

WASTELAND

ISSUE #17
AUGUST 2021

FEATURING:

**BLACK
CHRISTMAS**

**BLOOD FOR
DRACULA**

**EDVARD
MUNCH**

**THE GREAT
GATSBY**

JE, TU, IL, ELLE

**SCENES FROM
A MARRIAGE**

SISYPHUS

**THE TEXAS
CHAIN SAW
MASSACRE**

1974

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Featuring

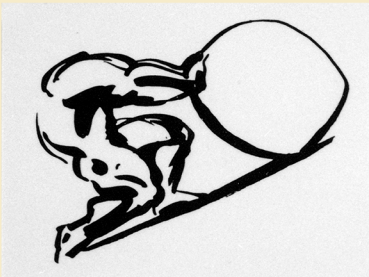
Scenes from a Marriage
(Ingmar Bergman)
Words by Lauren Mattice



The Great Gatsby (Jack Clayton)
Words by Kirby Moore



Blood for Dracula (Paul Morrissey)
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The Voice of the Slasher: *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*
(Tobe Hooper) and *Black Christmas*
(Bob Clark)
Words by Edward Pomykaj



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Scenes from a Marriage



1974 saw Ingmar Bergman's television series *Scenes from a Marriage* make its theatrical debut. Coincidentally, its release marked four years since the very public and emotional separation between Bergman and actress Liv Ullmann, who stars in the film alongside Erland Josephson. Ullmann and Bergman were both married when they fell in love, their tryst being one of the last for serial romantic Bergman, who proclaimed "I live many lives" to qualify his affairs. Shot partly on the island of Fårö, near the home in which Bergman and Ullmann's relationship bloomed, *Scenes from a Marriage* is far from abstract, rather, it is a meditation on past romantic strife.

We enter the narrative ten years into the relationship of Marianne and Johan. Our arrival is timely. We see the couple undergo various trials and tribulations, many of which are gender-dependent. Marianne is subject to Johan's lacerating indifference when he reveals his involvement with a younger woman, and further still to his tests of self-pity. Indeed, it is Johan's constant battle with not-entirely-unconscious male inadequacy that determines Marianne as the reason for his failed career, their lapsing sex life, and, ultimately, his feigned indifference towards her.

Marianne placates her husband so that the relationship may stay solid: running the house, dieting and bringing the family together. But her tenderness with Johan vacillates with his intentions, pulling the relationship and her role in it into a trap. Piece by piece, Johan drains her of her strength.

Bergman's characterization of Marianne as a divorce lawyer is deliberately at odds with her lack

of agency; she vicariously experiences her clients' failed relationships in a disturbing, cyclical fashion, adjacent to her own.

Only Bergman and Ullmann could know the similarities of their relationship to Marianne and Johan's. And yet, Ullmann's mastery of character gives overwhelming truth to the screen. In one moment, she is complacent with Johan's desires and fulfilling her role as the dutiful wife. In the next, as she's pushed to a point of such emotional turmoil, rebuking Johan and his behaviour, she emanates radiant authenticity.

It is Ullmann's screen presence that begets her authority; her performance yields to the imposing cinema vérité documentation of Marianne and Johan's demise. Only once they are both remarried and kindling an affair together do their defences crumble, and it is only then that Bergman's somewhat tenuous optimism shines through.

During their last meeting on screen, Marianne wonders if she has ever actually loved someone, to which Johan says yes, claiming their love was reciprocally felt during their original marriage. And yet, Johan's reassurance brings us back to square one. We feel Marianne's anguish at each strike of Johan's insecurity. Ullmann's demeanor in this scene does not grant her the romantic agency she is owed. It instead suggests that while hope may exist in Bergman's narrative, male envy and egotism will resume and surround Marianne; they will continue to tear her down.





Words
Lauren Mattice

Images
Scenes from a Marriage (1974, Cinema 5 Distribution)

The Great Gatsby



The '74 adaptation of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, directed by Jack Clayton and with a screenplay by Francis Ford Coppola, was not warmly received. As with several classic-literature-turned-films, Clayton's *Gatsby* was condemned for its inability to reflect the essence of Fitzgerald's original work; a novel that critics claim to be 'unfilmable'. Consequently, assessing this impossible film is all the more intriguing, particularly in what is earned through its visual aspects. Indeed, without its literary backbone, *Gatsby*'s atmosphere rests on its aesthetics: the set design, cinematography and costuming.

