



DESERT FOREVER / RESURRECTION OF DESIRE

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03/23/18

FLYOVERLAND

“The silence of the desert is a visual thing, too. A product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it. There can be no silence up in the mountains, since their very contours roar....”

Jean Baudrillard, *America*, 1988

DESERT FOREVER

1988: French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929 – 2007) publishes *America*. The ‘superstar of the simulacrum, shaman of the virtual, evangelist of the hyperreal’, as introduced by Geoff Dyer in the book’s 2010 edition, takes the reader on a journey through the cultural and socio-political landscapes of New York to Los Angeles, to Monument Valley and Salt Lake City. Verbal snapshots of his surroundings scrutinise the ‘America of desert speed, of motels and mineral surfaces.’ In the book, he tells the story of an abstract nation, draped by a handful of motives such as cinema, space, technology and, most of all - the desert.

According to Baudrillard, the vast dullness of *America’s* deserts does not allow for cultural titillation – their unfruitful soils prevent human desire from blossoming. The desert’s endless indifference towards stimulating thought is the paradox that lies at the heart of our very fascination with it. In this sense, Dyer rightly assumed Baudrillard’s belief that American deserts were created precisely in order to “satisfy the cloud-stifled yearning of Europeans” – dullness challenging the search for meaning and originality. And it is in the deserts of the Southwest where he identifies an emptiness, a “brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity.” He characterizes the desert as the country’s “primal scene,” the root of its culture, politics and even its sexuality.

The 1900s marked an explosion of outdoor advertising and cinema, symptomatic of the arrival of the motor car in the form of Henry Ford’s Model-T and the subsequent emergence of countless highways drawing through America’s landscapes. As cars and motorcycles raced ahead with accelerated speed, its drivers were seduced by a sheer magnitude of advertising. Then 1934 marked the emergence of the Drive-In Cinema. Teenagers once pursued and consumed their bodily desires in the privacy of their parent’s cars before and beyond the very screens which served as backdrops for larger-than-life projections of John Wayne spanking Maureen O’Hara’s bottom with a spade in the Western *McLintock!* (1963).

Today, the pristine white surfaces, where iconic cowboys once romantically disappeared into glowing sunsets have become lonely cultural ruins of a nation’s

former endeavour to conquer its own landscape. And ever since, those parts of the country that some only ever view by air - never actually experienced in person at ground level - those deep pockets of rural America, are speckled with the tatty and derelict screens of old cinema drive-ins and billboard advertising facades. And what remains; for something must remain in order for us to speak of a ruin; the devastation has been less than obliteration. They are now signposts pointing backwards to missing desires long departed. These looming skeletons are complete on one side with a screen instead of skin. Gargantuan homunculi dwarfed by the surrounding landscape stand as the relic of an image, testifying that a genuine life has come to an end.

RESURRECTION OF DESIRE

2018: The very screens that once seduced passerby to spend their money in outlet malls are now blank sentinels of the desert with no sales pitch or image of life. But a new invitation to stop and observe has appeared. Gracing billboards across America’s Midwest, the face of a young woman stares up to the clouds. A beauty mark appears in the landscape. Her unique anatomy accentuates the crisp line of the horizon, where mountain tops meet muted blue skies. She lolls in the comforts of her own four walls.

They are the eyes of Aomi Muyock (b. 1989), a Swiss model-turned-actress, who has just completed her second feature, *Jessica Forever* (directed and devised by Caroline Poggi and Jonathan Vine), in which she takes on the lead role of Jessica, who leads a group of lost boys with a violent past towards a peaceful and harmonious existence, bringing them love and understanding.

Her 2015 debut in Gaspard Noé’s provocative and controversial film *Love* catapulted her to the screens of Cannes. In the film Muyock’ plays Electra, a Parisian art student, who has shaken up the life of a young aspiring American filmmaker. The couple, driven by the pursuit of romantic ideals and their bodily desire for one another, finds itself in a constant battle between passion, jealousy and drugs. Muyock fiercely dominates the screen - her portrayal of the troubled yet determined Electra feels undeniably raw and candid - fully exposing her body in the most intimate moments between lovers and various sexual partners.

However nonchalant and natural Muyock’s performance may seem, the young actress remains self-reflexive, especially when finding herself in extraordinarily challenging projects such as Noé’s. Her honest presence and on-screen performance in *Love* unite complexity and a sense of airy indifference at the same time. “You need a

strong sense of humour to survive your own perception of yourself,” she says. “Be it still or moving images, I sometimes recognise myself and sometimes not at all... Oftentimes you recognise yourself in images you would prefer not to, and other times you do not recognise yourself in images you would like to.”

When asked what first drew her to Noé’s daunting project, she simply answers: the director. Like Muyock herself, the notorious Argentine filmmaker does not shy away from exposing authenticity over Hollywood fakery. In a 2015 interview with the Irish Examiner, he emphasised that: “You never see any girl having her periods and you never see a girl with regular pubic hair. It’s like a separate world that has nothing to do with normal life (...) In most societies whether they’re Western or not, people want to control sexual behaviour or to organise it in a precise context. Sex is like a danger zone. Sometimes class barriers fall down and it scares a lot of people. It’s about states controlling their systems, like religion.”

Sited in the American Mid-West, the images Muyock has collaborated on assume the fury of an avenging phantom of desire proposing to re-fertilise a land barren of sexual desire. Stoking the embers of life as depicted in Peter Bogdanovich’s *Last Picture Show* (1971), where sex had been an intimate mystery of misunderstood exchange and mistrust, these newly elements in the landscape reanimate the qualities of the life-force which the land itself pressures humanity to resign. With these recomposed rectangles of imagination filled with angular limbs and warm intimacies settling in pockets of flesh and hair, the “danger zone” of sex has been demarcated.

Muyock’s ambitions as an actress - and as a female in today’s rapidly changing Hollywood landscape - remain genuine and humble. “An actress needs to be generous, courageous, sensitive, natural, and hard working. What good actors have in common is a certain form of empathy.” As such, Muyock defines her own Femininity through cultural heritage, rather than stereotypical qualities: “Femininity is not a delicate flower,” she says, “to me, it is one of many ingredients in the making of a human being - no matter their gender. It’s just a collection of traits that we associate with women rather than men.”

No “delicate flower” is able to reanimate the infinite death of the dust-bowl’s libido. It takes empathy, active participation in the re-creation of one’s image, and a life force on par with Muyock’s. By using pictorial fantasy to materially invert the internal and external, to the extremes of exteriority, these feminine qualities abolish lifelessness, carelessness, and the otherwise unyielding indifference of the western expanse.

PORTRAIT BY GRETA ILIEVA

