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## FILM VS FINE ART

2023, THE YEAR OF THE CINEMA OF PERCEPTION, A CRITICAL OVERVIEW, 1.<sup>1</sup>

2023 was a surprisingly strong year for arthouse cinema and indie filmmaking, I couldn't even name my favourite film of the year, there were so many good ones. But the most important development, and this is what I will try to focus on in the following text, is that what could perhaps be called the phenomenological turn, which has also acquired new terms since Philippe Grandrieux (cinema of the senses, ASMR cinema, cinema of perception, etc.) and which is characterised by an increasing predominance of pure visuality and other sensory effects at the expense of traditional narrative, is increasingly gaining ground in contemporary cinema, and not only in terms of contemporary formalism. *Saltburn*'s prominent position is my little protest vote, because actually the top 20 are all great films that I can't really rank because they're all very important for different reasons - but the fact that *Saltburn* is so divisive was quite a surprise to me, as was the *Oppenheimer* hype, which is not only aesthetically or historically but also morally questionable, with the sad fact that Nolan's film, despite its treatment of women and Japanese victims, managed to get crowds of people to rush to IMAX theatres to enjoy - an atomic bomb. So by ignoring *Oppenheimer*, I also want to reflect on the dream factory's failed attempt at self-criticism and introspection. Obviously, it's not enough to change one's point of view against a global visual regime that has dictated our gaze for so long, that forces us to overlook the embarrassment of depicting the genocide of the Osage people in a Godfather-like gangster film genre as the exclusive chamber drama of a white duo in Scorsese's *Killer of the Flower Moon* - they would have to be able to shift paradigms, and Hollywood is not up to the task this year. The toxic masculinity that should be expressed in relation to *Oppenheimer* is instead expressed in relation to Lanthimos' *Poor Things*, whose feminist critics often forget that it is a satire set in the Victorian era, whose inherent devices include reduction, exaggeration, distortion and the Frankensteinian deconstruction of parts. This year was also the year of A24's pop arthouse aesthetic, with films that were quite problematic from a critical point of view. The most controversial case is Glazer's *The Zone of Interest*, the content of which can be summed up in a single sentence, and that sentence, unfortunately, can hardly be expanded. Rather than creating new metaphors, it is the visualisation of old ones that emerges in this new illustrative trend. *Saltburn* is particularly important from the point of view of its visual formalism, its highly spectacular, painterly imagery foreshadowing a formalist refinement that we will increasingly see in cinema: it could even be called contemporary mannerism.

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But more important were the surprises of this year, a Schanelec film that went beyond the Straub-Huillet school and not only came up with an astonishing post-post interpretation of the Orpheus myth, but also a wonderful visual language in which every word fascinated me, creating a new syntax of non-narrative slow cinema in touch with the philosophy of language. Or the fact that I saw a few films this year that managed to use landscape cinema not as an illustration of philosophical reflections, but as an equal companion within an experimental cinematic framework: Kyle Faulkner's beautiful, moving, thoughtful funeral mass and hymn to women, *Letter to Irigaray* and Lois Patiño's spectacular new film on death and reincarnation in an Anthropocene framework, *Samsara*, all of which would require a separate study. Kitty Green, after a serious true-crime critique (*Casting JonBenet*), has made a genuine microrealist film about the dynamics of violence against women in the Australian desert, *The Royal Hotel*, and I have read dozens of reviews of Todd Haynes' *May December*, and each came up with a different interpretation, a clear indication of the complexity and richness of the questions Haynes has posed to us in his iridescent, filtered, veiled images. Not only about sin, but about its knowability, about the potential for thought on the subject of communicability, artistic processability and appearance itself, mixing comic and dramatic elements in his characteristic way – I was delighted to see a multitude of essay butterflies emerge from the monarch larvae reared in Joe's cage, the film formally covered with Májá's pastel rainbow veil, a rare example of form and content in perfect harmony.

