

Csilla Markója

FILM, FINE ARTS, SOCIAL SENSITIVITY

2024, THE YEAR OF PC CINEMA, A CRITICAL OVERVIEW 3.¹

DEA KULUMBEGASHVILI: *APRIL*, 2024

The more time that passes, the more I remember the first night. I'd heard something about the morning-after pill, which had terrible side effects at the time. However, as a teenager, you couldn't visit a gynaecologist without parental supervision. As a woman, it's easy to forget how much blood, pain and discomfort are involved in being female. The word 'abortion' was on my mind, and I had to learn many more scary words, ranging from 'endometriosis' to 'myoma'. Not wanting to ruin the evening by telling him about my worries, I spent a long time looking at his slender yet muscular body, the lines that gathered at his groin and the dark cloud of pubic hair. I looked at his lap in the same way that Nina had looked at her child-faced lover's genitals, which were hidden under a soft, feminine belly with curvy lines. All these men seemed somehow weaker than Nina in the film. And yet Nina's quiet resistance and all her strength proved insufficient to prevent patriarchal destruction. The power that perpetrated it seemed to be nestled elsewhere; not in these helpless, seemingly benign men who were embarrassed when a woman dared to initiate a sexual act herself and would vent their frustration with violent outbursts.

„However justified Nina is in providing terminations to terrified and victimised young women, her need to do so is not really a principled mission, but clearly a symptomatic part of some larger buried trauma. But in these wide open spaces, the same old male attitudes and prejudices hold sway, effectively unchanged for centuries. Women's bodies are at the mercy of men, and Nina's resistance to this is an agonising and self-tormenting kind of submission. It is a deeply unsettling meditation on sexuality and transgression.”² While critics have described Dea Kulumbegashvili's film as an abortion drama, a second narrative emerges between the images of child-birth and abortion. The protagonist is Nina's mud-made alter ego: a pain-ridden skin monster reminiscent of Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* or Francis Bacon's *Fury*. (In fact, at the end of the critically acclaimed *Beginning*, set in the Caucasus foothills – the home of Dea Kulumbegashvili – this mud figure had already appeared, returning into the soil from which it came.) It's this second, hidden film that really excites me, with the birth scene and abortion drama providing a quiet dramatic

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 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/article/2024/sep/05/april-review-dea-kulumbegashvili-abortion>

narrative framework. The protagonist is the trauma itself, undergone by the landscape as the mountains release rain onto backward rural villages in *April*. During the stormy, restless night, Nina picks up unknown men for casual sex in her car. Her childhood trauma stems from feelings of abandonment and helplessness when the mud almost swallowed her little sister and she was unable to help. Thankfully, after the overly sensational and utterly unbelievable ending of *Beginning*, the word ,almost' plays an important role here.

Reygasas produced the first film, and his influence is evident in this one too, particularly in the intense, tightly confined landscapes shot on 35 mm film with an 18 mm lens. However, Dea Kulumbegashvili is a visionary director and Ia Sukhitashvili gives such a suggestive and complex performance that these influences are seamlessly integrated into the film. Kulumbegashvili's directorial style is highly distinctive, incorporating extended static takes, long shots of almost inaudible yet significant conversations in the distance, explicit moments of violence, surreal sequences, elliptical editing and figures drifting to the edges of the frame. This aesthetic is reminiscent of Breughel's painting *The Fall of Icarus*, where Icarus is barely visible in the corner. Nina Danino's film *Temenos* is landscape cinema of sacred places and sites, accompanied by the characteristic sounds of the female throat, including cries, moans, and melodies. In the gaps in Matthew Herbert's haunting soundtrack for this meta film of *April*, we hear the anxious, asthmatic breathing of a woman – the voice of the female skin monster. Watching *Temenos*, I was reminded of a train of thought perhaps initiated by Simone de Beauvoir, which led, in an intellectual sense, to the anguished, submissive and doubting feminism that characterises Kulumbegashvili's film.

The idea that we do not simply ,born' women, but rather ,become' them, as proposed by Beauvoir, would also be considered blood-curdling by the authorities in some Eastern countries. Despite the international success of her first film, *April* could not be shown in Georgian cinemas. While Beauvoir's view is that the place of the female body is defined by social construction, Virginia Woolf's concept of ,form as breathing' paves the way for a linguistic and philosophical interpretation of the female body. Lacan established the concept of the interplay between the female body and language when he sought the 'semiotic sphere' belonging to women outside of logocentric discourse, ultimately finding it in the discourse of hysteria. However, feminist thinkers now view this merely as a historical precursor. In Kulumbegashvili's film, the anxious, gasping breath connects the language of film to the female body. This is linked to Hélène Cixous's famous statement: ,Not representation: it is the body becoming language'. This is as subversive as a narrative that critiques patriarchal structures and is based on the dark and painful events and traumas of womanhood.