Theoni V. Aldredge's Oscar-winning costumes are ingredients for opulence and ostentation. Courtesy of Ralph Lauren, the men are the epitome of upper-classmanship; they sport an array of pleats and pinstripes, tuxes and tails. The women, too, wear eye-catching ensembles. Though sometimes veering from historical accuracy, they flaunt the classically shapeless silhouettes of the 20s while maintaining the fantastically flapper-esque fashions. Altogether, Aldredge provides the film with a rather delectable wardrobe.

Tom Buchanan (Bruce Dern) is the perfect picture of old money and the 1%. His suits and such are conspicuously debonair, yet it's his leisurewear that truly embodies the elitist ease of his upper-class lifestyle. Amid affairs, he plays polo, he fences; he flaunts white supremacy like his Ivy League cardigan – pretentiously, tastelessly, and with absolute comfort.

The enigmatic Mr Gatsby (Robert Redford) likewise demonstrates sartorial choices that undoubtedly place him on the stage of the American upper-class. His three-piece suits are not subtle or simple; they feature double-breasted waistcoats with double pockets, with pocket squares and pocket watches. Despite his wealth, however, Gatsby

cannot seem to attain the prestige of the likes of the Buchanans. This insecurity fuels overcompensation in his persistence to demonstrate his worthiness to the infamous Daisy Buchanan (Mia Farrow).

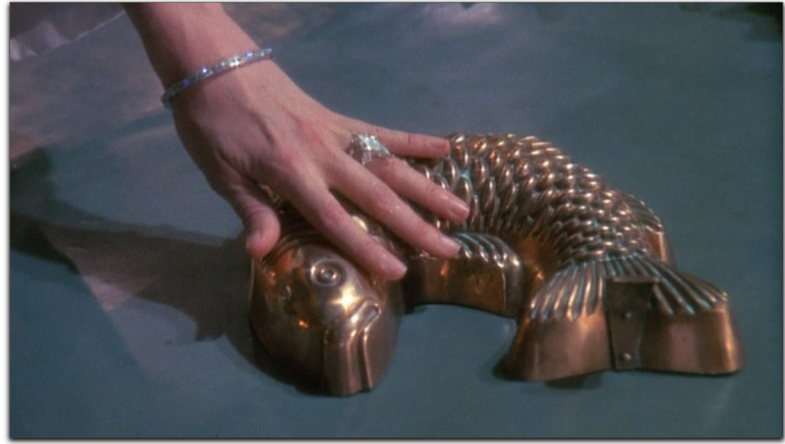
Daisy, easily the most controversial character in both the novel and film, wafts through high society in diaphanous fashions of chiffon, organza and marabou, all of which appropriately reflect the insubstantiality of her personality. Had Daisy been crafted as a more sympathetic character, perhaps an audience would better understand Gatsby's preoccupation with her. And yet, this precise fixation derives from his fascination with American aristocracy. To Gatsby, Daisy is the paragon of the wealth, sophistication and status for which he strives.

Daisy is presented as an insipid, shallow, and capricious woman, with few redeemable qualities. She does, nonetheless, grant the narrative its conclusion by demonstrating just how fleeting and fickle her romantic connections are. Nick Carraway (Sam Waterson), the engaging narrator and storyteller, aptly regards the Buchanans as careless people who "smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness."

In the end, it is the self-made aspect of Gatsby's affluence that impedes his aspirations; we are reminded that his wealth is the result of bootlegging alcohol during Prohibition. His less-than-legal dealings are emphasised by the company he keeps, and none too subtly at that. Indeed, one can presume no upstanding citizen associates with someone whose cufflinks are human teeth.

The ultimate evidence of Gatsby's overcompensation is his summer soirées, offering spectators a glimpse into a world of glitz and glamour. Their effervescent atmosphere shimmers off the beads and jewels and strings of pearls. Everything sparkles: chandeliers, champagne coupes, and the wrists of the hands that hold them. Every evening is as dazzling and excessive as the last. Each is followed by the gentle glow of pre-dawn light and soft, pale colour palettes, evoking indistinct tones of regret and sentimentality.

Clayton's *Gatsby* is a visual adventure. It unearths vague feelings of nostalgia amidst high-drama and extravaganza. It is a film devoted to its own aesthetic. It's *Casablanca*'s eyes combined with the hand-animated sparkles of classic Disney, dusted over a plot of melancholy and murder. It is a film that glitters, though not in a manner restrained by realism or two-dimensionality. It glitters like Fitzgerald's 'Jazz Age', like Old Hollywood, like the myth of the American Dream; "like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars."