Of course, there were also some not-so-well-made films that successfully disguised themselves this year: Wim Wenders made a deceptively spectacular and humanistic but actually unbearably sentimental kitsch by appropriating Asian slow cinema, *Perfect Days*, while Petzold's *Afire* is, in my opinion, a typical intellectual misconception, a kind of Rohmerian reminiscence, with a fake drama and too much didactic forest fire at the end: lazy students in a rural writing seminar in a lazy film. In any case, I would like to focus on films from this year's output that are interesting either for their formalism or for their sensory filmmaking, often in an intermediate context with other visual media, or where cinematography evokes other visual art analogies.

#### ANGELA SCHANELEC: *MUSIC*, 2023

Something happens in *Music* that retroactively validates her stubborn and – following in the footsteps of the Straub-Huillet duo –, persistent experiments in form and language, as if it all happened to bring to world this 'slower than slow' cinema. The protagonist of the film is the Greek landscape and the light, at once merciless and gentle, that falls on this mythical landscape as if there were a perpetual eclipse of the sun – a phenomenon I have only seen before in the lakeside scene in Grandrieux's *Sombre*, where the brilliant light is somehow saturated with darkness – in proportion to the way the film's protagonist, Oedipus' alter ego, begins to lose his sight. But anyone expecting a servile transposition of the Oedipus myth and looking for parallels will soon be disappointed. Fragments of the myth appear, but the narrative does not come together

in the end, and something else does, or rather gives us a dreamlike sense of oneiric, transcendental unity. But what this unity is about, or what it is trying to communicate, is a disturbing obscurity. Apart from a single important telephone conversation, the film contains only a few words, mostly of greetings and practical disclosures. Once after the word mirror you hear the word dream, but that's all. *Music* is a surprisingly quiet film, there are six times, to be precise, that music is played, but then we always hear beautiful madrigals and sophisticated contemporary songs, which in themselves lend a certain gravitas to an otherwise indifferent scene. *Music* not only robs the Oedipus myth of its dramatic emphasis, but also of the possibility of modernist psychological interpretation. We see the characters in their everyday activities, but these reveal nothing about them. They remain empty signs, empty puppets of an arbitrary fate, which is only exacerbated by the fact that the protagonist's age does not change, while everyone else's does. The cameraman either shoots the characters from such a distance that it is hard to tell who they are and what they are doing, or he ventures so close that only limbs, hands and feet are visible, or faces on which the camera lingers too long, as if hoping that some emotion will emerge in time. These gestures, which at first seem mannered, these endless long takes, increasingly seem justified. A typical detail of Schanelec's treatment of myth: in a prison scene, with its subtle homoeroticism reminiscent of *Beau Travail*, the props of ancient theatre, the raised wooden shoes, the 'cothurnus', appear, but two minutes later it is revealed that they are being used in the showers. The silent spectators, however, often arranged in conspicuously ornamental groups, rightly evoke the choruses of ancient theatre.

I am reminded of Bruegel's famous painting *Landscape with The Fall of Icarus*, in which the beautiful landscape with a random peasant ploughing a field, otherwise a background element, is placed in the foreground, while in the corner of the painting the tiny figure of Icarus falls into the sea, surrounded by the indifference of the outside world. But 'unremarkable drama' or the dethronement of myth is only one possible and unsatisfactory reading of this post-cinematic masterpiece. The stylisation of the figures leads to the landscape, and the body as landscape, absorbing and beginning to carry the possible emotions. Pain swirls beneath the unresponsive long takes, but nothing gives it meaning except the music, which seems to be made more sensitive by the fading and more and more blind Jonathan. But maybe that is an illusion too. There is no valid sign of progress. The suffering, the chain of traumas, is meaningless, but life is there in the hands, in the Christian wounds of the feet, in the mad green leaves of the garden, in the juice of the pomegranate, in the repeated swims in the same sea, to which we descend over the same barren stone curves – the mythology is there, the eternal destiny, a multitude of signs written on the skin of the landscape and in the souls of men, and read differently in each age. In this case, it is the omissions between the signs that are most revealing.

