psychological situation. In contrast, the protagonist of *The Ugly Stepsister* rides off into the sunset, liberated and happy – albeit having lost some fingers and a prince in the process. But how does Cinderella win the prince's heart? With her beauty, of course. So, what exactly is the message here? Unlike *The Substance*, this film does not address questions of 'beauty as expectations' in such depth. As if you could escape it! It's a false, didactic message. No, you can't escape it. *The Substance* understands this situation and its connection to the entertainment industry, society, psychology, and our consumption habits. In comparison, *The Ugly Stepsister* seems to be a pale imitation; it is much more one-dimensional, both intellectually and formally. Leaving the system is not a matter of individual choice. It's much more complex than that. *The Substance* reflects this with a certain degree of abstraction and satire. It focuses on the loneliness and powerlessness of the individual. I wrote that the portrayal of addiction was flawed because the addict did not experience pleasure. However, with hindsight, I think this is because social expectations have become so deeply internalised that addiction is no longer dependent on feedback. *The Substance* provides a complex description of the system, including its weight and pressure and the film is innovative in terms of both its visuals and its content. Its ending is much more nuanced than the didactic, mentally hygienic message included at the end of Emilie Kristine Blichfeldt's film. Feminist messages of varying quality, which are often greatly simplified, are also part of the aforementioned PC ecosystem that characterises the 2024 film crop. While the new films by Jia Zhangke and Tsai Ming-liang certainly represent a more sophisticated and innovative concept and style of filmmaking, they somehow fit too much into their creators' oeuvre to be worthy of legitimate celebration. The former is a subtle, lyrical assemblage in the Deleuzian

sense, while the latter is part of an ascetic project begun in 2012 that explores the extreme limits of slow cinema with patience and barely perceptible shifts. This makes it almost impossible to compare with Fargeat's explosively powerful - and rather divisive - satire. The ending will certainly be unforgettably moving for those who recognise Elisamonstro as the eternal girl in the blue tulle dress, demanding her right to love and be loved.

As I mentioned, I am unimpressed by this year's post-horror/elevated horror films, which I find to be collections of quotations with an obligatory politically correct theme. This is often done mechanically, achieving the opposite effect (see the demonisation of mental illness in *Longlegs*, or the portrayal of the black android in *Alien: Romulus*). As a woman, I'm particularly annoyed by the misguided quasi-feminist discourses of female liberation presented in a hypersexualised yet non-erotic form in *Nosferatu*, and in a queer frame in *Love Lies Bleeding*. Within the revenge subgenre, I think *Maxxxine* and *Strange Darling* set a bad example. Slasher films are not my favourite genre, but I forced myself to watch *The Violent Nature*. Despite the fascinating theoretical discourse that can be attributed to it (regarding the contemporary revival of mannerism as style in visual arts), I found it to be a completely empty and rather clumsy stylistic attempt.

Similarly, I found the year's most hyped film, Eggers' spectacular, yet in my opinion bland Gothic postcard *Nosferatu* as well as the traditional narrative epic megamovie *The Brutalist*, to be anachronistic and utterly empty in their very existence. Due to its length, this critical overview has been divided into several parts, with many important films missing and some postponed to next year due to time and space constraints. If *Oppenheimer* was last year's worst film in my opinion, then *The Brutalist* must take its place this year, even though there were obviously other bad films. A separate study would be required to analyse *The Brutalist*'s one-dimensional and forced allegorisation, such as the literal translation of 'the talent of European Jews raped by stupid American capital', and the shallow ending.

Some good things happened this year too. As far as PC aspects are concerned, not everyone missed the mark. True feminism was represented by the slow-burning drama *April*, directed by the Georgian filmmaker Dea Kulumbegashvili. Hong Sang-soo's films and Leos Carax's Godard homage essay film are also worthy of a mention. Mohammed Rasoulof's excellent film *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* and Payal Kapadia's film *All We Imagine as Light* definitely deserve separate reviews. Although it received harsh criticism, I found Lanthimos's cruel yet subtle satire *Kinds of Kindness*, which followed the spectacular success of *Poor Things*, to be respectfully consistent. I would highlight the promising experimental shorts of the young filmmaker Mateo Krygowski (*Contact*, *Through the Night Softly*, *On the Wounded*, *The Saviour's Witness*). However, the most notable film experiences this year were two films that slipped in from previous years. Once again, I was not disappointed by the work of my favourite directors, Sandro Aguilar and Lav Diaz.