Indeed, Cixous learned a lot of Clarice Lispector, who, in her visionary book *Água Viva*, described writing as a bodily vibration. Cixous built on this concept, suggesting that writing is the rhythm of another body within one's own. This sensual, almost erotic image transfers the bodily experience of making love to the process of writing. Kulumbegashvili creates this image too in the surreal visual scene of the lovemaking couple. We see the woman's body in all its unveiled reality; these bodies

speak in different ways. „But I'm trying to write you with my whole body, shooting an arrow that firmly pierces the tender nerve ends of the word.”³ In *Água Viva*, the interplay between the act of love and the grammatical act implies that the body is a ‚medium’, not an ‚object’. Dea Kulumbegashvili continues this line of thought by using Nina’s body and breath as a medium and language. Just as Cixous learned from Lispector that words not only ‚say’ but also ‚feel, pulsate and tremble’, Kulumbegashvili reflects on these feminist thinkers when her film begins to breathe asthmatically or takes on the restless, stormy rhythm of the April landscape. The Georgian director translates Lispector’s advice to always write from the sensory experience of the body into the language of film in a breath-taking way.

KIYOSHI KUROSAWA: *CHIME*, 2024

But I would need more justification for a kitchen knife in a little girl’s back than the cliché that the sterile kitchen of the nerdy cookery teacher suggests as a social framework. Especially when the people sitting in the café had their knives out. I understand that this is a message of repressed social tension, kind of emanation, a projection of an inner hysteria, but then why the mystical sound? And I’ve heard that voice, that chime before, most recently in Apichatpong’s head. This precise ASMR horror haiku almost reminded me of a Shyamalan-like bluff, which, according to the horror fan’s dream book, is not a good omen.

Perhaps it was unfortunate to watch it so close to Fred Kelemen’s brilliant *Fate*, an innovative and disturbing film in every detail, because suddenly Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s universally praised horror étude seemed a bit of an empty exercise in style. I like to think of this as a poem, just an alternate reality in the man’s head, it’s good that Kiyoshi Kurosawa doesn’t stick to a coherent narrative: but it still feels somehow artificially put together, somehow not convincing enough. Yes, the sound design is very professional, the evocation of the repressed madness that wants to break free is very impressive, there are some frames that are hard to forget, e.g. the wife with the tins... but I really missed the context, the flesh from the bones, because even though it may be a visual poem about repressed rage, something should open up, a door, a meaning, a secret, something beyond what we already know. I didn’t feel that there was any real mystery here, not just what Kiyoshi Kurosawa had prepared for us in his familiar witch’s kitchen with the ingredients we already had and the recipe we already knew. Technology, dehumanisation, alienation, okay. It’s as if the real meaning of the dish has been lost, there’s just fine dining, eye candy, red wine froth and some overly sharp knives on the table.

CHRIS NASH: *IN A VIOLENT NATURE*, 2024

Despite the big hype this film is just a ‚show bakery’, as they say in my country. When we talk about genre deconstruction, let’s not lower our standards. The only

³ Clarice Lispector: *Água Viva. The Stream of Life*. Minnesota, 1989. 7.

novelty in this quasi-experimental film is that, between two acts of violence, we walk a hell of a lot with a zombie in a beautifully photographed forest. To those who think this is slow cinema, I despair to say that it is not. It's just an arthouse slasher in which someone walks very slowly, because that's the mode these days. At best it's a parody, but it lacks the intellectual energy for that, and that's the biggest problem with the whole thing, it's actually completely empty, it's basically a black hole. Of course, this in itself creates a theoretical possibility for thinking about reframing, but in the end we are left with what the final girl says: „It's an animal”. That's as deep as the film thinks about the slaughter, it wears the formalist cloak of contemporaneity and is content to make us wonder why it wears it and what kind of lack it conceals. This very trendy exaggeration of formalism, the ASMR sound design that replaces the usual horror soundtrack, the unusually distorted angles, all offer an opportunity to reflect on what Tscherkassky called the violence of art with *Outer Space*, or how the formalism of our time is related to the loss of the naturalistic or sacred dimensions of the body. All this, however, does little to compensate for the rather redundant spectacle of over-estheticised genre recycling. And please, someone tell me what is so „refreshing” about a girl's head being pulled out of her back through her torso???? In fact, I wanted to turn it off after that because I felt I was already being violently bored. I think it's bad enough when a film doesn't make us think; when it only makes us consider possible theoretical frameworks, that's even worse.

The problem is that I don't see this as a Mannerist indie masterpiece, but as a school assignment, in which „contemporary”, „irony”, and „festival compatibility” were important items. I was seduced by the word „experimental”. But I think experimental horror is Peggy Ahwesh's, for whom the words form and content mean something. Here I see only design. And an idea, which is of course theoretically useful, that a slasher is a slasher is a slasher is a slasher... And the old cliché, that the evil in the dark forest awakens and goes out to slaughter under the bright sun, and that's all we need to know, because it's always been there, it belongs to us.