Not many people will like this film, because it goes against all our expectations with quiet ruthlessness. There is no narrative, no sympathetic characters, no acting, just repetition, an euphoric dance of stylised motifs, ellipses and a vast landscape that takes over from man the role and the play. The new trend in contemporary cinema, which

relies on the senses and on a nature, which no longer exists but in traces and ruins, internalized it in diverse, thought-provoking forms teaches humility and delight that create new, vibrant interpretations of our ancient myths.

EMERALD FENNELL: *SALTBURN*, 2023

I would say to those who argue that class critique is inadequate or superficial, that the very fact that it is not good and evil, but emptiness confronting emptiness here, suggests that class opposition is just a narrative framework used here to highlight, what we are capable of just to get into the circle, to get love/privilege, and the depth of Fennell's portrayal shows that the two cannot be separated - but at the same time what we are capable of doing to protect our power/privilege, sometimes just out of habit, to frustrate the oppressed. Elordi's empty beauty and Saltburn's infantile aristocracy, however, found a challenger in Keoghan's satyr/vampire, and all the sex scenes billed as scandalous were in the service of a microrealist psychological portrayal of their strange relationship - and Fennell even managed to get beyond the *Promising Young Woman's* posthumous, fabled revenge in the depths of *Saltburn's* labyrinth, to present a Dionysian sacrifice before the statue of the half-Minotaur, half-Silenus being, which pushes the film beyond its psychological and socio-critical dimensions towards a global critique of civilisation, where the naked dance of the Faun in the corridors of Saltburn is already a triumph of something profoundly inhuman, without forgetting that the revenge of the oppressed was the basic formula. She manages to free the dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed from the paradigm of good versus evil, all through a triumph of old-fashioned narrative cinema, with wonderful cinematography, retro vibe, mythological allusions and great acting, with subversive sex, exciting karaoke scene with Pet Shop Boys and brilliant intro with Handel: in a satirical play of Fennell, whose gestures I can only interpret as courage, consistency, thoughtful confrontation, and a hard critical attitude. I find it interesting that this is not obvious even to people who are otherwise enthusiastic about the cruel, sometimes nihilistic critical confrontations of Pasolini or Kubrick.

Ollie is humiliated every second of the film, but he has his answers to frustration: lies, emotional and sexual manipulation, and then violence. Although the scale and nature of the revenge at the end of the film reveals something deeply inhuman, the film is not short on emotion. Through consistent psychological-social interactions, one layer of the film shows what it means to be different and therefore not accepted by a class/community. This layer is fascinatingly micro-realistic. Since more people have written about this, I'd like to focus on the archetypal/mythological interpretation, which opens up both an individual dimension (you can't make the other person your own) and a global dimension (you can't make nature/the earth your own).

At every turn in the last third of the film I found myself saying out loud: 'Em, no, don't do that, you'll spoil it, it's really too much'. Then 2 minutes later I realised it was OK. At the end of the film, when the brilliant Barry Keoghan dances

naked through Saltburn's rooms, making this labyrinth his own mythical grove, I realised that all the exaggerated twists were necessary to take the frustrated middle/working-class Oxford student to mythic proportions. And by exaggeration, I do not mean in the least the sexual acts that have been described as extreme or scandalous, as empty sensationalism, which I felt had their place and their significance.

A filmblog reviewer called the dance at the end of the film a „Greek satyr scene”<sup>2</sup> If we think about it, we find the common root of the words satyr and satire, the word *satura*, which means mixture, hybrid. Silenos is the faun companion of Dionysos, and *Saltburn* begins, not coincidentally, with Haydn's Coronation Mass: *Saltburn* is a playful satire on the coronation, the inauguration of the Satyr.

