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INDULGENT GORE AND AMBITIOUS WORLD-BUILDING IN TI WEST'S X (2022)

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West, Ti, director. X. Performances by Mia Goth, Jenna Ortega, and Brittany Snow. Little Lamb and Mad Solar Productions. 2022. Film.

Ti West's *X* (2022) is a Horror film for Horror lovers. Imperfect pacing and occasionally derivative plot points aside, this film is an enjoyable and raucous ride of gore, killing sprees and religious fanaticism against the backdrop of the independent hardcore porn industry of 1979 rural Texas. Based on this spatio-temporal setting alone, the allusions to classic Horror are fairly explicit but the massacre in question is enacted with a wide variety of farming instruments rather than a singular chainsaw.

X follows a hodgepodge group of individuals who leave the relative safety of their seedy, Houston-based burlesque club to make a (very) low budget pornographic film to be entitled *The Farmer's Daughters*. Production is set to take place on the farmland of an elderly couple whom the group plans to keep in the dark about the reason for their presence. West leaves little to the imagination in terms of what mayhem will befall this entrepreneurial film crew. The opening title card announces the aforementioned setting to the audience before slowly tracking inside the seemingly innocuous farmhouse to reveal the aftermath of the violent killing spree within. West then directs his audience twenty-four hours back in time as the cast and crew leave the site of their day jobs and pile into a van en route to their filming location. While on the road, the group encounter several not-so-subtle foreboding omens about the twenty-four hours to come – one of which involves passing a crash site where a truck has apparently hit a cow with dismembering force. As the first-time filmmakers pass the site of slightly gratuitous blood and guts, we are left in no doubt that a similar fate is soon to befall them also.

The cast and crew are made up of: producer and burlesque club owner Wayne (Martin Henderson); his ingenue girlfriend Maxine (Mia Goth); the fame-hungry leading lady Bobby-Lynne (Brittany Snow); her romantic lead Jackson (Kid Cudi); director and camera-operator RJ (Owen Campbell); and finally his timid girlfriend turned boom operator Lorraine (Jenna Ortega). Snow's performance as a diva porn star is playfully tacky and surprisingly loveable. Ortega is powerful yet understated as the 'church mouse' who arrives upon some personal epiphanies surrounding her own sexual empowerment as she watches the cast perform. The true revelation however is Mia Goth, who offers a stellar and nuanced performance as both rising, cocaine-loving star Maxine and her elderly, murderous double Pearl. This is a film that is fascinated with oppositional doubles. We see this occur in the narrative via the rather perverse, sexualised fascination Pearl has for Maxine. This pair often appear to be two sides of the same coin, or perhaps the same life, as both women desire fame and adoration earned through their beauty, talent, sexuality and recurrently referenced 'x factor.' While

these characters are aligned throughout the film, West further presents a persistent correlation of sexuality and death. Throughout the film, Pearl's husband is plagued with fears straining his weak heart, a fear which causes him to reject her (frequent) sexual advances. Furthermore, as the narrative progresses, Pearl's frustrations heighten and her eventual violent streak is itself triggered by her voyeuristic observation of the young women on her farm performing their hardcore scenes.

But West also calls our attention to troubling doubles via the comic and occasionally revelatory sonic juxtapositions which recur throughout the film. For example, Mungo Jerry's "In the Summertime" plays as the aspiring porn stars leave the location of their day jobs at the "Bayou Burlesque," beginning their journey towards the inevitable bloodbath West has already assured us will be the narrative climax. Said slashing spree in fact begins as Blue Öyster Cult's "Don't Fear the Reaper" plays on the radio. In the film's opening sequence, West's camera pans indulgently through the space allowing viewers to soak up this bloodbath and laugh knowingly at the juxtaposition of it with the gregarious evangelical preacher on the television. This preacher will recur throughout the text hyperbolically vocalising the social stigma the young women in this film face in while, as we later discover, foreshadowing significant information for the planned sequel.

Given that the film begins by removing all uncertainty about how it will end, there can be no question that neither subtlety nor suspense is necessarily what West is aiming for. This begs the question, what is West's intention with *X*? The sequel calls attention to the most exciting and ambitious elements of West's Horror film or, more appropriately referred to as, the first instalment in West's nonlinear Horror triptych. 2022's *X* is followed by its prequel *Pearl*, which explores the origin tale of the troubled elderly woman in *X*. The third instalment will be the recently announced *MaXXXine*, which will address the fallout after the events of *X*. One might well argue that franchises such as James Wan and Leigh Whannel's *Insidious* films (2010-2023) or Wan's ever-expanding *The Conjuring Universe* (2013-present) have paved the way for filmmakers such as West to explore Horror narratives on a broader conceptual scale, addressing the worlds which birth such horrors rather than focussing on the events in singular terms. Eager fans will delight in the opportunity to dive deeper than a single viewing. Filmmakers like West are exemplary of the broader turn towards world-building, lore development and rewarding fan engagement with Easter eggs and intertextual references. In industry terms, the release of each film promotes the other. However, in more audience focussed terms, this world-building and inter-connected narrative approach encourages maximum engagement both with West's triptych and the Horror film genre in a more historical sense. West's films are in dialogue with the canon of classic Horror as much as they are in dialogue with themselves. Building Horror universes such as these speaks to, and harnesses the power of, the current era of transmedia content saturation.

This review began by describing West's film as one designed for Horror lovers and concludes with the recognition that it is not just a fun, effective Horror film, but an indulgent and unashamedly un-ironic tribute for the genre's lovers. *X* furthermore insists on pushing boundaries of established genre rules and norms. The long-standing Horror genre has always delighted in repetition, both of themes and of iconography. A hatchet-wielding mass-murderer, a virgin-whore dichotomy, sexual

perversion, nude female swimmers dangerously followed by water-based predators, religious fanaticism, creepy old women in bathtubs, eerie doppelgängers; you name the classic Horror story-telling element and almost certainly West has sought to incorporate it. Beyond this embrace of classic genre elements, West's triplicate vision recognises a desire among twenty-first century mainstream Horror audiences to understand the genre in intertextual terms, to observe intentional relationships between genre texts. Such metafictional elements function to assign agency to the viewer in a manner that invites an active involvement rather than passive enjoyment. *X* is ultimately a very exciting beginning to his innovative Horror tryptic.

BIONOTE

Rebecca Wynne-Walsh has recently completed her PhD entitled *Basque Gothic Cinema (1990-2020): A Regionalist Challenge to the Spanish Model of National Cinema Production and Cultural Identity* with Xavier Aldana Reyes at Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom (UK). She has now begun a new role as lecturer in Film Studies and Production at Edge Hill University, UK. She received her M. Phil in International History from Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, where she previously received her BA in Film Studies and English Literature.