Words
Kirby Moore

Images
The Great Gatsby (1974, Paramount Pictures)

Blood for Dracula



As the blood pours like cheap wine, Paul Morrissey parades an impaired and physically weak Udo Kier through an anti-communist, bizarrely conservative, and surreally moralistic caricature of the famous bloodsucker.

The sleaze of this politically charged satire of vampire folklore is palpable; only the blood of a virgin can keep the flailing Count Dracula alive. Anton (Arno Juerging), the manservant of Dracula (Udo Kier), finds hope in a religious pre-fascist Italy for the desolate Count. The latter can only be restored to strength by the blood of a virgin, having seen his family slowly disappear from Romania, searching for the same pure blood (of a virgin). In a weakened state, Dracula tasks Anton with arranging travel immediately to Italy; there, the Count befriends a family of declining wealth, despite owning a lavish estate, of which the patriarch hopes to marry one of four daughters to a wealthy aristocrat. The film comprises a range of softcore eroticism, political satire, lavishly over-the-top gore, and a tacky aesthetic that pulses vividly throughout.

Directed and written by Paul Morrissey, Andy Warhol's name was attached to the film in a loose pseudo-auteur gimmick to promote the film despite no consistent evidence of the latter's contribution aside from attending "the parties". Despite the lack of claim on Warhol's part, there is a clear link between this film and some other x-rated Warhol productions of the same era in their presentation of 'political' sex. Warhol and Morrissey collaborated in some capacity on numerous occasions before *Blood for Dracula*, exploring politics, exploitation, substance abuse, and sex work in *Heat*, *Flesh*, *Trash*, and *Women in Revolt*. Though other authorship issues existed, the European release of the film was credited to Antonio Margheriti (Dir; *Castle of Blood*, *Cannibal Apocalypse*). This credit as the director ensured the film would obtain Italian nationality for the producers due to Italian laws. *Blood for Dracula*'s production began only one day after Morrissey's *Flesh for Frankenstein* fin-

ished, both produced by the prolific Italian producer Carlo Ponti.

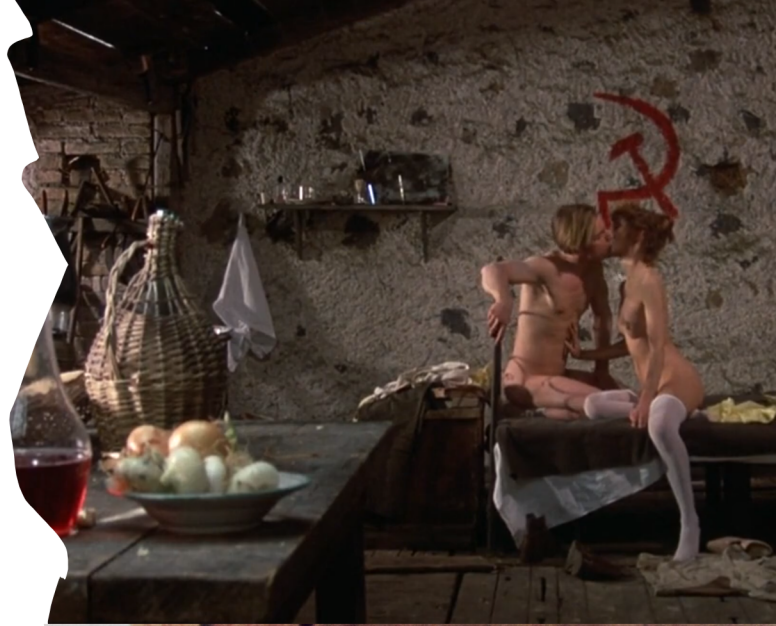
Morrissey deconstructs the legend of Dracula through a political lens; the Count exists as a reminder of his own country's dying aristocracy, his diminishing fortunes cast him into battle with a new foe. The political revolutions of the plot's era pit the bourgeoisie against the proletariat. The aristocratic vampire combats the Marxist family servant Mario for the now-cash-strapped Di Fiore family's socio-economic existence. The Warholian 'political' sex is symbolic to both Dracula and Mario, both lusting over and projecting political identities onto the family daughters. With the Di Fiore family patriarch and matriarch hoping to marry a daughter off to Dracula in hopes of replenishing a diminishing wealth and social status, the socio-economic ramifications of their children's love and lust hold much significance for the plot's progression and conclusion.

