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FILM, FINE ARTS, SOCIAL SENSITIVITY

2024, THE YEAR OF PC CINEMA, A CRITICAL OVERVIEW 2.¹

SANDRO AGUILAR: *ARMOUR*, 2020

I saw this film several years after it was released, and I fear that others will see it even later, if at all. One of my favourite directors, Sandro Aguilar, doesn't make it easy for audiences.² Some of his films are available to rent on Vimeo, and his latest works are showing at a few festivals. However, anyone who wants to watch his entire body of work will face serious obstacles. Although he works with some of the biggest names in Portuguese cinema at the important experimental workshop, O Som e a Fúria studio, he seemingly does not really care about the reception of his own films. This extraordinary, quasi-narrative landscape film, *Armour*, has been reviewed by 5 people out of the millions of Letterboxd users. On the web, I found three paragraphs about *Armour* and a Q&A video in Portuguese, from which I only learned that his gaze is as warm and melancholic as his films. And that he wrote once about Nathaniel Dorsky: „apenas os filmes mais livres, aqueles que cada vez mais procuro, encerram em si um pouco desta ambiguidade operativa”, which shows that he is above all interested in freedom, the freedom of filmmaking to the maximum, which obviously also says something about the freedom of in his case often unconstrained, ambiguous meanings.

Aguilar's magic lies in this search for freedom and lack of fixedness. The point of the deconstruction here is to decouple the 'signifié' from the 'signifiant', thus creating freely circulating, reclassifiable entities waiting for the possibility of a new bond. Aguilar films burn with the desire for new connections. A ruined house in Rimouski, identified in the subtitle as a living room, is not necessarily or almost certainly not the place of Hector's failure, but it is a reminder of a lost home. The fluctuation of locations and tropes creates new, freer fields of association. In this way, the landscapes of the film become tropes of the psyche. I have to use the word magic because his films can remain mysterious. Sandro achieves this so easily that he can even indulge himself, as in *Armour*, punctuated by ironic title cards, to make fun of the ruins of the narrative, to gently mock the drunken Hector. Despite the (self)-irony, the film keeps its secrets but shares its pain. The subtitles tell us that Hector's

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

² My academic paper on Sandro Aguilar and Peter Strickland: A test fenomenológiai kiterjesztése a moziban. Az ASMR, vagy Peter Strickland és Sandro Aguilar. *Enigma*, no 116. 93-101.

father is dying of cancer and that his girlfriend has left him for another man, taking their 11-year-old son with her. So Hector is not well, has been drinking heavily at a medieval village fete, and has donned a light armour he found there. In the opening shots of the film, he stumbles around drunk in this armour. After the main work *Uprise*, in which the narrative was deconstructed in such a way that you couldn't solve the puzzle after the fifth viewing, apparently because Sandro's main intention was that there should be no puzzle, *Armour* seems almost talky, even though not a word is spoken. From the outset, Aguilar resists the comprehensible, knowable story, the coherent narrative. At the same time, his films work with the richest network of connections. Aguilar's 'cinema of the senses', or groundbreaking formalism, is merely a toolkit that he changes from film to film. His films are formally diverse, but they are also recognisably Aguilar films. He moves between cinematic genres as easily as the creators of post-cinema, but just as easily transcends the satire that inevitably results from recycling.

At first glance, this film appears to be a hybrid of Benning's landscape cinema and a Skinamarink-like haunting horror, fuelled by traces and objects left behind and an elliptical, hiatus-like structure. In reality, however, it is a trauma film that captures someone's inner contemplation. However, the fundamental phenomenological question is what these images are and where they come from. Are these images what Hector sees, or what we see through his eyes and our own when we see him? Who sees what, and how is it possible to share images?