So *Saltburn* is not simply a confrontation between the lower and upper classes; the satyr has been the most powerful topos of the critique of civilisation itself since antiquity. The relationship between Silenus and Dionysus emphasises the unscrupulous and pleasure-seeking aspects of human nature, the joyful abandonment of social norms. The parties at Saltburn and Oxford and the brilliant karaoke scene are pale shadows of the Dionysian celebrations, but Barry, wearing the antlers of Odin, also familiar from Wiccan traditions and folklore, is very much in touch with the dark, gothic, erotic and spiritual forces of nature that throw civilisation off its axis. The appearance of menstrual blood suggests the satyr's connection to fertility, and scenes bordering on necrophilia are part of the prop library of gothic horror. „And in a funny way, you're operating on the film that it says it is, which is a classic country house Merchant Ivory gothic film, and then the film that it really is, which is just something about sex and desire and our very modern obsession with things that are not things that will never love us back, I guess,” sounds in an interview,<sup>3</sup> and that's the point. Barry's love for Jacob Elordi's character cannot be fulfilled bc this angel of beauty, an empty shell, a glove puppet that Barry's rough, raw, deep, unbridled, serious love could fill with meaning, but Elordi does not understand that Barry's lie about his father's death indicates the depth of this frustrated love, the strength of its drift – on the other hand, beware of the faun's love, the inhuman character of the forces of nature indicates cruelty: Barry is both the spider and the moth – what man is trying to suppress is the wild, relentless, unbridled erotic, animal force that breaks through the hypocrisy of civilisation. Perhaps an even more important metaphor than the satyr is that of the Minotaur, waiting like a spider at the centre of the labyrinth to devour those who consume too much but give nothing in return. How far have we come from the homoerotic romance of the anxious and frustrated poor Oxford student and his beautiful but empty aristocratic friend? To the dance of an all-devouring, inhuman, dark force over the corpse of a hypocritical consumer society.

Fennell wrote *Saltburn* for Barry Keoghan, whom she discovered in Lanthimos' *Sacred Deer*. She was inspired by her own Oxford memories, a 2006 playlist and the

<sup>2</sup> <https://hollywood-elsewhere.com/saltburn-dispute/>

On the satyr motif, see also Sex Ray Spex's review: <https://letterboxd.com/sexrayspex/film/saltburn/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/emerald-fennell-interview>

artefacts of the era's lousy taste. In a good film there has to be something tawdry and bad, something wrong, that's what the era was for, says Fennell. In the film's most brilliant scene, the manipulative and unscrupulous lying faun utters the film's key line in a drunken, infantile mumble: „But I'm the same, I haven't changed". The power of the oppressed means identity and autonomy. Yes, Fennell is driven by anger and rage, but that rage is motivated by a desire for autonomy: she could have ended her film in at least three places, but she found all three solutions cheap or false. Even if the audience rejects me, I will continue until my film reaches the degree of autonomous identity that my critical affinities demand, that's the logic, but *Saltburn* can also be seen as a renewal of traditional narrative film.

In addition to Lucrecia Martel, Lucile Hadžihalilović, Claire Denis, Kitty Green and Chantal Akerman, I have a new heroine: Emerald Fennell. Independent, brave, conscious. The film's visionary imagery is much more than a series of pretty pictures. Elordi's weightless beauty, his grace, is something Barry cannot grasp, Felix is sacrificed on the altar of the Minotaur, but it's not simply about the destruction of the class, just as Ollie is not just parasitic/vengeful. The formula is more complicated. Beauty is destroyed, but what emerges at the centre of *Saltburn*'s labyrinth is a horned hybrid, far more powerful and mighty: the faun's revenge calls for a Dionysian dance in art.