Like its precursor *Flesh for Frankenstein*, *Blood for Dracula* has achieved some cult film notoriety, owed to its over-the-top gross humour and camp aesthetics. The political elements of the plot are always present, running deeply as an undercurrent in every scene. However, the film is much more successful as a darkly comic exploitation flick than as serious social commentary. Overriding self-indulgence appears to hold every character back from their individual goals and aspirations. Mario, in particular, the Marxist family servant, seduces the daughters who Dracula seeks out as virgins, somewhat believing himself to be saving the young women from capitalism's grasp. In the character of Mario, Morrissey is satirising the Marxist cliches that were present in European arthouse cinema, particularly Italian Neo-realism. Further satirisation is present in the casting of Italian Neo-realist director Vittorio de Sica (*Umberto D*, *Bicycle Thieves*) as the Di Fiore family patriarch, a once vain aristocrat, now pragmatic peasant seeking to return to heights of wealth.

In Dracula's death throes, there is comedy in his over-exuberant displays of agony, but under the surface is a character born out of traditional values struggling to survive. Whilst not consistently successful in its message, the film exposes both political factions as opposing forms of subjugation through the Count and Mario. The

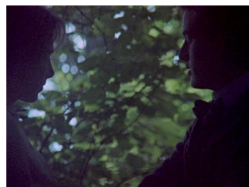
vampire folklore, Dracula and others have often contained socially classist elements, with the latter in particular, more often than not, an aristocratic, upper-class villain; this is a common theme in many indie or mainstream retellings of the Dracula story, though some vampiric characters have subverted this, from the street searching student vampire in Abel Ferrara's *Addiction* to the Cullen family of *Twilight* in their middle-class suburban lifestyle. *Blood for Dracula's* influence in challenging the conventional vampire story is clear.

The camp overtones in acting and setting add a layer of irony to the thematic pokes at class politics and modernity. The comedy is juxtaposed nicely by the tragically romantic score from Claudio Gizzi; the score fits the plot's period and unbalances the awkwardness of the ironic performances. The outrageous speech about urine, the deadpan gambling scene, and the overzealous portrayal of blood rejection by Kier could all be negatively associated with day-by-day writing during production. Though these negative connotations do not hold, the silliness and camp heighten the titillating affairs that keep any dour class politics commentary manageable. Both Morrissey's *Flesh for Frankenstein* and *Blood for Dracula* toy with their conventional themes, resulting in satirical takes on monsters lost within the modernity of changing social landscapes.



Words
Nick Davie

Images
Blood for Dracula (1974, Euro International Films)



Edvard Munch

Coughs, tears, sweat, and blood colour young Edvard Munch's home life. These signs of bodily terror follow him, haunting, perched on a stoop, ready to greet him when he comes home. As he grows older, Munch drifts in and out of countries, romantic relationships, and artistic ideals. But the threat of death is a constant for the artist, coursing through life's ups and downs. Together, these moments form what he calls the "frieze of life."

In his 1974 biopic of the artist, filmmaker Peter Watkins takes note of this symbiotic relationship. He crafts delicate supercuts to convey the feeling of anxiety that begins to lurk in young Munch's life; eventually, it will become the prevailing force. As the twentieth century approaches, Munch's artistic vision—the one he will pursue for the rest of his career—begins to crystallise.

His "frieze of life"—the name of a group of works exhibited in Germany, but also a fervent artistic intent—will depict human relationships, fractured communication, jealousy, life, and death as characters in a dance, never quite able to look each other in the eyes, always on the cusp of making a connection but never able to do so.

In his film, Watkins speaks Munch's artistic philosophy back to him. It is a collection of vignettes blurring the line between documentary and drama, guided by unenthusiastic narration that lets the scenes do the talking. It is through these scenes—snippets of a conversation cut short, shots of dancers performing for a heady audience, flickers of paint on a canvas—that Munch's frieze begins to materialise.

The film focuses on the early years of Munch's life, forging a path from his grief-stricken childhood to his early-thirties at the dawn of the twentieth century. Taking a cue from Munch, Watkins chooses a handful of flashpoints to shepherd viewers through the film. These include the deaths of Munch's mother and sister, the barrage of negative reception to his art from conservative critics, and his decade-spanning affair with an older, married woman referred to as Mrs. Heiburg. Through these grounding moments of the film, we sway forwards and backwards with the melodrama, locking arms and letting go. At any moment, the dance could be interrupted by tragedy.

Edvard Munch transports us to a parlour: smoking, drinking, and watching a performance of the can-can, only to intercept our enjoyment with images of Munch's dying sister on her sickbed, flocked by dutiful attendants for whom mourning has become quotidian, no longer emotional but practical: you wet the forehead of the dying, you catch the blood in a cloth, you sit in silence when it is over. All the while, the boisterous music of the can-can continues to play.