Although I know that nothing really happened, except that Aguilar got a scholarship to go to Canada and spend a few days walking around Le Bic National Park and the villages around Rimouski with a camera in his hand, when I watch the film I believe that these are Hector's memories or impressions. The images are often still, like a Lav Diaz long take compressed into two seconds, but I can see that the camera is held in the hand, not on a tripod. The relative stillness of the images suggests that they are mental images, not just the ones Hector sees while wandering drunk. We will never know, though we have an inkling, which of these are memories, but along with the strange, alienating subtitles, much is revealed about the traumas Hector has suffered, and the rather ingenious sound design, woven from fragments of some kind of distant music and noise, animal sounds and the rushing wind, provides the haunting atmosphere that makes Hector's wandering and pain palpable. The film creates connections through sensual, visual metaphors that take the place of narrative. We see fire-eaters dancing at a medieval party, then a burnt-out house, and at the end of the film Aguilar's son has matches in his pocket. While the father in the film tries to protect himself from the traumas of the outside world, the son wields a lightsaber – a plastic sword, as he navigates the jungle of life. His father has only this armour, which also seals him off from the outside world. He is trapped in a prison of trauma.

Aguilar, in spite of appearances, I think is worried about the fate of his films, behind his apparent indifference there is probably the same independence-obsessed poetics at work as in this kind of Zen way of filmmaking. While he takes everything apart, takes it to pieces and puts it back together again in new ways, he believes,

with the practical experience of a poet, that the ultimate form of a film are as much beyond the competence of the author as those of a good poem. Because film requires a series of practical choices, we often forget that a film can make much more room for its own metaphysics if its creator is willing to control the process just enough to make it happen. Nevertheless, his presence is powerful, capable of conveying not only personal sorrow, but even a kind of Portuguese melancholy that at times recalls the sadness of a fado. Armour consists almost entirely of a series of natural and suburban landscapes, especially at dusk and at night, but this is not just landscape cinema, but the story of a lonely spirit, alienated from nature and the human world, numbed by a stupor. Aguilar has always avoided both the very beautiful and the too ugly, the exaggerated close-ups of *Uprise* made the film's visuals more reminiscent of the fur of a limping, neglected stray dog, but it pains me to note that Aguilar's path to ultimate deconstruction leads him to a quiet dismantling of his own formalist tools and achievements. It is a logical progression – at one point in the film it is as if a shot is fired, not for nothing was a gun held under the counter at another moment: at the crossroads of space and time, a grown man has no choice but to put on his armour, which ultimately fails to protect him.

ALBERT SERRA: *AFTERNOONS OF SOLITUDE*, 2024³

The tense gaze of an animal in the arena, unaware of its fate. The tense gaze of a man in his car, preparing to kill. The arena's sand; the colourful embroidery of the *traje de luces*; blood; foaming mouths; suffering; and more blood. Death. That's the whole film. When the famous Catalan director Albert Serra was asked what Peruvian bull-fighter Andrés Roca Rey thought of the film, he replied somewhat uncertainly that he didn't know, as he had hardly met Roca Rey outside the arena. „As we saw, Roca Rey is introverted and shy.” Elsewhere, Serra described the protagonist of his film as an „enigma” – someone impossible to figure out. Indeed, despite watching him for more than two hours, we learn nothing about the man himself. Serra deliberately refrained from providing context; scenes of the bullfighter's injured body in a hotel room or the chorus of picadors in a tour minibus only serve to highlight the ritual. The film consists of agonisingly repetitive sequences of the torture and destruction of bulls. If this is a portrait, then it examines not personality, but the forces acting on the body. Roca is a dedicated man – perhaps his only characteristic – and a matador who has devoted his life to the fight, even though he does not need to do so financially; he is descended from a wealthy, successful family of bullfighters. In line with this, when *The Film Stage* asked him about the rich cultural connotations of bullfighting and mentioned the names of Hemingway, Goya, Manet, Dalí, Picasso, Bacon and Orson Welles, Serra replied: „When you shoot a film, the images guide you. I was there to serve their internal formal logic. You have to work with the images you shoot, because what you shoot is life. Cinematographers take what they can. They don't have time

³ For a shorter version in Hungarian, see the June 2024 issue of *Filmvilág* magazine.