#### KYLE FAULKNER: *LETTER TO IRIGARAY*, 2023

Indie filmmaker Kyle Faulkner is best known for his festival-winning feature *Street*, a media-critical and philosophical analysis of the true crime genre, but he has also made a series of landscape films whose ascetic yet sensual minimalism is always defined by a kind of complexity of thought. Just as *Hitokara* uses the metaphor of solitary karaoke to address questions of copying and duplication in modernity, *Spectre* revisits the themes of grief and hauntology within a possible Anthropocene aesthetic framework of interpretation. We are talking about a very free filmmaker in spirit, who makes uncompromisingly independent, low or zero budget, strictly non-profit films, which he then releases on freely accessible public channels, but despite the deep intellectual background, these films rely mainly on perception, their creator sometimes present only at the level of subtle direction, with a series of creative choices in terms of rhythm, editing, sound design, but of which the viewer is hardly aware, swallowed up in a jungle of long static shots or even shaky handheld camera footage. One might associate his films with those of James Benning or Lav Diaz, but in contrast to the conceptualism of the former and the large-scale epic breath of the latter, these landscape etudes are defined more by a kind of eroticism of the suffering gaze that cannot be confused with anything else.

In 2023, however, Faulkner tried something new again, combining his practice of landscape cinema and socio-philosophical questions in an essay film, enriching the visual fabric of the film with cinematic montages and intertextual references.

The wound of grief never heals, but the hardest thing is to lose someone with whom you shared your thoughts, with whom you learned to think together. Their

thoughts are tattooed deep into your thoughts and you can't separate them, like a camera looking from the outside at a cross slowly being swallowed by the bush. Your thoughts are not your own, but they are no longer theirs. They hang like empty clothes in the voiceless vacuum until someone comes along to try them on and then moves on. They are the audience.

Kyle Faulkner's new film opens with a few frames from Méliès' 1900 comic etude *Going to Bed Under Difficulties*, about a man who constantly changes his clothes, roles and ideas, believing he has a fixed personality and identity. A strong start to a film about, among other things, the criticism of 'over-identity'. The wonderful church choir work contrasts so wildly with the silent film fooling around that your throat closes from the first frame. It immediately adds a historical dimension to the film, which not coincidentally ends with a newly shot silent film imitation. Within the framing there is another framing: the dawn of cinematography is followed by a real dawn, which in the end becomes twilight. When a duck swims deep into the blue darkness, gently rippling the surface of the water and leaving ephemeral marks with its stick legs, leading the gaze across a real letter addressed to the philosopher Luce Irigaray, I already suspected that the ensuing cinematic montage of unspeakable beauty and euphoria of woman as being, with Diotima wandering by the water, would return at the end of the film in the form of tears falling down the faces of suffering, vengeful, desperate, but infinitely powerful women. Like the annual rings on a tree trunk, like ripples on the water, the internal images follow one another.

In the wet medium of film, the notion of vegetation, seen through the veil of tears, also takes on a particular meaning. In Irigaray's reading of Plato's cave in the early work *Speculum of the Other Woman*, which can be seen as a critical dialogue with Lacanian theory, the female womb and the cave are placed in a sensual and intellectual context. But the cave also contains the (missing) body of Christ. Like a box of tricks containing more and more boxes, the last box is nothing but the place of a (missing) love. But is it really missing? „The love is what outlives. This is hell's kindness, for what do we ever really know of each other's griefs.” To reach this place and see the barren thicket transformed into the Garden of Gethsemane, we have to wade through a wet, dark green rainforest, a veritable jungle of thoughts. These thoughts are contained in a letter, a letter written by the filmmaker to a philosopher, which he himself reads, occasionally interrupting the rhythm with a sentence end left hanging in the air, while we observe the rippling of a leaf or the denser than imagined order, the silence and the shimmer of the giant trees.

This is the third time Kyle Faulkner has tackled the subject of grief, each time in a different genre, and this is his most personal film, but the personal, well done, is always a mediator to the common, to the impersonal. As this film-letter says: „I do not wish to speak for you, as Socrates did for Diotima. I respect your absence, and the power therein, and I cannot speak with you, therefore I shall speak to you, in my learned language.” This statement refers to the post-traumatic inability to speak, to the way art exists, and to the complex train of thought in which Luce Irigaray analyses Plato in relation to Socrates speaking for Diotima.