DEV PATEL: *MONKEY MAN*, 2024

I think it would be better to give two hearts to this movie, one for the impressive, almost experimental cinematography and the slasher that turns into a drifting whirlwind of fast cuts, and I would like to give one for the fact that the oppressed people surround almost every scene as a watching, music playing (Zakir Hussain's tabla!), whispering or crying chorus, and the power of their constant presence gives the film a kind of gravity of social sensitivity and criticism. I regret, however, that there is speech in the film – the soundscape is so rich that it really wasn't a good idea to over-explain this strong linear flood of violence with clichéd sentimental phrases. It's not quite true that this is the *John Wick* of India, but the fact is that it hasn't really changed the rules of the genre. It starts off heavy, with very Holly-Bollywood scenes, but from the first rampage onwards it's as if we've entered another dimension. We could have stayed there longer, but Dev Patel hadn't worked out the characters

or a deeper content via analysis. As soon as the *Monkey Man* returned to the boxing ring, we were back in Bollywood, and the transformation of the blood and saffron covered scenes into *Mandy*-like, hypnotically coloured ones, was not enough to elevate the film. The Monkey Man in the kitchen is already killing those he recently worked with as a dish washer, and some promising threads, such as that of a supportive queer/trans community, are dropped too abruptly, and the film fails to create its real figures, either concretely or metaphorically. In principle there is little need to explain such a revenge story, but was too simple for the weight of the social issue undertaken and in the end its energy charge does not reach the level of *Mandy*'s. Sadly, I have to agree with Jeb Happy that it turned out to be „just a map when it could have been a whole globe”. Spirituality does not begin where the god Hanuman appears on a mural. This mythical-metaphysical dimension should have been created somehow, but it's also true that the film at least tried, at least for a few moments. It's telling that Jordan Peele came to Patel's aid as a producer when he ran out of money. The visual language, the speed and brutality of the action sequences, the labyrinth of life and death in the slums of Batam could have opened up a new space to be filled with some deeper, newly conceived content, some more accurate, nuanced social analysis, but even Peele's *Nope* wasn't good enough in this regard. The approach remained Hollywood cliché and failed to achieve the necessary complexity, making its own compromises to reach the big screen. But the passion with which Patel speaks out for the oppressed, to show the strength of minorities and the poor, almost makes up for everything.

M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN: *TRAP*, 2024

They say it makes for easy summer evening fun. I'd like to say something clever about it, but this one was really a mind killer. And I was the only victim of that killer, and I'm not kidding. There is not a single scene in the film that could be remotely realistic or plausible. Even if you could accept that an army of police, more than I have ever seen at the biggest anti-government protests, gathers at 11 a.m. at a gigantic Saleka arena-concert, to catch a serial killer,⁴ it is hard to understand why this sympathetic killer with his daughter would be so lucky to befriend the very two people at this concert who can help him escape through the backstage. Being watched by hundreds of cameras, but easily pushing an other girl down the stairs, and so on, with all the nonsense turns, ad infinitum. There's not a single believable moment, a good dialogue, and the psychology of it, the psychology, really, let's not go into that. How hard it is to be a father and a working serial killer at the same time. Reviewers of the film point to the father-daughter dynamic and the fact that Shyamalan cast his own daughter Saleka as Lady Raven. Shyamalan must really love

⁴ Shyamalan got the idea from an earlier case, when 100 criminals were trapped with free tickets to a sporting event. Source: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/trap-movie-true-story-operation-flagship-1235968441/>

his daughter to have organised such a big concert for her, using his entire film as one big Saleka commercial, but I was not impressed by the acting performance of the Shyamalan girl and the scene where Lady Raven tells the teenagers that it is time to forgive their parents. If only it were that easy. Otherwise, it's surprising that Shyamalan is so sloppy in his portrayal of the killer's mother complex, because he's usually good at it. I tried to remember what was said at the end, but apart from the fact that he loves his children, but he's partly a monster, nothing has been revealed, nowhere a new approach, an attempt at interpretation. It is almost unbelievable that this was shot by the DOP of *Memoria*, every frame is so predictably boring. What was Shyamalan trying to say? Even the typical Shyamalan complications were missing. I felt that the film systematically killed off all the things that work in this genre, the tight script, the suspense, the surprises, the faceless horror, the fear, the mystery, the believability, killed off, destroyed everything, that only the characters in the film survived, actually. I counted at least three happy endings, and the last twist of the film is just a forced one, because it was obviously painful that this butcher only cut the cake. Realism is not a prerequisite for a good film, but do you think there is another register? At least the usual mystical-occult? There's nothing, absolutely nothing, just a boring concert and a rather illogical way out. An obligatory genre exercise without any ideas or innovation, just an average piece of the factory. Since it's all about logistics, logic would be essential, lol. I did not hate *The Sixth Sense*, but there is none of that kind of psychological complexity, or the skilful use of archetypes, or the strong mood setting here. It's a lifeless stuff, without meaning or vibe. I only woke up in the last ten minutes, but that's because I didn't want to believe that it was serious, that his wife would find the poison just when she needed it, and even the FBI would get there in time, but, oops, he still had time to break the spoke out of the bicycle wheel. Oh, no. No. Don't do this to me. I beg you. Please –