JIA ZHANGKE: *CAUGHT BY THE TIDES*, 2024

I've always longed for a film woven out of music, but I never thought I'd get it from Jia Zhangke, in the form of a long, poetic farewell. What I like about it is that it doesn't try to be big cinema, it is deliberately thin, it has a certain modesty and restraint, built on small gestures, melodies, and facial expressions that find their stage in these basically closed faces. This film works like a poem, held together by a delicate web of internal rhymes, free associations and barely visible connections. Some might say that it's a recycling of the cinematic by-products of *Unknown Pleasures*, *Still Life* and *Ash is Purest White*, which the director edited together during the Covid period, but I think this is not the case, it is not about nostalgia. Most of these shots are taken from the werkfilms made on location, in which Jia Zhangke wanted to document the environment, because he felt, he might not be able to return to these places, and the meta-narratives he has developed to point out the connections between the films cited would certainly require multiple viewings. This film, with its high degree of autonomy, belongs to the quietly resistant breed, and I appreciated the gesture itself, that someone would summarise his own trajectory to this point in such an indirect way, with an eye to the random and the contingent. There are so many different ways in which Jia Zhangke has worked with film material here, from mono to stereo, from 16mm to dv, that it is a pure joy to watch.

This is a travel film about a journey in space and time, in which a woman (Zhao Tao, Jia Zhangke's wife) searches in vain for her beloved, whom she meets in many places and many times, but in the end it is always just a collision and a separation: and even that is only a hint in this mainly experimental, non-narrative, differently structured film. There is something deeply personal, yet ascetic and distant about it that I can relate to: love as a series of farewells is familiar to everyone, because this ebb and flow dynamic is part of the nature of our relationships, the tide of embraces and rejections. The profound experience of all this searching leaves more and more traces on Zhao's face over time, and we observe these traces, sometimes on a social scale. The never-ending crisis of relationships is analogised to the forces that shape history, the dam built by men becomes a metaphor for the obstacle between the two, this alienation deepens the trenches in the historical portrait of China. The only thing I really missed in the film was spirituality, which is not coincidentally absent in this crypto-communist milieu. Perhaps the easiest way to approach Jia Zhangke's films on a theoretical level is through the notion of „assemblage” as set out by Deleuze and Guattari. This is a central concept in their work *A Thousand Plateaus*. Assemblage provides a way of understanding how various elements come together to form open-ended systems, identities, and processes, without assuming fixed or hierarchical structures; these systems are non-totalising, susceptible to change, and capable of forming new connections. By focusing on multiplicity, assemblage theory challenges traditional, hierarchical film analyses (e.g. prioritising narrative over visuals or characters over environment). The term itself refers to a dynamic arrangement or network of heterogeneous components that function together temporarily or pers-

istently and emphasises relations of contingency, interaction and multiplicity rather than stability or essentialism. I mean, this theory enables us to approach Jia Zhangke's cinema not as a static medium of representation, but as a dynamic process of becoming, full of fluid interactions between form, content and context – as the title *Caught by the Tides* itself may suggest.

„What made this particular project so daunting was the possibilities of the material. It's almost like the clouds in the sky: you can move vertically or horizontally,” says Jia Zhangke. We glide over faces and landscapes as if we were the silent hang-gliders over the concrete blocks of the housing estate, and perhaps I would have liked a little more music, even richer soundtrack, but in this film everything is intentionally a fragment, a shred of a song, a fleeting impression. A distant gaze scans the ruins of history, the arc is one of decay, but the music invites the most diverse forms of human community to counter the perception of history: the land changes, the characters grow old in an impossible romance, but the wind carries the sounds of community singing. I remember, during the pandemic, noticing how deeply sad people's eyes were above the mask. But maybe I just didn't see their smiles, and that gave more space to the inherent sadness, the lack of sunshine in the clouds. Jia Zhangke's film is like a texture of haiku, subtle gestures and tiny movements, sometimes slowed down in a slow cinema, the way a woman's eyes light up when she is praised, but darken when that praise turns to more, or the way we end up trying to get an emotional reaction out of a silly robot that reminds us of our childhood toys.