to think or look for something beautiful that relates to another artist. For example, I drew a beautiful idea from Georges Bataille's conception of eroticism. I wanted to explore the sexual symbolism of the bull and connect it to women, especially the women watching the show. I thought about hiring an actress, sitting her there, and directing her reactions. But we never did it.”⁴ Although Serra's enthusiastic comments make it clear where he stands in the debate between animal rights activists and those who support the 'esthetics of traditional brutality', the film itself does not take a position. „The power of will and the experience of fear are universal themes. We all experience fear and ask ourselves how to control it. However, the fanatical elements of bullfighting are very Spanish. The idea that life is meaningless touches the fanatic in me. I love living in France, and French cinema is important to me, but I am Spanish! I can't escape it. I am also a fanatic,”⁵ Serra told Ela Bittencourt when asked about the sensuality of the bloody scenes and the almost tangible proximity of the blood, which is depicted with great plasticity and viscosity. This kind of sensuality and dominance of the image is very characteristic of Serra. In his other films, he focuses on the act in the broadest sense (and sometimes the narrowest, as in *Liberté*, 2019), which is subject to the order of eternal return and characterised only by rituals and their props. As in *The Death of Louis XIV* (2016), the camera focuses almost exclusively on dying flesh submerged in magnificent costumes. Similarly, the close-ups of the bull-fight, edited from 700 hours of footage shot by three cameras, focus on magnificent costumes and the ritualistic liberation of men from fear and their dedication to death. Serra wanted the cameras to be directed by the choreography of the dance of death. Through these shocking yet aesthetically shot images, he aimed to bring people who casually consume beef burgers and highly mediated images of violence back to the source, where we can glimpse our animal instincts and the resistance of technology to change. „If this ritual exists in the Third World, we say, 'Oh, that's beautiful. We see it as something pure,'” Serra told the Hollywood Reporter. „But when we see it in Western society, we say, „These people are crazy. 'They're sadists.' It's this paradox that interests me.”⁶

But are viewers interested enough in these theoretical arguments to sit through a two-hour film focusing on senseless, meaningless torture; the suffering of a victim forced into an unequal struggle despite his strength; and the viscosity of blood? There is little new in the line of thinking. Nor is there much new in the form. Serra unabashedly highlights and appropriates three scenes from Francesco Rosi's 1965 film *The Moment of Truth*, three scenes about a matador 1) fighting in the arena, 2) preparing in his car, and 3) dressing in his ornate costume. By depriving the contest of its audience and social context – which addressed the issue of poverty – Serra created

⁴ <https://thefilmstage.com/you-cannot-project-your-desire-albert-serra-on-afternoons-of-solitude-bullfighting-and-kristen-stewart/>

⁵ <https://mubi.com/en/notebook/posts/the-plasticity-of-blood-albert-serra-on-afternoons-of-solitude>

⁶ <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/albert-serra-bullfighting-doc-film-afternoons-of-solitude-1236162937/>

a stylised, aestheticised spectacle that merely masks the lie of nostalgia. The animal within us is changing slowly but surely. Bullfighting is a product of a male-dominated, phallogocentric worldview which has already been criticised, but Serra's message is that time is trapped in an eternal loop of repetitive violence, and that 'bullfighting is a reminder of the cyclical nature of life'.⁷ Paradoxically, his main tools – the lack of commentary, close-ups of the arena that exclude the audience, and ritually repetitive sequences – make the spectacle of death boring, and this in itself is revealing. When looking into the eyes of the dying animals, one soon asks oneself what one is doing in this redundant, barbaric and senseless bloodbath. Shouts of „Your balls are as big as the arena!” make the matador seem more ridiculous than heroic, especially with the noise and screams of real wars waged by men in the background. Emphasising the feminine traits does not help at all. Ultimately, it's all about balls, not the bull. Contrary to Serra's belief, the bull does not seem to be inherently masochistic or consent to the ritual 'trial'. For fans of bullfighting films, I highly recommend the claymation film *Long Live the Bull* (1926) – even in the early days of filmmaking, some were already aware of the moral dilemmas involved. The film does not take a stand or offer anything new, making it in itself totally anachronistic – contemporary discourses such as toxic masculinity, animal cruelty, posthumanism, deep ecology, animal ethics, vibrant materialism and animal liberty seem to hold no interest for Serra. He clearly doesn't spend his days reading Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett or Peter Singer – but still. Something would be needed that goes beyond this pure, but somehow ambiguous presentation. The pure 'act' is silent in a philosophical sense. After a while, we see the animals shitting themselves in fear, they are terrified and unable to comprehend the situation. If the killers would let them, they would flee the battlefield, and this is no longer just true for bulls. The tradition of bullfighting, perpetuated purely out of nostalgia, ignores the principle of equality between animals and humans. A fight is never between equal opponents. Serra's closing words about the formalism of powerful and beautiful images and pure cinematic enjoyment are lost in the cries of the victims – for lack of anything else to say.