Somehow these moments of ambivalent tragedy are what most invigorate the film. Another filmmaker might have used them to shock viewers, or to instill sadness. But Watkins, like Munch, knows how to harness the power of a harsh reality, how to use them to propel the art.

“This isn’t art, but dirt,” said one of Munch’s critics, following an exhibition in the Norwegian capital. This isn’t art—isn’t life—but dirt, thinks Munch when his family is dying of violent sickness; when his lover won’t leave her husband and commit to him; when his starving wish to enjoy life is met with despair. With reverence, Watkins collects the dirt. He hands it to us as a gift.



Words
Emma Olsson

Images
Edvard Munch (1974, Norsk Film)



Sisyphus

As a punishment for attempting to fool the gods and cheat death twice, Sisyphus, the King of Corinth, was cursed to push a boulder up a hill for eternity, only for it to roll down every time he approached the peak. This image – of a man suspended in endless labour, with no hope for relief – has resonated with many throughout history; one might find parallels in agricultural cycles, relentless working schedules, and even celestial movements.

It is impossible to talk about Sisyphus without mentioning Albert Camus, who famously retold the story as a metaphor for the existential condition: namely, the tension that arises from the human need to experience meaning, and the apparent inability to find this with any certainty. The horror of Sisyphus's curse, Camus reasons, is not found simply in the immensity of his labour, but in his awareness of its futility. The only way our hero can rebel against or overcome his tragic fate is to find happiness precisely in his struggle.

In 1974, Hungarian animator Marcell Jankovics produced his own interpretation of the classical story. In the two-minute film, the hero's ink-drawn body contorts and compresses under the weight of the boulder, in some frames reduced to simple brush strokes, in others growing into a pulsating mass of muscle. This reductionist impression of immense labour is accompanied by recordings of Jankovics' desperate screaming, broken only by periods of strained breathing. The boulder itself appears to grow larger with every revolution, and the body is soon dwarfed by the object before him.

As Sisyphus finally reaches the top of the mountain, he falls to his knees in exhaustion, even melting, temporarily, into the ground he is standing on. The sequence then pulls back to reveal that this mountain is made of countless identical boulders. There is a brief moment of respite, before our hero leaps to his feet and returns to repeat his task.

Despite its relative obscurity, Sisyphus has made two prominent appearances on public television: once, in 1976, when it was nominated for the Best Short Animated Film at the 48th Academy awards; and again in 2008, when it was featured in a Super Bowl advert for GMC's (failed) Yukon Hybrid.

In the latter, Jankovics' animation is muted and partnered instead with a simple piano score, as the narrator utters:

“Why push? Why change? Why grow? Why dream? Questions you don't have to ask yourself if you never say, ‘It's good enough.’ If you never say, ‘It can't be done.’ When you never say never.”