If there's enough left over from that unfulfilled love to get down on your knees and tie someone else's shoelaces, then it's all worth it. You've tied his shoes, but you're the one who starts running. You blend into the flux of running people. Back to the changed community, back to the current. Perhaps that is the aesthetics of this assemblage, the re-integration into the alienated world. And you still have the memories, woven into this patchwork blanket of flowing music, and they can protect you and make you dream.

ROBERT EGGERS: *NOSFERATU*, 2024

For Christmas, Eggers has created a kind of Disney remake, a gothic fairy tale version of Murnau's film, a pale digital copy sucked dry of all life by the futile desire for historical fidelity, which Eggers consistently confuses with the authenticity and autonomy of a real work of art.

What surprised me most in the interviews with him was that Eggers took his own remake to a Czech location, the castle of Pernštejn, but, and I quote his words: “It was actually used as the castle for Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu*, but I'd been consciously not watching that film, so it didn't occur to me.”³ Huh, okay. Eggers didn't

³ Others claim he had seen it in the past. A review on Letterboxd consists of a juxtaposition of Herzog's philosophical depth of thought and Eggers' words on Murnau's *Nosferatu*, e. g. „I've always been interested in dark stuff”. <https://letterboxd.com/supremelemon/film/nosferatu-2024/>

dare to watch the film again, but the fact that he couldn't remember the location is odd. But does his film have anything to do with a real landscape? Would it really have been possible for Eggers to learn something from Herzog? Instead of a series of pretty postcards, Herzog's landscapes are both naturalistic and dreamlike. Instead of symmetrical box-spaces and dull close-up reliefs, wild chaos squeezed into the geometry of the city: a danse macabre of coffins and pigs at the Last Supper. It is instructive how Herzog uses music, for example a Georgian folk song,⁴ in such a way that it instantly creates the mysticism that Eggers only longs for. Isn't it strange that what came easily to Herzog is no more available to Eggers? That he can't bring to life the things he strives for most: authenticity, metaphysics and eroticism? Eggers' obsessive interest in historical detail seems to be a symptom of this problem. But neither he nor his film reflects on it. I mean that the history fetish ends up producing an ahistorical gaze that is caught in the gap between the past and the present and ends up having nothing to say about either time.

Whereas the female protagonist in Herzog's film is abandoned by men, yet understands Nosferatu's hunger for love and performs the act of self-sacrifice alone, Lily-Rose Depp's character shows a serious regression: she is dependent, hysterical, annoying with her constant whining, unaware of her own desires or her relationship with men, which also means a complete lack of self-reflection. In fact, the hysterical figure of Ellen is also a Lacanian cliché that goes back to the 90s and Charcot's rediscovery. Compared to Herzog's dignified, at once fragile and infinitely strong, noble female protagonist, Ellen is a puppet, dragged along by the power of men and her own un-understood desires. In contrast to Herzog's solemnly clean, hypnotically naturalistic, wonderful compositions, we get a CGI fantasy world of orange and blue, and the complex character of Nosferatu has become a silly rubber monster, a mindless zombie and a mean horror toy. This tasteless treatment is devastating; the new instalment in the franchise has nothing new to say. While the films of Murnau and Herzog offered new paradigms of interpretation, Eggers' film is somehow empty.

With *The Witch*, Eggers immediately became one of the foremost exponents of folk horror. The 1970s subgenre owes its contemporary revival in part to the fact that while globalisation is destroying traditional cultures, folk horror is able to speak to postmodern anxieties, depicting nature as a vengeful force that resonates with fears of ecological collapse, often acting as representatives of marginalised or oppressed groups, I mean, in effect, these films implement a complex agenda of subalternity, reclaiming spirituality and emphasising the sometimes dangerous power of forgotten traditions, rituals and beliefs, serving paradoxically as both a critique of urban life and a critique of rural nostalgia. But it is their own means that are the greatest