Luce Irigaray was part of the influential intellectual movement of French feminism that emerged in the 1970s. Her study of Plato's *Symposium* in *The Sorcerer's Love* criticises the phallogocentric bias in which love is predominantly discussed from a male perspective. Challenging this exclusion, she calls for the recognition of the feminine in philosophical discourse and proposes a new ethics of love. Arguing that women's experiences and perspectives have been marginalised, she calls for a reevaluation of femininity as a distinct mode of subjectivity that challenges the idea of fixed, stable identities and embraces the fluid and multiple nature of human existence. Here it becomes clear that the slipperiness and wetness of the images in Kyle Faulkner's film are a kind of visual translation of this proposal for fluid identity, and that when Faulkner addresses Luce Irigaray, the film addresses Diotima, and Diotima in this case is woman as the very expression of the power of alterity, of marginality.

Irigaray explores the ways in which individuals can transcend binary categories and embrace the complexities of their own subjectivities, and examines the role of language in perpetuating gender inequalities, arguing that language has traditionally been constructed from a male perspective, so she stresses the need for new forms of linguistic expression that allow for the articulation of women's experiences and desires. When Faulkner channels his grief over a lost partner through Luce Irigaray, who connects them intellectually, he does much more than talk about the trauma he has suffered or the shared thinking that defines them in a moral sense. Through the women, the film advocates alterity, the acceptance of otherness, it speaks of the energy of love by creating it through the medium of film and gives a new interpretation of its archetype. Speaking alternately to and about Irigaray, he does not just talk about his own intellectual genesis, his use of cinematic language, his way of thinking, his taste in films and music. His grief is no longer his own. There are some very profound and rawly honest lines about trauma at the heart of the film, and their energy is palpable from the very first frames. It's a strange, deeply moving film, which I think is Faulkner's best work to this point, and it manages to weave together thoughts and images with a density and intensity that is quite unusual, but it's also a drifting, euphoric hymn to women, not just a requiem. At its most personal point, there is a Nietzschean allusion to the necessity of dance, at which point Faulkner's text becomes a kind of poetry, close to the language Nietzsche gave to Zarathustra and Irigaray proposed for a philosophy that integrates the female experience. I should talk about the reinterpretation of the Judas kiss in terms of Irigaray at the end of the film, but I would just like to point out that here Faulkner reformulates the topos, or more precisely the form of pathos, pathosformel to use Aby Warburg's terminology, that we see at the end of his film *Street*. This is the gesture of the prodigal son in the history of European art. It was great to see the two brilliant actors from *Street*, Josh Lacy and Scarlet McPherson, back in the lead roles. Just as the sequence of grainy 16mm footage at the beginning of *Street* linked the film to the earlier landscape films, so the final sequence of *Letter to Irigaray* evokes the river of oblivion of *Spectre*. There is so much more I could and should say.

Plato's cave, where the images are born, becomes a womb that carries new forms of communication, the inability to speak due to trauma leading to a cinematic essay written in an unknown language. It is a film rich in inter- and meta-texts and philosophical contexts, but also very sensual. The web of thoughts and images is accompanied by footage of mushrooms, giant roots and other biological associations, pointing to nature as a network of rhizomes, model and example. I watched it with tears in my eyes, and I'm sure everyone who sees it will feel touched in some way, because if 'I can't talk to anyone, I'll talk to everyone', as they say in my country, translated into my perhaps not yet quite 'porous, fluid, glistening' but learned second language.

#### LOIS PATIÑO: *SAMSARA*, 2023

Here, where I live, we have such a bad attitude to death. We have no chance of dying like that Laotian woman, surrounded by family, on an open, windswept terrace, saying goodbye slowly and with dignity, face turned towards the beloved landscape, while a young person reads words of guide and consolation from the *Bardo Thodol*, a holy book. And yet we all dream of it. And now an European director brings this dream to us in the most beautiful and endearing images.

