

PSYCHOSPIRITUAL UNDERCURRENTS

Jennifer Reeder's *Knives and Skin*
at the 2019 Tribeca Film Festival

From the outset of Jennifer Reeder's *Knives and Skin* it is clear that things are not what they seem, but are rather strange unexpected manifestations of psychospiritual undercurrents that exist beneath the surface. Reeder's exaggeration of stylistic elements such as colored lighting, jump cuts, glowing objects and the supernatural subvert the terms of conventional narrative cinema to create space for a feminist examination of grief, personal evolution and the unconscious. The opening scene ushers the viewer into this filmic universe, following a distraught woman with a kitchen knife raised in her hand walking through a dark house. The highly stylistic use of colored lighting and close ups of her face intensifies the mood and places us in some sort of theatrical cult nightmare. Conditioned by countless horror film openings with the same ending we assume the worst, but like many of the narrative tropes Reeder draws on, this traditional assumption is subverted. "Carolyn" the woman calls, "are you still listening to your records?" her shaky voice asks a silent door. As she uses the knife to pry the lock, it's suddenly clear that her motive is perhaps rooted not in something about to happen, but one that her maternal intuition tells her already has.

By the end of the next scene the mother's fears are confirmed, as we see Carolyn (played by Raven Whitely) with a nasty head wound after Andy (played by Ty Olwin) pushes her when she refuses to have sex with him. But as the film unfolds, it is clear that this classic motif of teen horror – a precocious but defenseless girl gets in over her head with an impulsive sex hungry male – is not what it seems. In her customarily feminist style, Reeder's dead girl is no passive victim or martyr, but rather an energy or spirit that activates transformation within the painfully inert ecosystem that governs this small Midwestern town. Before her tryst turns sour, Carolyn carves a C into Andy's forehead "so if I get lost I can find you" she tells him, and it glows as he leaves her on the ground calling after him. Similarly her glasses, which Andy takes with him, glow from within the locker where he hides them a few days later.

Like the shots of Carolyn's decaying body rolling around the site where she was left, Reeder uses these unexpected and surreal motifs throughout the film to focus our attention on the deeper collective dysfunctions bubbling beneath the surface. Like her roving body, the wandering narrative of the film jumps



between the various complex and bizarre personal narratives of each of the (mostly female) characters: Carolyn's all-female punk rock bandmates, the neglected stoic hard-ass who sells her mom's used underwear and medication to teachers, the mother who is crying for help by pretending to be pregnant, the grieving mother who uses smell to locate her daughter's victim, among others. The jumps are edited in such a way that they speak directly to one another, giving the viewer the sense that there is a dialogue happening between the individuals' and their collective thread. This forces the viewer to develop an intimate understanding of each character bit by bit, as if learning about them at the same time as they are learning about themselves. It also ensures that one never knows more about one character than another, so that there simultaneously emerges a character of the collective that is not seen, but felt and reinforced through the unconventional motifs Reeder uses throughout the film.

In addition to unexpected editing and narrative structure, perhaps the most notable motif Reeder uses as a subversive mechanism are the choral arrangements sung by the female students and conducted by Carolyn's distraught mother Lisa (played by Marika Engelhardt). These beautifully simple acapella renditions of popular rock songs of the 80s and 90s such as *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*, *I Melt With You* and *Promises Promises* highlight the sad and often difficult meanings hidden beneath their catchy pop status, making it possible to relate to them in a new way. Like in *Greek Tragedy*, the chorus homogenizes the uniqueness of its members into a singular voice, which exists as an authority that guides how the viewer interprets the story. In this way, Reeder implements the teenage girls' collective voice as an authority of truth and reason, which foreshadows their loss of

innocence and signals the failure of adults to support and protect them. At one point Carolyn's dead body joins the chorus from her lakeside resting place, further solidifying her status as a sort of stylistic ganglion of feminine power.

Almost directly in the middle of the movie Carolyn's body is found, and it feels as if a blockage has been released. Up until this point the extent to which each character was involved in some sort of denial or toxicity towards themselves or others made each scene more uncomfortable than the next. Following this discovery however, it feels as each character is liberated from whatever internalized fear was preventing them from moving forward: the girls finally stand up to Andy by repeating "you treat girls like shit", the apparently pregnant mom's ruse is discovered, and the lion on her T-shirt tells the dysfunctional mother to "get your shit together". Yet perhaps more obviously than anyone, the character that finally gets closure is Carolyn's mother, whose bizarre manifestations of grief serve to legitimize the other characters' strange behavior throughout the film. Grief, like many psychological struggles we all face daily, can command the most irrational and unpredictable impulses within the psyche. In the culture of Midwestern America where 'the destructive determination to cope' prevails to the point of the absurd, giving these struggles room to breathe is necessary for transformation. Carolyn's physical body served as a totem for the psychospiritual energy of the town, such that when she was discovered the energy could be released.

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