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdjqDzaNVjc>

György Fehér's 1990 Hungarian film *Szürkület* (*Twilight*) features the same Georgian folk song „Tsintsaskaro”/Zinskaro on its soundtrack, performed by the vocal ensemble Gordela. This haunting melody, known for its ethereal quality, was later used by Kate Bush in her song *Hello Earth* from her 1985 album *Hounds of Love*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWsfNYATsEE>

obstacle: getting lost in ethnographic detail, confusing historical fidelity with genuine authenticity, and believing that the re-enactment of beliefs and rituals, the visual anthropological reconstruction, can revive the spiritual forces once associated with them. Eggers works almost exclusively with narrative and visual *topos* created by others. He has sources, not visions. His mainstream impact is also due to the fact that he appeals to our cultural memory, creates a kind of patchwork woven from existing paintings, photographs, literary material, nothing original, but all with evocative power. In fact, the use of 2D illustrations, the paintings on which the images are based, requires a boringly panning camera movement with semi-close narrow static shots, without real depth. One frame of the film copies a painting by Fuseli, which in turn evokes a whole series of vampire depictions; Count Orlok's strange speech is borrowed from Lugosi-Dracula, the opening scene, the whispering and the window is from Jess Franco's adaptation, the theme of the medicalisation of Victorian hysteria and melancholy was already present in Bram Stoker's seminal work; the twitching of Lily-Rose Depp's character is familiar from the *Exorcist* films; the dark cypress trees are from Böcklin's famous painting, the girl in the nightdress walking towards the castle looks like something out of a Jean Rollin film, there are gothic visual clichés and pastiches everywhere, in the usual modern horror guise, muddy dark colours, jump scares, big screams after long silences, the hand always on the volume button of the remote control.

Just as the idea of *The Lighthouse* was borrowed from a 1922 (and a 1929) silent film, *The Lighthouse Keepers*, *Nosferatu* also relies on visual and narrative precedents. In a way Eggers was even copying his own work. But while the protagonist of *The Witch*, a woman who rebels against oppression by making a pact with the devil, retains her mystery and creates an euphoria of liberation, Ellen's fascination with darkness is unconvincing, so that the critical potential of the folk horror genre was not used this time. Eggers' only autonomous gesture, that of placing the right of choice in the hands of the so-called self-confident woman, is pure didacticism and also quite hypocritical, since Ellen ends up sacrificing herself on the altar of conjugal, petty-bourgeois love and social comfort, and of the men who oppressed her.

Style over substance, sorry, style without substance, or rather, neither substance nor style, just think of the Nosferatu monster at the end, with that funny voice and the shreds of rubber on his body. Those who find Eggers superficial tend to praise his formalism, his experience, his flair for set or production design. But does a sense of form guarantee good taste? Can content and form be separated in this way? Obsessed with historical authenticity, is Eggers not a little lost in the labyrinth of simulacra? Is there any substance behind the over-sexualised, obligatory PC performance? What I missed most was precisely the convincing portrayal of desire and female power. In this *Nosferatu*, despite the carefully edited images, the ethnographic accuracy, despite the advice of the creative team from Northman's screenwriter to Chris Columbus, everything is in fact oversized, overdone, disproportionate, artificial, sexually exaggerated but not erotic, and composed entirely of visual and narrative clichés. There is everything from pigeon heads bitten off to blood vomit, from necrophilia to occult

symbols, from CGI waves to a Nosferatu who is an once handsome, moustachioed zombie Vlad Tepes, and to vampires who can bite through the breastbone – but nothing works, at least for me. Nothing original, nothing new, just an usual mainstream entertainment product with clichéd horror tropes.

Of course, if you compare it to an average Marvel etc. movie, and don't have high expectations, it's a fun time. But one hoped for more from Eggers after *The Witch*. It was hard to find any really elaborate, autonomous thought and vision here, but I fear that there is something inevitable about the Eggers phenomenon that is part of our times, and if anything, it would definitely be worth a deeper analysis.