THEO MONTOYA: *ANHELL69*, 2022

„I didn't decide to be born; I was never asked” – these are the opening words of the film, and for me, this sentence has become a kind of eternal trope of suffering. This suffering stems from a sense of dysphoria, the malaise of being an outsider or belonging to a minority. There are so many components to this feeling that it seems almost impossible to unravel, let alone in a film of about an hour. The young Colombian director takes apart and reweaves the components of the political environment, the discourse of a young queer community conceived in violence and growing up fatherless and among women, with such a light hand, as if he were not a 32-year-old

⁷ <https://www.screendaily.com/features/bullfighting-is-a-reminder-of-the-cycle-of-life-albert-serra-reflects-on-afternoons-of-solitude/5197541.article>

beginner. Religious allusions, various forms of oppression, spectral aesthetics are all present in this reflection, which is entirely cinematographic, visual, autofictional, experimental and documentary in nature, accompanied by the melancholic sounds of the narration that float dreamily over the film, and built around a casting process through which the director tries to find the protagonists of his film among the often drug-addicted twenty-somethings of the local queer community. The film-within-a-film was intended to be a haunting sci-fi about the spectrophilia and subsequent reprisals that swept through Medellín, that great graveyard, in the wake of the Escobar era – but the young characters who would make love to ghosts in this subculture have since become ghosts themselves.

The causes and ways of their deaths are explored through a form of allusion both subtle and brutal, imbued with a deep sense of grief and woven into the film's genre-rich, uniquely complex audiovisual fabric. The film, which ends on the most pessimistic tone possible, foreshadowing the futurelessness and untimely deaths of these talented young people, is nevertheless imbued with a particular power and brilliance. The seemingly sentimental term 'trans angels' makes sense here – their strength lies precisely in their resistance, however self-destructive, and their simple, direct words in response to the invisible director's questions will stay with us for a long time. In this film, the director makes countless subtle moves, one of which is this remotely Kitty Green-like way of casting, but the whole film is marked by something of astonishing taste, a taste that has to navigate between the most difficult questions. It is an essay film haunted by the orange-eyed ghosts of *Uncle Boonmee*, freely crossing all boundaries, at once a love poem and a requiem, full of sadness and splendour.

The film is also an autofiction by the director, who, born in a coffin, with his favourite filmmaker (Víctor Gaviria) at the wheel, in a funeral car, recounts his relationship with filmmaking. Since then I have seen a film by Gaviria, from which Montoya has borrowed the distinctive night view of Medellín as a cameo, and I understand why the director of *Animal's Wife*, a brutally realistic depiction of the abuse of women, is at the wheel. Montoya's autonomous formal language, his visual style, couldn't be more different from that of his master – but they are united by courage, social sensitivity and a sense of responsibility for the slums of Medellín. Like the Fontainhas in Pedro Costa's films, the favelas on the city's hillsides have become an universal trope, and it doesn't matter whether these subcultures live on the periphery or in the heart of the city – the multiple presences of ghosts and death, the queer youth's relationship to the eternal present, make this unique experimental docu-fiction philosophically – e. g. the hauntology of Derrida – very thought-provoking – it is a trans film, as Montoya said, in every sense of the word, in which transition becomes a metaphor for the journey to death – its director, Theo Montoya, will be one to watch in the future.⁸