OSGOOD (OZ) PERKINS: *LONGLEGS*, 2024

Well, my pulse didn't jump from 76 to 170 beats per minute like Maika Monroe's at Nic Cage's clowning around, which was supposed to be androgynous but looked more like a trans parody⁵ in the most embarrassing way possible. Even more embarrassing was Perkins' statement to the press that „the film is a metaphor for dealing with parents who have struggled with mental illness”. Apart from the fact that this concept explicitly demonises the mentally ill, is this to be taken to mean that shooting the parent in the head is treatment, even in a symbolic sense, á la Freud? but even that's not enough against the infection of evil, is it? Or mental illness, like evil (?), is hereditary (?). Parents pass on their sins to their children (??), as Perkins said? Or is that not a good explanation either?

⁵ I agree with Tom Spearing (letterboxd) on this, he put it this way: „But I also cringed plenty more, given his character's awkwardly handled transgender traits – clearly a callback to some of the film's aforementioned influences, yet something that feels inexcusably regressive for a film released in 2024.”

This film is very artistic and completely empty. Pastiche upon pastiche upon pastiche. From the rather common idea that the mental illness of a loved one is a defining factor and that no one can escape its influence, Perkins has created a shallow horror story in which the basic premise becomes a dangerous stereotype that evil is indestructible, stays in the family forever, and that evil is transmitted through mental illness. Perkins had lost his parents in tragic circumstances, and this loss had a great impact on his themes as a filmmaker, but perhaps that is why he was unable to think through this strange message, because he lacked the necessary distance. But Perkins also said⁶ that he saw the film as a baroque garden, and that he had never looked into the history of occult motifs. The reason T. Rex is on the board because Perkins thought Bolan was so cool and hadn't heard them before - but without any deeper content, the mood seems more like ornamentation, decoration. The cinematography is spectacular, but not original, the stuff is packed with horror props, from horror dolls to clowns, in such a quantity that it borders on the ridiculous, but nothing is justified, nothing is sufficiently elaborated or deepened. And is it serious that Nic's iconic jacket has been dyed white to match the white wig? And this would be the scariest horror film of the decade? The only thing scary about it is that I was born on the same day in December, lol. Everything is just mimed, even the investigation itself, nothing can be taken seriously, but it's not muscular enough for parody. It's as if the fabric of this film is missing, there's a skeleton of ideas, and there's a spectacular layer of skin, a visually elaborate surface, but it's between the skin and the skeleton of ideas that the film is supposed to happen, but there's literally nothing happening. This film has atrophied muscles, and how can anything be scary without gravity? They are just unoriginal horror tropes, with a lazy script and without real stakes: signs that have lost their meaning. We call it the 'uncanny valley' phenomenon, when something looks too much like something else, but it is not. Levinas wrote that since the possibility of „magical participation” has been lost, we are increasingly lost in the labyrinth of mimicry, of imitation. The ancestor of the horror doll is the voodoo doll, which only symbolically wore the attributes of the person it replaced. This film is the epitome of the 'uncanny valley'. It's very much like a horror film. If nothing else, it is really scary!

GEORGE MILLER: *FURIOSA: A MAD MAX SAGA*, 2024

I've just read that *Furiosa* failed in its first weekend at the box office, and I'm not surprised, because it's a pale CGI clone of *Fury Road*, without the action-ballet and the DIY vibe: we don't even get anything like *Fury Road*'s really not very deepened love story. I'll share with you how I see it, and apologise in advance for being a bit furious(a). *Mad Max* is the big sandbox where you can play with boys' toy cars again, a men's