„If the body be present, just when the expiration hath ceased, either a lāma [who hath been as a guru to the deceased], or a brother in the Faith whom the deceased trusted, or a friend for whom the deceased had great affection, putting the lips close to the ear [of the body] without actually touching it, should read this Great Thödol.” (cit. Tib. Book of the Dead) On the path to rebirth, the guide leads the soul of the dying and then the deceased for 49 days, as according to the occult teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, there are seven stages or seven worlds of Maya within the worlds of Samsara. These worlds are made up of the seven planets of a planetary chain. On each planet there are seven cycles of development, these constitute the forty-nine (seven times seven) stages of active existence.

This film is about how an European imagines reincarnation. The soul of an old woman in Laos is transferred to a small white goat in Zanzibar. Finally, Lois Patiño's *Samsara* arrived and its waves of colour flooded the screen. But when the tide of dazzling images receded, it left an unexpected void.

Unexpected?

Anyone who believes in the healing power of colour as much as I do, whose windows are decorated with the same floating turquoise muslin curtains, will be a little embarrassed to see that the parts of the film shot in Laos are practically Apichatpong clones. From the dreamers in *Cemetery of Splendor* to the riverbank in *Blissfully Yours* to the dying figure under the pink mosquito net in *Uncle Boonmee*, from the starfish to the waterfalls, everything is there, even the colourful plastic containers from Tsai Ming-liang's *Days* that the Laotian migrant worker piles up in the small kitchen in the basement. But is that a problem? Some people are equally enthusiastic about Apichatpong's *Memoria*, Patiño's *Samsara* and Wenders' *Perfect Days*, making no distinction between original, adaptation and fake. Of course, this raises further

questions, because why should Apichatpong, who was educated in America, be so much more authentic, or what would be the value of this authenticity? I think of Wenders' film, which presents „a positive example of the minimalist life of a happy Japanese toilet cleaner”, as a kind of kitschy Orientalism, which in its own way more appropriative than the much-accused *Lost in Translation*. But what about Patiño, who illustrates the Buddhist Samsara and the Tibetan Book of the Dead for us, not through his own eyes, but through cultural mediators? How meaningful is this form of cultural transfer? Is it not just a superficial illusion, a visual deception?

After the Buddhist monastery, we visit the exploited women working in the seaweed farms of Zanzibar, and the director does not forget to analyse the conditions of production. Even Mauro Herce's name appears in the list of contributors as cinematographer, and here we have the opportunity to compare, because *Dead Slow Ahead* is also very beautiful, but somehow it does not slip into ornamentation, into decoration. As if the synergy between the many spectacularly filmed colourful curtains and the beautiful landscapes were not enough, Patiño also uses filters and transitions, the most spectacular of which are the dream images in which the sea shines through the colourful clothes of sleeping children and is even superimposed by the shadows of mosaics. Or ebony fingers with specially painted nails searching through the red of the seaweed. I wanted to have more and more spectacular print-screen-frames of the film for a longer review.

But what should I write in that review — how beautiful the Buddhist monks in their orange robes looked against the mint green backdrop of the waterfall? or that I will never forget the white goat with its straps of blue and red threads standing still in the white sand at the edge of the blue sea? do these colours, these clichés, this monumental ethno-painting know anything about transcendence? Was there anything going on in this film beyond basic perception, an experimental stroboscopic depiction of death, and beyond the subtle little touches of Apichatpong that we might remember after watching this spectacular frames? Is the camera's undeniably absorbed attention to painterly detail enough for reinterpretation, or at least empathy? Is beauty sufficient for spirituality? Should we not keep our heads down as long as we can only see to the height of stray dogs as in Kyle Faulkner's *Sangha*? Are we not all stray dogs in this foreign culture? Shouldn't we turn away from the seductive images? Do we not show more of the miracle by showing little of it?