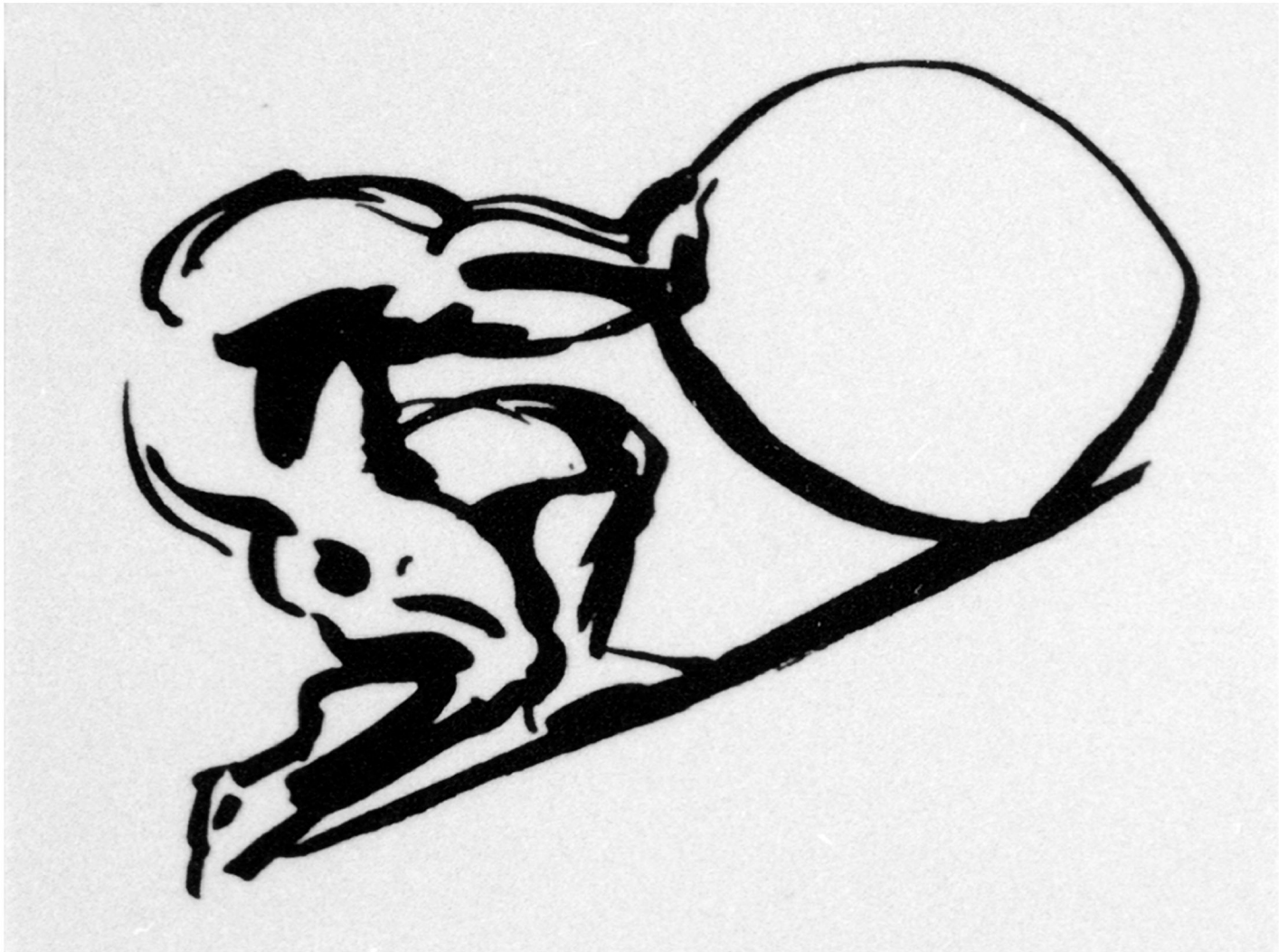
Of course, only a multinational conglomerate could think to transform a story concerned with the futility of inconsequential labour into a sports-movie-locker-room-style monologue about the value of an uncompromising work ethic. Intentionally or otherwise, this advert appears to present the task of selling a new vehicle to an over-saturated market as a fruitless project, and one that is doomed to eternal repetition.

If the advert does highlight one thing, however, it's that the sounds of Jankovics' screaming are integral to his interpretation of the myth. This is where I think Jankovics improves upon Camus; his Sisyphus is not that of the pipe-smoking philosopher, deliberating on his curse as if it were interchangeable with any other task, but that of a man pushed to extreme emotional and physical exhaustion.

Perhaps Jankovics intends to present animation, itself, as a Sisyphean task: after all, the moment one frame is completed, the animator has to turn to a blank page to continue the sequence. This might go some way to explain why the boulder in *Sisyphus* remains in stasis at the top of the hill; his punishment is one of eternal accumulation, rather than repetition.

Jankovics, who passed away in May this year, was working on *The Tragedy of Man* for over 23 years, with each segment of the film being funded separately before its release in 2011. I

often can't help but wonder why animators put so much blood, sweat and ink into their work, especially when commercial systems are often so resistant to experimentation. Perhaps, to paraphrase Camus, one must simply imagine the animator happy.



Words
Jonny Rogers

Images
Sisyphus (1974, Hungarofilms)

The Voice of the Slasher:

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre & Black Christmas

It's a quiet winter night. Christmas is approaching, carolers are singing in the distance. A sorority house—decorated with lights and wreaths—is engulfed in darkness. With a heavy breath, two hands grasp a trellis, and an unseen man climbs into the attic. The phone rings—the killer is inside.

Bob Clark's *Black Christmas* tells the story of a sorority terrorized by an unknown killer and his perverse, near-unintelligible phone calls. The killer, in between shrieks, growls, and other indiscernible noises, slides in comments like “let me lick it,” or, more directly, “I’m going to kill you.” The phone, and more specifically its ringing, becomes a trigger for the sorority girls and a symbol of impending horror. But the phone calls also offer a solution—a wiretap—through which the authorities may find and stop the killer.