⁶ See Dávid Klág's interview with Oz Perkins. <https://telex.hu/kult/2024/08/02/oz-perkins-longlegs-a-rem-nicolas-cage-maika-monroe-horrorfilm>; other cit.: <https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/longlegs-ending-evil-explained-with-director-oz-perkins/>

playground full of dystopian fantasies of violence that is now trying to open its doors more to women. The big question for me is: do we really need this? this Barbie-isation of the barbaric world, as a pc requirement, led to the birth of the one-dimensional young Furiosa, who practically never opens her mouth in the movie, which must have come as a considerable relief to Miller, who likes to depict women as milk machines, or desert models wrapped in white wet gauze, waiting for rescue with hard nipples, or tin soldier look-alikes with black foreheads and piercing eyes. Miller means this as irony, satire, I know. But is it irony that beyond a few clichés, two meaningful words never leave anyone's lips? Or the thin characters? the too simple plot? The whole thing is empty, we're just watching the fireworks and that's it. The fact that Furiosa is mute doesn't help the cause of complex female characters in this masculin, testosterone-designed world. Nor does the fact that almost three hours are not enough to find out why Cyberpunk Barbie's new boyfriend is so good and honest when no one else is, but the relationship itself is only two half-sentences and two battle scenes, and there is nothing else in the film but men fighting as usual, lots of fire, long convoys and heavy excavators, but Furiosa cannot afford more than to plant the seeds of the future - what a cliché - in Dementus' body as revenge. Because women are the future, the green future, you know, and even though Furiosa almost kicked and punched the head of Dementus, who was lying on the ground, tied up and completely at her mercy, but such bloody revenge is not appropriate for a woman, let's plant trees instead.

And Chris Hemsworth really deserves some serious punishment. A lot of people have said how great it is that he's an everyday Dementus, a weightless guy and a too muscular actor, because now the Miller universe finally has a clown. But being a clown is too big a job for a hammer-faced Thor. Miller's worldbuilding for some reason is worth 4-5 stars on Letterboxd, even though I don't see any substantial changes in it, but the fans are certainly keeping track of some new car parts and accessories. And it's as if this world is built mainly for them. Meanwhile, there was not enough time for Furiosa. I really don't want to oversimplify this story into a battle of the sexes, but it's not me, it's Miller. It's not as malicious a blockbuster as *Oppenheimer*, where (among others) women, the Japanese people, the American victims of the atomic test and a real confrontation with the past were simply forgotten. Furiosa is a charmingly infantile and benign attempt to neuter the *Mad Max* universe, which, it should be added, was never more than it seems, a highly spectacular, sometimes slightly funny, half-hearted treatment of how men actually enjoy what they know is pretty bad, including ruthless slaughter, warfare, torture, smelly vehicles, horrible metal solos and the abuse of women. Just jokin'.

Actually, of course, I know, these are big contemporary tales about the things that are so hard for the human animal to process. That's not the problem, but why can't we get away from the mere spectacle? Miller did what the spirit of the times demanded, in the form of a dumbed-down, didactic quasi-feminism - there is something lazy and superficial about it all. By the end, you can't even remember what this girl did, did she do anything at all? It's like she wasn't even there, except that she fired some hard-to-identify weapons.

And I guess she really wasn't there.

MICHAEL SARNOSKI: *A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE*, 2024

I woke up crying after the operation. It was a rather surprising experience, as although I didn't remember anything, part of me must have been in pain. Or not? My last memory was of the four or five men around me laughing kindly at the fact that I had asked for a Propofol injection before the anaesthetic gas. 'Oxygen is just a gas,' one of them said, smiling. I was unable to protest or laugh with them, though. Maybe that's why I cried. I'll never know, but the man who pushed the ambulance stretcher on the way back must have thought I was in trouble because he took me in his arms with unexpected tenderness and put me in my hospital bed.

I was afraid that I would be too heavy for him, so, to make it easier, I instinctively put my arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. I expressed my concern that he might get hurt, which made us both laugh. I immediately fell asleep again, remembering the rough texture of his white linen shirt and how his body seemed to shine through it. I also remember how, after he had laid me down on the bed, he covered me with unusual gentleness, smoothing the blanket over my feet.

Last night, I watched *A Quiet Place: Day One* in a 35-degree room. I'm not saying it's a good film; it's not the lonely, weird *Howard the Duck* designed by Phil Tippett (*Mad God*). It's an average CGI blockbuster franchise – absolutely not my cup of tea. I was surprised by the utterly suicidal idea, that this film is not only about escaping monsters that destroy everything, but also that the protagonist is a terminal cancer patient who has left a hospice and can only survive on opioid patches. A visibly scared and shy guy falls in love with her and they have a cat that needs taking care of, so it's really unhappy. Maybe some human warmth would shine through, I thought. But it just turned out to be the usual kitsch with self-sacrifice set to beautiful music. The images are oversaturated and the painterly, washed-out, blurry backgrounds try to be stylish, but they only serve to hide the CGI. It's cheesy and boring, and cat people know cats don't behave like that. I won't sugarcoat it: it's a two-star film at best. But it wasn't that bad to watch. My life for a slice of pizza – that's all I can say. Because if you're going to die, as everybody, you might as well be a literally dying one. Aren't we all, after all? That must have been the director's thinking – he seems not to have been supervised.