The film successfully combines the ethno-documentary genre with an adaptation of Asian slow cinema and an anthropocentric approach to landscape cinema. But in a way that allows the Spanish filmmaker of the *Strata of the Image and Duration-Landscape* series to use the technical skills he developed in those experimental shorts, while also reviving the slow cinema with Marxist tendencies he left behind with 2013's *Coast of Death*. Patiño's signature is present, with his delight in waterfalls and his fascination with ghosts, which he used to create the images of *Red Moon Tide* and *Night Without Distance*. In this film, he approaches foreign cultures with due respect and is careful to convey the teachings not as a narrative but as people talking to each other. The camera dives into the sea from distant horizons to observe the smallest snail under

the seaweed. This film is a nostalgic celebration of the earth, of beings, of teachings and of cultures close to nature.

Jung's reading of *Bardo Thodol* is very interesting. According to him, the philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism is „the quintessence of Buddhist and psychological criticism, and as such, one may say, of unheard-of high order” and „we must accept as a fact that the Western rational mind has, through psychoanalysis, only recognized the Spida state in the neurotic sphere, and at this point has stopped without criticism at the assumption that psychology is a highly subjective and personal matter.” The transition from the Spida state to the Chönyid state is the surrender of the ego, the self, the persona, to what Freud called the 'realm of panic, of terror'. The self, the individual, is the realm of fear. A very important sentence. This is what the soul has to go through. The end of the film reveals a bit this phase. But Patiño mostly remained on the surface, and thus lost in the delusion of the maya, in the visible world.

For me, it was the deeper spirituality that was missing from this film. But perhaps that is the point, that we, in our present state of consciousness, are not entitled to more of Samsara than the world as a mirage, as the realm of the māyā, where we live and where we die.

#### KITTY GREEN: *THE ROYAL HOTEL*, 2023

What the film's director, Kitty Green, knows perfectly well is that the 'a little male attention' that girls should be able to tolerate in this terrifyingly barren Australian landscape is never pure violence. Pity works. Empathy works. A kind of gratitude. Disgust, understanding, all at once. Indignation, anxiety, anger. Fear. A damned strong internal prohibition against humiliating a man when he's in a vulnerable position. Dignity. Frustration. An alarming awareness of the abuse of power. The moment you get to the bar, you are a woman and they are all men, which in itself is a confusing situation because you have succumbed to a social stereotype. And when Liv says to the increasingly anxious Hanna, „He's just Dolly, but he's just Dolly,” there's a complexity to it that made me squeeze my fist so hard it went numb. Because you can't just say that the other person is a psychopath. Dolly has his own history, his own traumas, there's alcohol as a stigma of sadness and frustration. Liv refuses to exclude Dolly from the circle of human beings, even when he offers Hannah a snake soaked in alcohol in a jar. Although they laughed together at the drunken British girls when they arrived, Liv, even in the shadow of the gang violence, would end up falling into the escalating situation. But Kitty Green resists to temptation, and the only one who is seriously hurt is Dolly. The presence of the threat is all the more powerful.

What Kitty Green and her actors (Julia Garner, Hugo Weaving are amazing) produce here in this microrealist setting is a monumental tableau of the different forms of aggression. The perfect construction of the whole film, the dynamics of fear worked out with fantastic subtlety, is amazing. No horror clichés needed, because this is pure horror itself. Nothing happens, does it? This pub is the last metaphor of a phallogocentric worldview in disintegration. *The Royal Hotel* is an adaptation

of Pete Gleeson's 2016 documentary *Royal Coolgardie*, but it goes far beyond the problem of male violence. It is the infinitely accurate perception of gender issues in the frame of social givens, of social gravity. The fact that the cursed pub at the end of the world goes up in flames, means that redemption is only a form of sublimation, exists in the cinematic genre itself. In fact, there is no chance to redeem except to make a good film about it, which is not only an act of understanding, but also of compassion. The final gesture is a subtle self-reflection, a reflection on the magic of sublimation. And from the nightmare of reality, it is almost nice to wake up to the fact that we have just been in the socially and psychologically sensitive and complex world of a great film.