SEAN BAKER: *ANORA*, 2024

Anora may be fun the first time you see it, but the second time is only good for exposing the emptiness of Sean Baker's social commentary, which has so far been somewhat masked by its apparent, well-directed micro-realism. On rewatch, all that remains of *Anora* is a bunch of stereotypes about young, sweet sex workers and spoiled children of rich Russian billionaires who, of course, feel no weight of their choices. Two clichés, taken from secondary materials such as *Rich Kids of Instagram/Internet*, are juxtaposed to win our hearts on a „poor girl” scale, from *Cinderella* to *Pretty Woman*, while the film unscrupulously use as motifs people whose lives are absolutely nothing like that. We learn nothing about their real world of human smuggling, exploitation and vulnerability, where lecturing your pimp with shiny waist-length hair and glamorous almond eyes seems a bit unbelievable. This distortion of reality for the sake of a glossy contemporary romcom and the fact that this theme plays the role of the „exotic” spice, is rather embarrassing. The big heart, the charm of some gestures and the visuals of *Tangerine* somehow managed to forget the trans stereotypes, but it was with *Red Rocket* that I began to feel what became clear with *Anora*: how Baker works with our expectations and interests in „real” and „sex”. Unfortunately, this time the character studies, such as those of the Russian parents, are not very successful. The *Anora* film is so empty that there is really nothing to write about it, except for a single gesture when Ani tries to pay Igor back for some of his warm, human gestures with the only currency she has, sex. It is not only gratitude that plays a role here, but also the wounded vanity that Igor did not value her enough, in bizarre terms: he did not consider her „worth raping” – that Ani measures her own worth in this way sheds more light on the trauma of sex workers than anything else in the empty spinning of a quite long running time. At first glance, all the sex and shouting, the three bodyguards stumbling around in the big city and the resulting situational comedy may seem amusing, but the only real moment in the film is when Ani starts punching Igor in tears because he reacted with real emotion and broke Ani's rules that protected her.

True, even the ban on kissing is a cliché that has been seen a thousand times before on this subject, but if you're looking for some light evening entertainment, I can recommend this film, this shameless lap dance, just remember to keep an eye

on Sean Baker's hand, because, well, you can be sure he's cheating: that's not the touch you're waiting for.

LAV DIAZ: *ESSENTIAL TRUTH OF THE LAKE*, 2023

Tonight, after my second viewing of *When The Waves Are Gone*, I dreamt I was talking to Lav Diaz, making an interview, in a park. I asked him, why did Hermès have to say in words that his serious skin disease started when the president launched his „war on drugs”, using nefarious means? Why not let the viewer make the connection? And does he not find these political allegories too simplistic, such as the Western-style duel between the violent policeman and the psychopathic mafioso, both driven mad by the evils of the system and the suffering they inflict on each other, or the figure of the Philippine Eagle, an endangered bird symbolising artistic freedom and failed environmentalism, and the desperate state of the country?

He replied that he slept badly, woke up early and wrote the script of the day with the first rays of dawn, which the actors then developed freely. He spoke vehemently about the crimes of Duterte and Marcos and how his countrymen needed to understand what was happening to them, the weight of history and the responsibility of the present on his shoulders as a filmmaker. Meanwhile, more and more people were gathering around us and I realised that they were all cops. Luckily, in my dream, I was able to jump from tree to tree like a monkey and get out of our situation, seeing the human waves crashing over his head from a safe distance.

Lav Diaz's views on the reality of the Philippines, his persistent, consistent search for truth, his commitment, his complex thinking, his deep attention to nature have always inspired my respect and love. After the desperate, hopeless and violent darkness of *When the Waves are Gone*, which was not helped by the soft tonal metaphysical vibrancy of the grainy 16mm film that at times enveloped the doomed characters in a white glowing halo, *The Essential Truths of the Lake* sees the return of the former Diaz. He is able to put a special knife in the hand of a fanatically religious psychopathic mobster who dances like a madman, deliberately tearing open flesh and causing death. Primo and Hermès' path to hell may have been paved with good intentions, but it becomes inextricably entangled in the series of sins that accompany them, as if the weight of history were a crippling frustration pressing so heavily on their shoulders that they collapsed under the weight. *Essential Truths of the Lake* is the prequel to *The Waves Are Gone*, and we follow young detective Hermès' journey into this madness, aggravated by a skin disease and as he tries in vain to discover why the talented Esmeralda Stuart, performance artist, maybe prostitute and environmental activist, whose life and possible death are the subject of a thousand legends, has disappeared. Determined to right a wrong committed 15 years ago, Hermès slowly goes mad in his investigation, leaves his family (his wife will cheat on him for this in *The Waves*), wanders through the night in a bird costume and, following Esmeralda's trail, moves into the slums around the lake, one of the shacks hidden in the bamboo forest, covered in a sea of rubbish and ash from a volcano that erupted during

filming. Using the simultaneous reality of the volcanic eruption, Diaz and his crew, disguised as reporters, enter the isolated areas. Mixing digital and 16mm footage, the slum around the lake becomes Lav Diaz's *Fontainhas*, only instead of the dark caves seen in Pedro Costa's films, the slums of the white bamboo forest are almost radiant with light, their inhabitants, the orphan Achillés and the abandoned women, all victims of the system, people who shine in their desolation.