⁸ The film was also Nicole Brenez's favourite in a poll! :) <https://www.conlosojosabiertos.com/la-internacional-cinefila-2022/>

LUKE GILFORD: NATIONAL ANTHEM, 2023

I thought that *National Anthem* would instantly become an indie cult film, predestined by the subject matter (kind of 'trans heaven' at the foot of the red cliffs), the aesthetically pleasing pop cinematography of photographer Luke Gilford and the soundtrack, which mainly features Perfume Genius and Elvis songs. I thought we were going to argue about it a lot, like in the cases of the *I Saw the TV Glow* or *Emilia Perez*. I could not have been more wrong. The film was seen by surprisingly few people. Some of the visual *topos* of Gilford's film appeared in an unexpectedly mainstream setting, on the cover of Beyoncé's new album, *Cowboy Carter*, by Blair Caldwell, also with visual references to rodeo and national consciousness.

The idea for the *National Anthem* came from Gilford's album of 100 photographs of the same name, and in the book's foreword Gilford writes: „One of the great powers of queer rodeo is its ability to disrupt America's tribal dichotomies that cannot contain who we really are – liberal versus conservative, urban versus rural, 'coastal elite' versus 'middle America'.” It's incredibly rare to find a community that actually embraces both ends of the spectrum. The fact that they managed to find this community, which is a small queer subculture within the rodeo subculture, is truly exciting. What Gilford ended up doing with it can be seen in the photos sold on his website. Gilford is a mainstream (glamour) photographer; these images are reminiscent of fashion magazine covers and, despite their subject matter, fit effortlessly into the usual fashion photography trends. The photos of Kristen Stewart and Katy O'Brien are worth a look. This is photography uses queer identity as a cool accessory, uses queer visual *topos* with a light hand. It is typical that of Mapplethorpe's heritage he uses the decorative minimalism rather than subversive force, focusing on design rather than communication. It is completely traditional in its tools, decorative and not really innovative: one of the first interviews about the film was given in *Vogue*. *Vanity Fair* wrote this of the *National Anthem* photoalbum: „rich with Gilford's tenderness for his subjects, while imploring us to rethink the hegemony of the American cowboy.” This in itself is not surprising, of course, as all queer musicians turning mainstream also enjoy the attention of the fashion world, as evidenced by a number of clips, not least in the case of alternative black queer music star Yves Tumor, but the kind of subversive boldness that characterises Tumor's music videos is out of the question with *National Anthem*. Gilford has spent years photographing the queer community of the International Gay Rodeo Association in Texas, Mexico and Arizona, but by comparison, the film doesn't show anyone in particular, apart from Sky, Pepé and Carrie, and doesn't show them in their conflicted or even realistic sides. Life at the ranch where Dylan finds work is reminiscent of a hippie cult propaganda video. Everyone works with a smile; nobody is tired or in conflict with anyone else. The outside world only appears once in the film, in the form of a store, and everyone is as understanding as Dylan's mother. Even at the end of the film, no one asks what will happen to Dylan's autistic brother, whom the community has embraced for a day. Dylan, at least at the beginning of the film, seems almost in love with his brother, as his father instead of his father, but at the end of the film, he

leaves him there without shedding a tear with his alcoholic mother and her „sponsors” of dubious morals. And this is just one example of the superficiality of social framing and psychological analysis.