RIDLEY SCOTT: *GLADIATOR II.*, 2024

It's not really easy to pick the worst movie of 2024, there are so many contenders, but for me, this movie is the absolute winner. After watching *Gladiator 2*, I was left with only one thought: how can a man desecrate his own work to such an extent? What happened to Ridley Scott's mind when he gave up all his knowledge of epic historical action, the sword-and-sandal genre, and the sense of form and rhythm he had back then, for this CGI arena with fighting CGI blood monkeys and CGI sharks swimming around in a water-filled coliseum? What happened to Ridley Scott's heart when he chose these two lukewarm, enervated guys who, together, cannot match the charm and charisma of Russell Crowe? Without Russell

Crowe's sexepile, the pun 'Pedro Pascal vs. Paul Mescal' was the only fun in the whole thing.

Do you remember the opening battle scene in the first *Gladiator*? The crowd, covered in mud and blood, screaming in the flaming trees, while the pyrotechnicians had to take special care of the dogs and horses on the set? Or the forest of woollen threads made by carpet weavers, dripping with red paint and blood, through which the gladiators passed, or the backlit cinematography with its almost experimental qualities? What a crowd Ridley Scott moved, with what perfectionism, and yet the whole film remained so close to you that you could almost smell and feel the blood and sweat. And what has become of it? The boring battle scenes in the film made me wish that at least mountain trolls would come with that combat rhino. And shouldn't he have thought about what the historical action film genre could offer people today? What is the point, or how can we even think about history in a world that constantly falsifies not only its history, its past, but also its present? The very existence of this film is an anachronism.

This movie really is the bottom of the pit. I'm not a big fan of the unreflected, romantic machismo of the first film, but if that's worth three stars, this is minus three. I don't recommend watching the two films back to back because you'll cry. If you were tired of the pathos of the first film, you'll find it multiplied in this one. Every emotional gesture is misplaced. They recite poetry all the time, Mescal forgives Pascal in the arena after 2 minutes of knowing him, even though he wanted to take revenge on him for the death of his wife, and at the end, he rants about peace, but he hasn't even started, the army has already thrown down their flags. For a while I was hoping this would be a standalone sequel to the first film, but no, it's a half-hearted half-remake, repeating scenes and iconic gestures, only in a much worse, overwritten version. Among the embarrassing moments, one of this year's PC failures hardly noticeable: the madman Caracalla appoints a monkey and a black man as praetors. A telling triumvirate. A madman, a monkey and a black man in the role of evil in a senate of white men. Fortunately, the framing scene of the first *Gladiator*, where the majestic dark cypress path seems to lead from the golden wheat fields of paradise to the remote island of death, is an genuine image that no one can take away from Ridley Scott. Not even himself. Although - you won't believe it - in the film's final seconds, he even made a vague attempt to do so.

ALEXANDRA SHIVA, LINDSEY MEGRUE: *ONE SOUTH: PORTRAIT OF A PSYCH UNIT*, 2024

I have had almost exclusively bad experiences with mental health care, not in terms of good intentions, but in terms of methods and effectiveness, on the other hand, one of the most inspiring and enlightening experiences of my life was my time in the psychiatric ward (which was next to the addiction unit with the same staff), where I really understood what it means that we are all human beings, I mean people with problems. *One South* is a locked psych unit in America, it specialises

in the care of students, and although obviously only the easiest cases are allowed to be filmed, everyone here has attempted suicide. The two-part documentary, made mainly by women, follows the daily life of the psych unit with great empathy, building the film's dynamic around healing, hope and the catharsis of saying goodbye to the One South. By the end, the twenty-somethings whose mental problems we have come to know are dancing and jumping together, happily planning a new hair colour and a weekend in Switzerland with their boyfriends, a week after a stomach wash and a heart monitor.

The most interessant was for me the case of C's. We can call it sensory overload, when the nervous system goes into an unstable state, best modelled by the electrical charge of the atmosphere before the storm, in an increasing number of cases of generalised anxiety and panic disorder. There are too many stimuli, and in One South almost everything is unsettling. The film captured how the sounds of violence emanating from one room (a benzo-addict trying to stab herself with a pen) completely stressed out her fellow patient in therapy. A panic patient in the psychotic phase is often also suffering from PTSD, depression, is emotionally restricted or blocked, fixated on their own condition and seemingly incapable of empathy. In reality, it is a heightened self-defence in which the person, faced with a loss of control or paralysing depression, tries to preserve what remains of their integrity by shutting out stimuli that appear dangerous or too much. In the film, C is in this terribly vulnerable acute state, often lasting for months, and the big question is whether the realisation that others suffer from the same thing (and the choreography of panic disorder is almost boringly the same for everyone) helps as much as the dramatic overload of stimuli does harm.