Black Christmas was overlooked by film critics and audiences upon its release—on October 11th, 1974—their attention drawn towards another film that premiered the same day: Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. And while the latter film is by far more popular and critically acclaimed than the former, both films have much to say concerning their shared release date and the political context out of which these narratives sprung. Aptly, almost exactly a year before the release of these films was the infamous “Saturday Night Massacre” of the Watergate scandal on October 20th, 1973. Perhaps it's unsurprising that the next year, as the Watergate roared on and came to a head, two of the most important and groundbreaking slasher films would be produced. And neither film is operating as an island in this regard; both *Black Christmas* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* offer us a representation of the unfolding controversy, and more importantly, its consequences for its “audience.”

The '70s and the Nixon presidency served as a paradigm shift, out of which the political para-

noia inherited from the '60s ceased to only be experienced by racial minorities and counter-cultural figures; it was now felt too by those who the government *doesn't* directly persecute. In other words, middle-class white Americans—those who voted for Nixon in his landslide 1972 election against the “socially liberal” candidate George McGovern—were suddenly confronted with conspiracy and corruption on a level they thought impossible. It was a loss of faith, and this loss was horrifying. And while the targets of the conservative government remained the same, suddenly, the curtains were peeled back. Normative Americans were appalled at what was there. And it all began with a break-in.



Black Christmas, similarly, begins with a break-in: where the killer climbs into the attic of the sorority house and kills his first victim. But at first, the girls have no idea where the phone calls are coming from. Then, as characters begin to disappear one by one—with nobody finding the bodies the killer keeps in the attic—the cops get involved and install a wiretap on their phone. Only after it is revealed that the calls are coming from inside the house does one of the living characters, Jess, witness the violence, as she runs upstairs to discover her friends Barb and Phyl massacred by the killer. Like the “average American,” Jess is horrified not only by the violent acts and the disturbing phone calls, but by the fact that it is *coming from inside*.

To turn back to Watergate, the threat was no longer an outside force—like, say, the Soviet Union, or, on a much smaller level, hippies and their counter-cultural beliefs—but instead came from normative institutions themselves, including the Nixon administration. And this too was revealed via wiretapping, where Nixon's

self-surveillance served him in his own demise. But, like Watergate, the wiretap reveals *and* conceals, offering necessary evidence (the location of the killer), while obscuring and failing to reveal other things (who the killer is, what the killer is saying, and *why* the killer is doing this). For Watergate, the wiretap revealed Nixon's involvement in the scandal, but it also left things unknown, generating not merely a distrust in the government, but a larger paranoia as the scope of the investigation broadened. The Killer's voice—like Nixon's—is never fully comprehensible, leaving more in question than answered.



This lasting impression is a horror film's greatest tool. What goes left unexplained is what haunts an audience. By the end of *Black Christmas*, the bodies of the killers' first two victims, Clare and Mrs. MacHenry, are still in the attic, having never been found by the police. And just as we think Jess is safe, the phone starts to ring again—the credits begin to roll.

Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* also explains very little, leaving plenty for the imagination to fill in the gaps. We never learn, for example, why this family is keeping their grandmother's body in the attic; why they are cannibals; or why Leatherface wears the mask while the other members of the family don't. Those are just a few of the endless questions an audience might ask. The film is, rather simply, a group of teenagers stumbling upon a horrific scene, where only one of them gets out alive, and that's it.

But what is strange and sometimes forgotten about *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is the beauty that prefaces the horror. Before chancing upon Leatherface's compound, they visit two of the group's old family home. It's an old, run-down but formerly gorgeous house, sur-

rounded by overgrown fields of tall grass and flowers. And the film isn't shy regarding this beauty; we get shots of Kirk and Pam wandering the grounds with lovely yellow flowers in the foreground. Later, after we see Kirk and Pam's demise, the camera follows Franklin as he walks beneath the tall trees and towards the sunset.

For Kirk, Pam, and Franklin—like the middle-of-the-road American—to find the grotesque underside of the country (i.e. the deep corruption that upholds the country's normative ideologies), one must first believe in the beauty of it. In other words, one can only have a loss of faith if one ever had faith in the thing to begin with. Suddenly, what one thought was beautiful is utterly despicable, never to be seen in the same light again.

What leads them to the grotesque via this scenic traverse is, again, auditory: the sound of a generator in the distance. Once there, the sounds become more and more peculiar—the roaring of a chainsaw, screams and yells, and most importantly, Leatherface's concealed and confused squeals. Never once does Leatherface actually articulate anything; he only moans, grunts, and screams, leaving not only his identity but his purpose unknown. And the film ends with him screaming in the middle of the road, swinging his chainsaw, seemingly without resolve. He is inexplicable, grotesque, and horrifying, but blooming just beyond sunset fields of wildflowers. He is just behind the curtain.