„A 21-year-old construction worker in rural New Mexico joins a community of queer ranchers and rodeo performers in search of their own version of the American dream” – reads Letterboxd’s succinct synopsis. „One thing I love about this community is that if you show up, you’re accepted. There’s something really beautiful about that. That’s what America supposed to be” – Gilford said, and I think it was all meant to make this other American dream of inclusion, of the ‘chosen family’, as beautiful as possible.⁹ Just as in the photos it was enough to put a gay bodybuilder painted in silver in front of a red rock to get a pleasing queer photo, the everyday life of the queer community depicted in the film by the same means is made to look so utopian and happy that it borders on lying. Gilford wanted to send the message that queer people are beautiful, accepting and good to be with through beautiful, spectacular images of beautiful people rolling in red sand, cuddling, wrestling or even jumping naked into the water, playing Elvis songs in a yellow wheat field, riding into the sun in tulle. The message is powerful. Gilford has chosen a different path than the usually underrated dramas like ‘Paloma’ and its peers, which focus more on the pain and conflict of queer existence. Gilford chose to turn the National Anthem into an anthem of queer happiness in a long-form, Perfume Genius-style music video. He wasn’t afraid to bow to the cinematic *topos* of the gay cowboy, borrow the antics of drag queens and the visual *topos* of mainstream queer photography, and fuse them with conservative American national iconography. Unfortunately, although it tries to use kitsch in an aesthetic sense, the lack of critical attitude makes it kitsch itself. The lukewarm politics of the film show some hesitant desire to fit into the bad system and the fault lines are covered with a colourful cotton candy of lies. The main value of his film lies in using this aesthetic to teach acceptance in a time and medium not exactly known for social tolerance. But that’s not enough to make a good film. At least it hasn’t convinced me.

JANE SCHOENBRUN: *I SAW THE TV GLOW*, 2024

I’ve been wondering whether I should write about *I Saw the TV Glow*, because this film is important for queer/trans people and I am perhaps not in a position to judge its value in the sense of impact and relevance. And because it was made by a Buffy fan, and yes, Buffy has a special place in my heart. Jane Schoenbrun wrote the film during her transition years. She cited the final scene of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Season 2, along with the work of Gilles Deleuze and renowned queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, as her main sources of inspiration. This led her to reflect on the film, considering what it means to see oneself in fiction and what it feels like to

⁹ Sources of the Gilford quotes: <https://www.lukegilford.com/>

<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/national-anthem-film-review-2024>

become a spectator in one's own life. She also considered how this could be a symptom or metaphor for dysphoria relating to otherness or queerness. Schoenbrun says that it was an epiphany for her when Buffy told her mother that she was a vampire slayer, and Joyce asked her if she could pretend that she wasn't, and behave like a normal kid at school, but Buffy had seen the world of demons and vampires and decided to take responsibility. Jane says that as a young person isolated from her friends and family, Buffy's example was very important to her, but not just for her, because in that show „a generation of queer people first discovered themselves”. The film is autobiographical in that sense, Schoenbrun was obsessed with the series as a teenager, and there is a series in the film, Pink Opaque, which she put together from elements of *The Adventures of Pete & Pete* and *Are You Afraid of the Dark*. Unfortunately, from this point onwards, the film does not really require Deleuze's ideas of ‚becoming', which Schoenbrun uses instead of ‚transition', nor Freud's concept of melancholia – the aspect of depression associated with grief, whereby the world seems impoverished because the ego has been depleted by loss. She neither considers these ideas nor contributes anything to these lines of thought. All this is presented in the film as thesis, illustrating in the most didactic way possible even Judith Butler's concept of gender, in which the words „social construction” and „fiction” are used together, or the term „melancholic identification”, which refers to „the melancholic consequences of a disavowed homosexual attachment”. Jane translates these theoretical references into the language of the recently fashionable bicolor aesthetic, almost in the form of an educational video.

When I saw the familiar, pink, juvenile and so many times reused looks-like-sm screen caps, I knew that this film could not be any good, but then I began to feel really uncomfortable at the sight of the frightened faces of the kids in the red and blue interior. It was as if the director had told these two great child actors to look very, very sad, while talking in scared and crying voices, and to move very, very slowly like zombies, because, you know, this is depression and gender dysphoria, and I say out loud, halfway through the film, „SLOW”, because, you know, you're all undead in a coffin who haven't faced your true selves (which, in the simplistic interpretation of the film, means gender). The entire film was overly sentimental and didactic, and the ending was absolutely over the top with that apology scene. Even the music inserts felt like pale copies, quoted from a manual on how to do retro DIY horror aesthetics in the era of David Lynch, Bertrand Mandico and the *Stranger Things*. Oh if only the solution were as simple as the film suggests! Life and art would be much more easier. My problems with the film are related to aesthetics. I can understand trans people who don't feel these characters are overdrawn because they recognize their own anxieties in an oppressive social milieu and identify with their own coping strategies, but the film's lack of nuance and depressive exaggeration undermines its very authenticity. It might be useful to watch this film for sad and lonely teens who don't recognise their gender dysphoria: but I'd rather stick with Buffy. Her character, who did her homework, cried, laughed and between two school lessons beat the monsters to death, seems to have worked in a much more complex