It surprises me that whereas it used to be enough to tick two boxes on a test form to get a diagnosis of schizoid personality disorder ten years ago, now 60% of people in this unit are diagnosed with borderline personality disorder combined with depression (+20% bipolar and 20% psychotic). The trend towards borderline is surprising because it used to be associated with a very specific, defined set of symptoms. Cognitive therapy was the magic word then, whereas now it seems to be dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) combined with ‚cognitive mindfulness'. It was depressing to see that nothing has changed in terms of how much therapy is tied to protocols and even single methods. Not that the current buzzword of ‚radical (self- and situation-) acceptance' is useless, as I was pleased to see that one of the main tools of my self-therapy, the knowledge of how to laugh at oneself, was now being incorporated into clinical practice. The psychologist asked C to repeat the word ‚piece of shit' (the first word the patient said about herself) at an increasing rate, at the end of which, of course, C burst out laughing and the panic attack was effectively over. This is not to say that laughter can stop the biochemical reactions caused by disproportionate stress. But if you can laugh at your condition, you have the distance you need to wait peacefully for the fear to subside, the lightning to stop and the sky to clear. These are important techniques, but it was still weird to watch the staff gather once a week and sniff perfume samples with reverent

awe, just because it's what the mindfulness protocol they believe in requires, like members of a cult.

Mental illness can mobilise incredible forces for wrong purposes from the hidden reserves of the ego, of the personality. The team of helpers can rarely match this. They hide behind mechanical protocols and drugs with unknown mechanisms of action, while behind the stage in supervision sessions they worry about whether the people in their care will survive the next few months. Watching *One South*, I got the impression that mental health care has not changed much in the last few decades. Yet the film inspires respect for those on both sides of the hospital corridor. It's often said that one smart, good friend who really loves you is worth a thousand psychologists, but that's not quite true. A large percentage of people cannot allow friends, loved ones and family to get close to them in this state. For a mentally and emotionally overwhelmed person, even the most understanding friend is just an expectation they cannot meet. It is a time of running away from those to whom they feel they owe something in return. DBT highlights these tensions and contradictions. For example the fact that you can't talk to anyone, just when it's most important to talk. It's a vicious circle. This is the phase where you long to be called, but when you are, you turn your phone off. That's why the therapy is called dialectical, because until C does something about these contradictions, she can't get out of her current pain, she can't break free. An other girl's mother made a pro-life speech on the phone, but it had no effect on her daughter. But the staff at *One South* give you the anonymous, unrequited attention and support, opportunity for distance, the one-sided, abstract love that can push you through the impasse. And this is what the film conveys, without diving deep enough into the dark waters (into which Wang Bing, for example, has dipped), without extra intellectual investment and formal sophistication, but effectively enough. After more than three hours of watching this HBO doc, as we leave *One South*, some trees suddenly appear, dressed in the lush green of early spring, with a glow I've rarely seen before.

THEA HVISTENDAHL: *HANDLING THE UNDEAD*, 2024

When Nemo died, I have opened the coffin to see her face for the last time. This is not the way we do it here, this is not Morocco, where people carry the bodies of their loved ones on their shoulders to the cemetery, laid out on a board, as I saw yesterday in the queer grief-film with big heart, *Blue Kaftan*. The family stood around the grave as if petrified, and to be honest, I was not prepared for what I saw in the coffin either.

I was quite touched by the theme of this arthouse zombie film, with loved ones returning from the grave. What if one day they came back to us, in this corpse that had begun to decay? Thea Hvistendahl worked from a book by John Ajvide Lindqvist, who proved with *Let the Right One In* that all genres can be renewed. I loved that film. Thea Hvistendahl didn't go nearly as deep, her film is in fact a

quiet, slow cinema in which the living sometimes seem more dead than the dead, but that's what I appreciated about it, the blurring of boundaries that gave a deeper dimension to this somewhat monotonous story. The film is primarily about grief and letting go, and the horror felt by anyone who has seen a loved one die and can't understand or comprehend where the life has gone from the obedient body that not long ago was so autonomous, powerful and unrepeatable. It is truly haunting to see someone you love stripped of everything that made them who they are, but it means that they are now empty signs, not meaningful enough for a dense narrative. The feeling that you would do anything to get the one you love back leads to a dead end of irreversibility, of alienation. I thought it was a good idea, that the returnees cannot communicate, but are visibly suffering themselves; the sight of a tearful corpse is like a magical extension of the mourner's suffering. Unfortunately, the main idea is not developed. Grief is the purest expression of love because it no longer has a witness and is separated from its object. It floats in the world as an unidentified substance, an energy of unknown origin and purpose. But it is not only human. I once saw a film about elephants returning year after year to a certain place where they had lost their mate. It was disturbing to see them picking at his bones with their trunks as they stood around his remains, roaring in grief. What they were looking for was what you might call a soul, and although there was not much thought in this film, and what there was was not really developed, it was unusually restrained and tasteful, and most importantly, it had some soul - even if it barely flickered with life.

