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‘Gluttony, Decadence, and Resistance, Embodied’
Cinema Rediscovered, Watershed, Bristol
25–28 July 2019

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Watershed, Bristol

In the final scene in Vera Chytilová’s *Daisies* (1966), its two plucky protagonists, Marie I (Jitka Cerhová) and Marie II (Ivana Karbanová), enter a banquet room where excess – of nourishment and provision – leads to an elaborate and entertaining act of destruction. The scene is spectacular and vulgar; its grand depictions of food waste were responsible for the former Czechoslovakia’s ban on both the film and its maker. Chytilová was held accountable for her supposed lack of a positive attitude towards socialism.¹ Apparently irony is not welcome when its execution involves waste. The paradox inherent in both Chytilová’s film and the very concept of social decline is that it must be enacted in order to be made visible: the food we watch Marie I and Marie II eat, throw, dance on, and destroy is food that will never make it into the mouths of the hungry.

In 2018, I programmed *Daisies* as part of a three-film taster selection from the wider national touring programme, ‘Revolt, She Said: Women and Film after ’68’.² As the months wore on, I continued to think about how the scene revealed social hypocrisy through its ornate style, the characters’ appalling actions and their delight in the act of destruction. Chytilová, working collaboratively with co-writer Ester Krumbachová and cinematographer Jaroslav Kucera, had captured on film a physical and violent act of social decay. It was both incredible and awesome to watch. It led me to another two films from the Czech New Wave, which would serve as the cornerstone for a new film programme as part of 2019’s *Cinema Rediscovered*, the UK’s dedicated film festival for the rediscovery of classic, archive, and repertory film.³ The full programme, consisting of seven films, was titled, ‘Gluttony, Decadence, and Resistance’. Each of the films, screened in a repertory context under such a charged and inherently political banner, becomes an act of cultural materialism. Furthermore, like the ‘Revolt, She Said’ season, ‘Gluttony, Decadence,

and Resistance' aimed to look at historical context whilst speaking directly to the contemporary climate in which it was curated.

Beginning, then, with the Czech New Wave, this programme opened with an aesthetic of excess. Working with New Wave filmmakers such as Chytilová and *enfant terrible*, Jan Němec, among others, Ester Krumbachová, who was prolific in her collaborations as a writer and as a production and costume designer, created many of the intricate and ornate backdrops against which political protest could play out. But Krumbachová only ever directed one film. *The Murder of Mr Devil* (also known as *Killing the Devil*, 1970) was written as an unofficial sequel to *Daisies*, and starts its critique where *Daisies* left off, centred squarely on food and the lusty appetites that create and maintain systemic social inequity and decline. Like the banquet scene in *Daisies*, *Mr Devil* uses excess to elicit affect – namely shock or disgust – in order to draw attention to social ills. Its protagonist, Ona – which translates as 'She' (Jirina Bohdallová) – is alone and desperate. She calls upon an old suitor, someone she remembers as attractive. However, the proverbial Mr Devil (Bohous Cert) who turns up is obese, with behaviour to match.

Ona cooks for Bohous, but no matter how much food she prepares for him, it is never enough. His appetite cannot be satiated because it is lustful, gluttonous. In its fittingly Christian connotation, the devil's gluttony is not only the act of overeating but is in the very desire for abundance. Abundance can never be satisfied because it defies limitation. In my programme notes for the season, I wrote,

Gluttony, then, is a perfect match for capitalism and social systems where class, gender and other hierarchies mean too much for some at the expense of others. It is an inherently disgusting desire and its manifestation, each of these films reveals, is physical grotesquery.⁴

What I hope to highlight here is how the three overarching concepts of this film programme – Gluttony, Decadence, and Resistance – are entwined through an aesthetic of excess, itself a physical manifestation of the mechanism of inequity at the heart of capitalism. These films all offer physical grotesquery as a means through which to explore the wider politics of their time precisely because gluttony, decadence, and resistance are concepts that embody wider social and

psychological anxieties, and cinema is itself an artform that offers its audience an embodied experience.