Essential Truths of The Lake is much more dreamlike than *Waves*, its shorter sequences and wild close-ups replaced by Diaz's trademark distant static shots, with the wind constantly blowing and everything in violent motion in the stable, still frame. This tense contradiction, the fact that we can't even see the faces of the characters, let alone look them in the eye, and the oddly stylised dialogue create a strange, if familiar, atmosphere for hardcore Diaz fans. There are those who compare this delirious investigation to *Twin Peaks*, and those who point out the neo-noir elements, but Diaz, despite the straightforward political commentary, is always able to create that strange island, that sequence within reality, that Lav Diaz-realm outside of time and space, where images of light and darkness collide, each frame offering a new, unexpected twist that will, after a while, draw the patient viewer in. Alice in Wonderland, only these Filipino wonders are infused with pain, horror under the palm trees of a windy, hot landscape. In his one-man psychodrama, Hermés delves deeper and deeper into the world of people living on the fringes of a society buried in ashes, and after a while he forgets what exactly he is looking for. Lost in the thousand truths of the lake is the one truth, the figure of the woman bravely fighting for the extinct bird, and slowly we leave the characters, the woman making a documentary about Esmeralda, who talks about rape and abuse, the queer fashion designer and the small group of activists dancing naked. Whereas *Waves* is a film about violent, frustrated men, in *Truths* Hermés stumbles among the oppressed and lost women, finally falling to his knees before a widow who has lost her son, in whom he may or may not recognise Esmeralda – the question remains open. On the hillside, an old peasant tries in vain to dig the remains of his family out of the ashes. I'm reminded of Apichatpong, a landscape in a deathly slumber. Following the euphoria of the final scene in the film, it is clear that there will be no redemption for Hermès in the next part of the trilogy. However, nobody makes films like Diaz; the message is overridden by the mystery that stems from his approach to filmmaking and his perception of film and reality. Diaz's gaze is so complex that the sometimes simple, powerful allegories of political activism become a thousand existential parabolas of potential truth in the process of watching. Diaz's attitude, the humility with which he approaches the world, his indulgent, only-as-directed methodology, always open to what is happening, makes the world a creative partner for him. The volcano becomes silent, the wind rises, the waves reach for the sky for his sake. He needs only a few tools to reveal history and the human psyche in all its infinite layers, and the wounded landscape, buried under rubbish and ashes, is happy to assist him – spreading its infinite carpet before his camera.

CORALIE FARGEAT: *THE SUBSTANCE*, 2024

It's really funny that when I was looking for interviews with Coralie Fargeat, I found them in fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *ELLE*, and for a while I was as unsure whether this was trolling as were the film's critics, who couldn't decide whether the film was a feminist masterpiece or, on the contrary, the realm of the male gaze and hagsploitation (the genre in which old women are portrayed as evil, crazy monsters). But after watching CF's too-small entire oeuvre, I got the impression that CF herself is split into two parts: a Sue who actually enjoys making bloody exploitation genre films, and an Elisabeth who tries to give this desire an intelligent, feminist framework and legitimacy. In the case of *Revenge*, this was done so badly that critics were desperately trying to work out how much of the victim-blaming introduction and the kind of *Mad Max*-style protagonist, even with a bloody stake in her belly and still hot as hell in her panties and tiny bra, could be a feminist avenger with enough bloodshed to be called 'ironic'.

Coralie Fargeat herself put an end to the critical torment when she confessed, with impressive sincerity, that „When the (*Revenge*) movie screened, people commented on its [gender] statements, I wasn't rationalizing them yet, but I started to read a lot about the societal imbalances and [considered] those seams in a more intellectual way”. In the case of *The Substance*, the critics are in a similar predicament, because 95% of the film was directed by 'Sue', but the 5% that unfolds in the film's final sequence is the real, desperate cry of Elisabeth-Coralie, who literally explodes with rage at being 48 and still working on her first really important film. Why didn't I get more opportunities, she asks.⁵ That's only part of the frustration, of course, but it's not an insignificant part. But as someone said about „trash being in *The Substance*'s DNA" does not preclude it from deliberately responding to emptiness with emptiness.