Words
Edward Pomykaj

Images
The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974, Bryanston
Distributing Company)
Black Christmas (1974, Warner Bros.)

Je, tu, il, elle



Chantal Akerman was a humanist, a quiet revolutionary who introduced to cinema a decidedly female gaze. Born in Brussels into a poor Jewish family, Akerman would come to be considered by many a foremost European director of her generation. Amongst her most celebrated films is the 1974 tenderly confessional *Je, tu, il, elle*, a simple tale that tackles, through its minimalistic plot and aesthetics, the issues surrounding the queer, female body in a quest for things unknown.

With the help of a women-led production crew, a then 25-year-old Akerman released her intimate statement on female sexuality and life as a woman. The plot follows the three-act story of Julie, portrayed by Akerman herself, a woman troubled by past, present and future dilemmas, mostly unknown to the viewer.

Within the first act, Julie – the titular “*je*” – repeatedly moves around the little furniture she has in her apartment, dresses and undresses, and writes letters to a subject unknown – the “*tu*”, or maybe even the viewer. In what can be seen as an autobiographical representation of Akerman herself, Julie waits. While calmly describing everything she does through a voice-over, the character frantically repeats those same three actions again and again for the first half of the film, which accounts for 28 days within the story.

During that time, the evidently troubled character awaits for something we – and seemingly herself – do not get to know. Perhaps she was trying to gain control of her own life before exiting her self-imposed exile, or maybe she was simply trying to escape the societal conventions which tied her up as a bisexual woman in the 1970s. The minimalism, both visually and narratively, renders the viewer uncomfortable – they watch as a nude woman does nothing except write letters and eat sugar straight from the bag.

While it may be distressing to some, it can feel like home to others: Akerman displays with radical transparency how it may feel to be in conflict with the search for human connection and the fear of rejection from the world outside. Through the letters, Julie attempts to reach out for the relationships everyone longs for, but at the same time she ponders, looking through her window, what goes on outside of her solitude. She chooses to wait, and one day, the wait comes to an end.

The second act is that of “*il*”. It can be seen as the bridge between the two others, as she passes through the outside world and eventually back into her own intimacy. In this little voyage, Julie hitchhikes with a truck driver with whom she hooks up; she listens to his chatter, revealing his misogyny and disdain for women. As a woman, I felt extremely restless seeing another young woman hitchhiking with an unknown man; the character kept upon her face the same calm expression she carried during the first part of the film, which made it even more difficult to watch. Quietly, Julie sits next to him and listens to him talk as he reveals his aversion to his wife and divulges his sexual attraction to his pubescent daughter.

Here, Akerman’s subtle feminist commentary is one of the most appealing uses of cinema; displaying the horrors of the male mind within a patriarchal society. It is depicted through a simplistic camera angle and movement, along with the banality of the day-to-day actions in which Julie and the hitchhiker partake together. Until, after a hand-job, Julie finally arrives at her destination, inaugurating the third and final act. She replaces the uneasiness of that bizarre relationship with a man with the comfort of an ex-lover’s embrace – “*elle*”. This mysterious ex-girlfriend rejects Julie, asking her to leave, but still makes a sandwich for her hungry, thirsty lover, with whom she proceeds to make love in what turns into one of the most fascinating portraits of queer and female sexuality cinema has ever achieved.

Despite not being open to Julie’s love at first, the girlfriend passionately fulfills her needs, embracing and satisfying the need for human connection Julie longed for through the letters written in the first act. Her hunger for humanity is disclosed by the long, perplexing eating

scenes, which take place throughout the film, and are finally rendered as love takes the screen for the last twenty minutes of the film.

Their passionate embrace is a refusal of the male gaze, a refusal of the aesthetics of eroticism in cinema, of the patriarchy and its standards of sexuality. It is real: embrace, flesh, love. Akerman is able to make a powerful statement against the male voyeurism that exists throughout cinema, in films acclaimed by cinephiles such as Brian de Palma's *Body Double* and *Dressed to Kill*. The scene is not only a refusal of such voyeurism, but an active assertion of female sexuality and pleasure. The women consensually partake in eroticism, free from objectification and power roles. They are not body parts sexualized for the titillation of men, they are real; fulfilling their needs and wishes, together and as individuals. Despite its simplicity, *Je, tu, il elle* is a revolution.



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Images
Je, tu, il, elle (1974, Paradise Films)

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