In the wake of the Prague Spring and after their collaboration on *Daisies*, Chytilová and Krumbachová teamed up again to examine how bodies have historically worn the weight of this capitalist and gluttonous desire for abundance. In what could act as an unofficial backstory to Marie I and Marie II's coquettish bad behaviour in *Daisies*, *Fruit of Paradise* (1970) goes back to its supposed origins, using the Christian concept of Original Sin and the story of Adam and Eve as a narrative experiment in allegory. An example of betrayed freedom, the story is a reflection of the invasion of Prague by Soviet forces in 1968 but it is also a way of pointing to the subsequent seven deadly sins as manifestations of just one central sin: the desire for more. Be it knowledge, food, love, sex or any other tangible or intangible thing, desire is, as Chytilová and Krumbachová reveal, both an embodied experience and a danger to the body. By virtue of association, capitalism in this context is not just an ideological threat, due to its inherent promotion of capital gain, abundance and excess, it is also an embodied experience and a danger to the bodies that live under its ideology.

I decided to programme these two Czech New Wave films and, as their theoretical frameworks were rooted in a Christian understanding of gluttony, I then wanted to look at other films where appetites were instrumental in instances of social decline. This is where decadence takes on an edge of despair as both suicide and cannibalism manifest in a thirsty search for more. Although *La grande bouffe* [*The Big Feast*] (1973) stands alone as the only one of the remaining five films in the programme that does not deal with humans eating humans, it is perhaps the most shocking and disgusting of them all. Aligning food and sex as grotesque sensory indulgences – again, a Christian sentiment – *La grande bouffe* features four middle-aged men, on a weekend away, determined to gorge themselves to death. They feast until freed of their desires through impotence, wind, defecation and orgasm. All four men are dead by the end of the film. A satire on consumerism and the empty yet voracious appetites of the bourgeoisie, this film probably embodies decadence better than any other. It is pure degeneracy, social critique made in

deliberately bad taste. Equally as splendid as its characters' demise are the stories that surround its reception. As an artefact of cultural materialism it is a chief example of embodied ideology, offering its viewers visceral affect as social and cultural commentary.

As the story goes, the film's outrageous affect began at its première at Cannes, where it supposedly caused Jury President, Ingrid Bergman, to vomit after the screening, whilst others spat at director Marco Ferreri.⁵ In his theatrical review, Roger Ebert also discusses the film's controversial reception: it provoked fist fights on the Champs-Élysées as well as causing a rift between one of the film's stars, Marcello Mastroianni, and his then girlfriend, actress Catherine Deneuve.⁶ Ebert cites these extreme responses to make a point about how the film communicates through bodies. It may have been 'not so much excited as exhausted', but it was, nevertheless, embodied. For Ebert, the film 'hammers your sensibilities. It's decadent, self-loathing, cynical and frequently obscene.'⁷ I would argue, however, that Ferreri has extended decadence beyond the scope of an artistic sensibility to create a visceral understanding of its social and political implications. Here, decadence is not only about degeneracy and corruption, it is about the affect of social decline and the implications of despair in the face of lost decorum. The implications are manifested in the audience's responses: vomit, violence, silence, and exhaustion.

This preoccupation with physical and embodied responses to gluttonous desire and decadent social decline also led me to think about the self-perpetuating nature of such degeneracy and decay and how, in some instances, resistance only serves to feed the machine. In both Richard Fleischer's *Soylent Green* (1973) and Rachel Maclean's *Make Me Up* (2018), the terrifying reveal is that the scarce but heavily processed food source turns out to be made of people. Frightened by the ideological and embodied prospects of both society eating itself and them potentially eating people, the protagonists who uncover these salacious secrets – *Soylent Green*'s Detective Thorn (Charlton Heston) and *Make Me Up*'s Siri (Christina Gordon) – embark upon journeys of resistance. As film historian and curator Peter Walsh writes in the programme notes for *Soylent Green*:

As with so much great science-fiction, the film says a lot about the era from which it emerged, specifically the point at which the optimism of post-war America was starting to sour after years of failure in Vietnam, while also being on the cusp of the Watergate scandal. Yet, much as the film is woven into dreams of what the future looked like in 1973, the social and environmental issues at the heart of the film have never felt more urgent, and the warnings it sends are more troubling than ever before. As a viewer in 2019, the film constantly challenges us to ask how far we have come, how close we are to this bleak vision, and what we can do to stop this grim dystopia becoming reality.⁸