and mature way. But I'll give it one plus star for its good intentions and nice title. After all, it's true that we all saw the TV glow, which glows forever for those locked in darkness – like us, you know, my dear.

JACQUES AUDIARD: *EMILIA PÉREZ*, 2024

That was very, very bad! Or bizarre? Ridiculous? Like the staff of queer magazine THEM, I'm usually not really interested in the question of why a cisgender Frenchman is directing a film about transgender Mexicans in French studios with hardly any Mexicans in the cast, because I believe that anyone can make a film about anything if they approach the issue correctly. However, they are right to point out that Emilia Pérez has made this question relevant again, as the film is astonishingly insensitive to its chosen subject matter. Audiard has publicly admitted that the protagonist, Karla Sofía Gascón, had to rewrite the script because of initial misunderstandings about trans women, but the film is still, as critics say, based on „retrograde trans stereotypes”. It says a lot about the depth of its failure that the discussion in the magazine was not about why Emilia Pérez isn't good, but why isn't it camp enough?

There really is a curse on the 13 Oscar nominated film, the trans protagonist, who was honoured at Cannes, was recently in the press for her racist tweets. But you really can't understand how anyone could have seen fantasy in a synopsis that starts 'Take a Mexican drug cartel leader who begins his transition and becomes a good person as a woman, repenting all his sins'. Pardon? Even with good intentions, this idea sounds bad enough when compared to the half a million victims in Mexico. Did the protagonist deal drugs and kill people just because he couldn't be a woman? Does being a woman mean you can't be guilty? Does society allowing you to become who you want to be mean there's no sin anymore? Or if two years of hormone treatment didn't stop you from killing, wait until you wake up in a bra? or what was the starting point here?

One thing is clear: a kind of didactic, benign PC theme has been combined with the popular genre of the musical and 'French art': the result is a hybrid that should have been very clever, very brave, very musical and very careful in the queer and political fields, but unfortunately none of these things came together. The complete creative failure is good for one thing. It is time to talk about how being politically correct is no guarantee that a work will be good, even if the world hypocritically pretends that it is, even if it is rewarded. These attempts often end up as didactic nightmares or comic nonsense on a cosmic scale, or as propaganda films, but usually nobody dares to say so because they are on the good side, so to speak. Nowadays, anything that is just crap with shallow, clichéd PC messages is called genre trolling or irony, and the question of quality is over.

I will summarise the plot because I have no words to describe the audiovisual experience:

A Mexican drug cartel leader has an operation to become a woman and wakes up the next day with: 1. no drug problems, or solved them in her sleep; 2. no longer wants to kill people; 3. no more psychological issues.

Instead: 1. wears high heels and female cloths; 2. continues to whisper; 3. volunteers as an activist to exhume the mass graves of her victims; 4. literally fucks the victims' wives; 5. goes on TV to rant about their rights; 6. tricks her ex-wife and kidnaps her children, who don't recognise their father/ex-husband.

Her miraculous moral transformation (which, I repeat, required only one operation) has one small flaw: she tries to eliminate her ex-wife's new boyfriend by good old-fashioned means, for which she ends up being punished in the trunk of a car, even though her severed three fingers barely bleed. But no matter, because after her death the Mexican people will celebrate her as a martyr, carrying her statue through the picturesque town while singing hymns about human rights.

The message is: just be yourself, whatever that means, and you get a statue (or not).

FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA: *MEGALOPOLIS*, 2024

Do you know what this film looks like? Like a pyramid of golden Ferrero Rocher bonbons, around which the rich gather to discuss what would be good for the poor, sweet golden champagne in hand, in an Art Deco interior. „Even disaster tourism is better in the mind of a real author” – a friend of mine wrote to me yesterday, so the credit for this goes to him, and it is an apt analogy, because there's something really catastrophic about this film, there's power and conviction in the bad things it does.

Yesterday watched the film for the second time, whereas the message of *Megalopolis*, because unfortunately it has a message, is not even from the last century, but rather from the 19th, and the many quotations from Marcus Aurelius and allusions to Shakespeare do not improve the situation of this romantic naivety. It is an infantile kitchen-table philosophising about the fall of the contemporary Roman Empire, the decadence of our time, the world-changing potential of art, and how we might use the creative energies of art ('megalon') to comfortably settle our brave new world ('megalopolis'). The obvious pun on the megalomania of the concept is only as true as it could be in a superhero movie devoid of any self-reflection or nuance. But perhaps we shouldn't expect more from this film. The moment you take it seriously in an intellectual sense, it's all over, but why not take it as a comic book/cartoon world, with a battle of good and evil elites, Romeo and Juliet love, city mayor from Penguin era, and the kind of shameless happy ending you only see in the DC/Marvel universe? It's a silly, idealistic social commentary from someone who still believes in miracles. Unfortunately, the truth is that *Batman Returns* has a thousand times more real social sensitivity than Coppola's idealistic but actually uncompassionate wishful fantasy. But while I don't like the actors in the film and wouldn't call Adam Driver's work brilliant, as many do, Coppola hasn't forgotten for a moment that film is first and foremost a visual art form. Even if the whole film is a really campy one.

As I sat under the Christmas tree in my imagination, it would have been so much better to watch this fairy tale without the dull dialogue while eating Christmas sweets – but all I had left the next day was the memory of an upset stomach and the empty gold wrappers covering the nursery floor like some pieces of 'Megalon' in the real world.

STEVEN ZAILLIAN: RIPLEY, 2024

It's a collection of Italian postcards in black and white, with too much lighting and too artistic photography, from the 'wannabe-arthouse' series on Netflix. It has a noir aftertaste, and is a genre clone saved only by Andrew Scott's likeable performance. I'm afraid it won't escape oblivion, though. I suppose the hype is for the atmosphere, which is really well developed. But when Ripley stops for the third time at the sight of a policeman, only to continue after what feels like an eternity, and everyone else in the film looks at him with so much suspicion, I couldn't help but laugh. Even if Dakota Fanning is very out of place in this setting, it is a professionally made fake, sorry remake, sorry adaptation (aka „Picasso“). I can't say much more about the thing, because Scott only managed to bring the psychopath to life in a few strong moments, the other 7 1/2 hours he was just simple sympathetic with his innocent, doe-eyed look – but it wasn't bad to watch, I mean really. There were nice details, great compositions and ASMR effects. There was a vintage metro train, a lovely cat, funny hotel concierges, beautiful architecture, amazing frontal shots of bankers, charming scenes with policemen and sexy olive trees, a hardcore Italian vibe. It's true that, apart from these, some great ironically sentimental sea shots and refreshingly humorous bits in the last two episodes, I got nothing from the series. I skipped the parts where he struggled to get rid of the bodies; the series put a lot of emphasis on this. I guess this would be one of its contributions to the theme. NB: in the Minghella version, Damon's Ripley's involuntary drift into it all was more convincing and interesting.

I also found the constant references to Caravaggio and the analogy with the Ranuccio murder empty and somehow embarrassing. This analogy is supposed to be profound, but it essentially worked just as decoration. The fact that its meaning has not been thought through says a lot about the intellectual background. It's like a piece of candy that melts in your mouth immediately. This morning, I remembered nothing but that, before I die, I want to go to Atrani – that little town built on the mountain with the stairs – and that my heart is forever yours, Italy.