TODD PHILLIPS: *JOKER: FOLIE À DEUX*, 2024

Todd Phillips spent a year as an undergraduate making a docu about a heroin-addicted punk musician. This biography fact gave rise to the myth of the 'middle finger held up to the fan club as a punk gesture'. However, I believe Joker's fate was more influenced by political correctness and a kind of guilt, as well as by a sense of helplessness. This makes the film a strange reminder of Hollywood's dilemma over how to portray evil and ambivalent heroes in our brave new PC world. This is especially pertinent given that Todd was accused of romanticising violence after the first Joker film was released. One strong leitmotif emerges from this shy, insecure musical, modulated by criticism of the entertainment industry. Even love cannot help those whom society judges to be wrong, ill or dangerous, especially if the love is for a terrorist while we are just poor mental patients from the hell next door.

Folie à deux (French for 'madness of two'), also known as shared psychosis or shared delusional disorder, is a psychiatric syndrome in which symptoms of delusion are 'passed on' from one person to another. It doesn't help when our true love is literally the other half of us - a schizoid embodiment that encourages us to do evil, to kill - and at the same time an alter ego of our most loyal fans, who want to see us as the punk artist and not the weeping, abused little boy that we really are. As for whether the brave terrorist is a fulfilled form of the self, Todd

answers with a timid 'no', while Gaga answers with a resounding 'yes'. However, it is the viewer who is forced to make constant ethical judgements about wars and other terrible atrocities, the schizophrenia flourishes rather in the viewer's mind. Clearly, things are becoming increasingly unmanageable for everyone and we will all end up in a psychiatric ward. The film also offers a sad commentary on mental illness: even those who recognise our potential and appreciate our uniqueness, cannot save us. The ending leaves no doubt that society offers no cure or protection for a traumatised mind that turns to violence.

To be honest, I was slightly disappointed by the musical interludes, which felt interrupted and, at times, tired and lacklustre. This was not what I had expected when I heard Gaga's name. It seems like a missed opportunity, and it is; yet somehow this intimate, introspective, stripped-down musical fits in with the film's depressing, enervated tone. Todd Phillips took a difficult path by swapping an action-packed plot for a drawn-out courtroom drama. Yet it is this highly questionable, divisive directorial solution that makes the film a bit interesting in the Marvel/DC universe; the theoretical problems of handling the character have been placed where they belong: before the viewers' court. Let's discuss what should happen to the Joker, let's discuss frustration as a problem itself. However, the question proved too complex and theoretical to build a good film around.

When we are in love, we make the other person our own super-ego: we realise, support and re-create their potential. However, paradoxically, it is precisely through our infatuation that we cannot do it well. The other person can never really live up to this desired image; it is always an illusion, and the potential does not exactly match the lover's imagination. The more violently we cling to this belief, the further we stray from their true inner capacity and potential. This profound paradox of supportive love and the pain of it was movingly revealed in Gaga and Phoenix's duet, in which the weapon in the woman's hand is sometimes handed over to the man, sometimes turned against him. Gaga as the eternal lover appeals to the truth of the rebel and the better self - the self that speaks and acts truthfully - which can only express itself through destruction. She refers to schism and division, and begins to apply the concept of schizophrenia at a philosophical level. The theoretical work behind the film is clear to see. Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. According to this book, capitalism creates a system that liberates and decodes desires, while simultaneously repressing and pathologising their chaotic release - the revolutionary manifestations of desire machines, embodied in schizophrenia - because this release threatens order and control. It pushes them back into institutions such as the family, prison, psychiatry or the courts.

If the film didn't drown completely in moralizing thesis drama, it's only thanks to a few moments of Gaga and Phoenix's performances, although the portrayal of mental illness wasn't always free of stereotypes or slight clumsiness. Despite being the least punk, and the most enervated middle finger I have ever seen, the film is a desperate but ambitious attempt to renew the franchise, even if the dubious

gestures of taming and domestication are obvious. Once the dust had settled after the big bang at the end of the film, it became clear that no significant statement could be made. The film's dark depression stems not only from the paradoxical nature of love, but also from the realisation that the society we create for ourselves is on the brink of destruction, as lies and oppression form the basis of our coexistence. Yet, as soon as love arrives, the music starts. The music, which lives inside each of us, seems to be made possible only by the other. When two people notice each other and hear the music, redemption is always present, even if it ends in an unnoticed and insignificant death in a deserted corridor. The Joker, whose rebellious power Todd Phillips couldn't handle, end up being killed by a disappointed fan, away from the screens and spotlights.