Walsh points out how cultural anxieties are played out as contrasting aesthetics. The film depicts a pea-soup coloured haze of the polluted and over-heated real world juxtaposed with the brightly coloured, dazzling interiors of the new aristocracy. Though both represent the future in this science fiction these two distinct visions operate as present and future in terms of decadence and social commentary: the pea-soup is the nightmare imaginary of the contemporary (Vietnam, Watergate) while the aristocratic interiors suggest future aesthetic possibilities (despite resembling the fashions of the 1970s, as Walsh notes). Through visual contrast and narrative cohesion, Fleischer unites ornate style and social critique to craft a decadent sensibility.

The very premise of moving-image artist Maclean's *Make Me Up* is decadent: representing suffrage through a contemporary lens, Maclean references Mary Richardson's attack on the Rokeby Venus at the National Gallery in London.⁹ Updated, here, to a cyber world where art and art history are regurgitated as attainable and consumable aesthetics, eating one's competitors becomes an act of decadence. Siri, whose plight we follow, must defeat other women in a series of pointless, exploitative and sexist challenges in order to sustain her own existence, achievable only through the act of unwittingly devouring her subordinates. Maclean's critique of capitalism as both a systemic and aesthetic problem is acerbic and on point. As with *Soylent Green*, Maclean evokes both the past and the present in order to bolster the affect of her decadent nightmare. Instead of regarding the issues of inequity through an historical lens, Maclean invites the viewer to understand body politics as a contemporary issue, and their body, by extension, as a decadent object, unwittingly playing the master game of consumerism.

Brian Yuzna's *Society* and Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (both 1989), also examine the breakdown of social decorum and the degeneracy hiding among the elite. *Society* and *The Cook* are the most explicit and violently embodied of all the films. Exploring how the ornate styling of the bourgeoisie serves as a sort of carapace for bad taste and immorality, both drench the screen in the body's most universal colour: blood red. Each of the films curated in this programme sensorially assault their audiences and examine the politics of desire through gluttony, of social decay through the aesthetics of decadence, and suggest ways in which resistance operates both thematically and stylistically. My hope, in curating these films, was to propose a question around how gluttony, decadence, and resistance interact with audiences to create affect and meaning. Perhaps, then, the final word on the programme's affect should go to a viewer from *Cinema Rediscovered*, who commented, 'What sadist thought it would be a good idea to put *La Grande Bouffe* on right before lunch?'¹⁰

¹ Dylan Rainforth, 'This Film's Going Bad: Collaborative Cutting in *Daisies*', *Senses of Cinema*, 44, August 2007, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/cte/q/daisies/> [accessed 15 December 2019].

² 'Revolt, She Said, Women and Film After '68' was curated and co-ordinated by Club des Femmes in partnership with the Independent Cinema Office.

³ <https://www.watershed.co.uk/cinema-rediscovered-2019> [accessed 15 December 2019].

⁴ Tara Judah, 'Politically potent unpleasant appetites', *Watershed*, 19 June 2019, <https://www.watershed.co.uk/articles/politically-potent-unpleasant-appetites> [accessed 15 December 2019].

⁵ Jacqueline Louise Dutton, 'C'est dégueulasse!: Matters of Taste and "La Grande bouffe" (1973)', *M/C Journal*, 17.1 (2014), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/rt/prinFRIENDLY/763/0> [accessed 15 December 2019].

⁶ Roger Ebert, 'La Grande Bouffe', 30 September 1973, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/la-grande-bouffe-1973> [accessed 15 December 2019].

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Peter Walsh, 'From "soylent steak" to Soylent Green', *Watershed*, 7 June 2019, <https://www.watershed.co.uk/articles/from-soylent-steak-to-soylent-green> [accessed 15 December 2019].

⁹ Katie Goh, 'The dystopian satire tackling sexism in the social media age', *Huck*, 15 October 2018, <https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/film-2/rachel-maclean-make-me-up-film/> [accessed 15 December 2019].

¹⁰ Tweet by Peter Walsh, 28 July 2019, https://twitter.com/soylent_grey/status/1155096471643021312 [accessed 15 December 2019].