For the main problem with the film, at least in my opinion, is not that it is dominated by the male gaze, for the message of this Guy Debord colouring book for adults is precisely that you cannot escape it. Guy Debord's concept of the 'spectacle' refers to the way in which contemporary capitalist societies are dominated by images, representations and media that shape our perception of reality. Debord himself defines the spectacle as a social relationship between people mediated by images. Accordingly, the film is dominated by images that rely on hyper-photographic realism and elaborate close-ups (think of the ant paralysed under the weight of drops of blood in *Revenge*), as well as film quotes and pop culture clichés. These are very stylised images, but they do not create an independent style. It is very telling that CF deliberately did not want any furniture in the white bathroom set, because her stated aim was to create an universal, timeless, satirical allegory, a kind of caricature – and as I myself argued at the time of *Poor Things*, excessive complexity is not expected from a satirical allegory or agitation genre. Still, *The Substance* feels like a

⁵ Cit.: <https://www.elle.com/culture/movies-tv/a62297701/the-substance-coralie-fargeat-interview/>

film with too little substance, I was sometimes bored of it, it was quite predictable and didactic, with simple (but important) messages, right up to the brave finale. My problem with the film was not only that it lacked complexity, love of the feminine principle and of life itself, and a view outside the paradigm, but that it even failed to do the job it set itself. Although Sue and Elisabeth were supposed to be one person, there was no relationship between them, which greatly weakened the film's meta-theme of addiction. If Elisabeth was not involved in Sue's trip, why did she maintain the addiction? If she didn't know what Sue was doing, and Sue wasn't carrying on her life's work under her name, why was she sacrificing herself on the altar of not-perceived pleasure?

Many women will find that all their problems have been reduced to „a nice bum”. All Sue wants is recognition and sex, which is an oversimplified interpretation of the difficult time of female menopause or ageing. Fargeat says her film is deeply personal because, at 48, „it was like a super depressing collapse in my personal life. I felt it's over. My life is over. I'm going to be erased from society.” There is a precursor to *The Substance*, *The Wasp Woman* (1959), but things are not going well in that either. Compared to the long running time, the one-dimensional approach and self-hating lack of compassion is given a questionable resolution in the Carrie-like bloodbath at the end of the film.

Although it's exactly this final, overwhelming scene of personal despair and resulting rage that redeems Fargeat's literally „bleeding from many wounds” body horror. Her admirable eye for detail, her sterile yet innovative use of retro design, adapted to the visual standards of advertising and fashion magazines, and her consistent execution of a minimal narrative with a simple but powerful message, all border on cathartic by the end of the film. Through the editing of the single frames, the visual language, from the fly in the champagne to the *Shining*-like corridors and Harvey's disgusting crab eating, the clever use of the excommunicating gestures familiar from *Body Snatchers*, and other horror tropes, the film finally breaks out of its lifeless allegorical shell into a very subtle and sensitive satire. *The Substance* was able to resist the temptation of sentimentality all the way through, in a way that, while it showed no mercy, in the harsh downward spiral, there was still the possibility of redemption and self-acceptance in this last scene, revealing Elisabeth's true substance, the little girl underneath the prosthetics and distortions. And it wasn't discursive, but in an ambiguity that awakened the viewer to the archetype, but at the same time didn't lift it out of the disgust, but put both on stage at once, in a simultaneity that hit the human essence more deeply. When the monster, unable to free herself from her addiction, puts on the pretty blue tulle dress over her shapeless, amorphous body and goes on stage, so that even the mask she holds in front of her is the face of a woman with smeared lipstick, falling apart in despair, internalising society's expectations and thus violating herself, one's heart must break. The sight of the monster exploding in pain, covering everything with her own insides, went deeper than any 'rape-revenge' avenging angel. Because there is no one to blame but ourselves and the system we have built. The word „disgusting” had not even crossed my mind at that

point. I could see the beauty in the beast, how her body, her self-image and the gaze of others let her down, yet she puts on the blue frothy dress of youth, of beautiful girlhood and stands up for all to see, because „that's still me”, even if she's left alone in this trap called society, again and again.