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Review of *Fresh* by Barnaby Falck

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A 'FRESH' TAKE ON CANNIBALISTIC CAPITALISM

Review by Barnaby Falck

***Fresh*. Directed by Mimi Cave, Performances by Daisy Edgar-Jones, Sebastian Stan, Jonica T. Gibbs, Charlotte le Bon and Andrea Bang, Searchlight Pictures, 2022. Film. Disney+**

Content Warning:

This review contains discussions of gender-based violence, misogyny, and cannibalism.

Fresh (2022) begins with a date – a bad one. Our main character, Noa (Daisy Edgar-Jones), has spent the evening being bored and casually insulted by a condescending man named Chad (Brett Dier). To make matters worse, when Noa rejects him, he responds in a verbally aggressive manner, leaving Noa shaken and worried about her immediate safety. But life starts looking up for her in the days following this incident – Noa meets Steve (Sebastian Stan) in a grocery store and quickly falls for him. Noa's best friend Mollie (Jonica T. Gibbs) sarcastically describes this new romance as "A straight girls fantasy come true."

All of this occurs within the first 30 minutes of the film's opening act, presenting itself as a standard romantic comedy, but *Fresh* soon takes a sharp turn into the Horror genre. It turns out that Mollie had every reason to worry, as Steve is a cannibal butcher/chef for hire called Brendan, who kidnaps women to slowly harvest their meat for his own consumption and the enjoyment of his rich customers. When the women have been 'used up' he disposes of them. The rest of the film follows Noa's struggle to escape as we see her face off against all the horrors of the patriarchy, morphed into and personified by one easily recognisable and tangible villain, Brendan.

Fresh is an extremely well-written, acted, and technically put-together film, an impressive feat for director Mimi Cave's first feature and writer Lauryn Kahn's second. The clarity and purpose of these driven creators help to sell this film as a biting commentary on modern-day misogyny while still working as a gruesome yet accessible Horror film. Kahn stated in an interview with Abbey White for *The Hollywood Reporter* that when she set out to write *Fresh*, she wanted to create a film where "people that are Horror fans and people that aren't could somehow find a common place to enjoy this movie" (2022, n.p.). The result is a film that is simultaneously subtle and extremely blunt with its social commentary. The film draws sharp parallels between real-world misogynistic attitudes and the kidnapping and dismemberment of women within the film's world. Yet, contrasted against this blunt messaging is the film's surprisingly reserved use of cannibalism, leaving most of the gruesome flesh consumption to the viewer's imagination. This expertly handled balancing act helps to easily place *Fresh* into the canon of classic 'cannibal' Horror films, joining the ranks of *The Texas Chainsaw*

Massacre (1974), *Ravenous* (1999), and *Raw* (2016).

The way *Fresh* uses the idea of humans eating other humans, while reserved in terms of gore, is a perfect embodiment of Naomi Merritt's concept of "Cannibalistic Capitalism." Initially published in 2010 to discuss the classic Horror film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* through a new lens, Merritt's piece, "Cannibalistic Capitalism and other American Delicacies" (2010), provides an excellent framework to view *Fresh* through. To Merritt, "Cannibalistic Capitalism" presents a world in which the "transgressive excess of capitalism" has led to humanity "devouring itself" (217; 228). *Fresh* iterates upon this idea by using its surface-level subject matter, literal cannibalism, as a way of giving shape to and shining a light on the daily horrors of gender-based violence. A kind of existential and all-pervasive horror that exists because of the dating 'market,' where the idea of a perfect relationship is thrust upon individuals as the ideal form of human interaction within a patriarchal society, which can often lead to women in particular feeling as though they are part of a dating 'grind.'

The film takes this idea of being part of a patriarchal dating 'grind' literally. Every female character introduced in *Fresh* becomes just another commodity in Brendan's flesh-collecting operation. First, starting off as objects of desire for Brendan to seduce or manipulate in some way, they are soon kidnapped and quite literally used to help satiate both his own and his client's desire for women's flesh. Even women who are seen to be part of Brendan's operation are revealed to be his past victims, only later to have been 'converted' to his way of thinking in an extremely eerie indoctrination into a lethal patriarchal system. At first, Noa is no exception to this. Although Brendan reveals that he has developed 'real' feelings for her, we have seen that he has developed 'feelings' for previous victims, going so far as to live with and marry one of them, his accomplice, Ann. This inescapable feeling of being trapped in this situation feeds directly into what writer Lauryn Kahn describes as the "all-encompassing fear of violent men" (White 2022). However, while Noa starts out as another victim of Brendan's brand of violent misogyny, as the film progresses she becomes determined to break out of this violent cycle and start anew. Building on this determination to break free, her struggle becomes possible because she does not do it alone. Noa is not presented as being 'exceptional.' She is depicted as brave and intelligent yet she only manages to get through this ordeal with the aid of her fellow captives, both alive (through direct action) and dead (through hidden messages), in the form of a survivalist sisterhood.

The fact that all the flesh consumed by Brendan and his secretive selection of clients is harvested from women is no coincidence, exemplifying the logic of Cannibalistic Capitalism in the film's constructed world. Brendan states that women "just taste better" and cites this as the only reason the group focuses exclusively on women. This is brought into question through the small glimpses of his clientele. They are all men, and they all choose to opt for a personalised element that accompanies their meal. This extra service sees them receiving a picture of their food before the 'meat' was harvested, as well as some personal effects of the victims, including items of clothing or other significant belongings of the victims. These pictures are gazed at longingly while their subject's flesh is consumed, while the personal items are groped and sniffed at. The way these small segments are constructed gives the horrific impression that this operation exists just as a way

for these powerful men to commodify and fetishize women. As Cave put it in an interview with Margaux Sippel for *Movie Maker* (2022): "This script is not based on anything real. So, it's 100% fiction [...] However, we've seen cases of men that are in scenarios that are the 1% of the 1%, who are so wealthy that no one has ever said 'no' to them. [...] How far can you push it?" This power, combined with the commodification of specifically female flesh, fits perfectly into a 'Cannibalistic Capitalism' symptomatic of Western patriarchal society.

It is quite clear in the film that Brendan is not a victim of this culture of misogyny but rather someone who benefits from and enjoys being a part of it. Although he is quite literally commodifying and parcelling up women, to him, this is just how he makes his money. As such, his status as a rich white man seemingly acts as a shield to protect himself from any repercussions that his actions might hold. In fact, the only danger that ever comes up for Brendan is much later in the film, when he begins to develop a non-cannibalistic sexual desire for Noa. This desire changes the entire dynamic of the film, switching the tension from 'what body parts will he take from her next' to 'how will Noa work her way out of this situation?' Two contrasting scenes exemplify this tension. Earlier in the film, after a botched escape attempt, Noa is drugged and restrained on an operating table while Brendan removes pieces of her flesh. The tension and fear in this scene are aided by Cave's decision to show only brief glimpses of the mutilation, with the camera's primary focus being Noa's terrified (yet subdued via drugs) reaction and Brendan's matter-of-fact attitude to his violation of Noa's body.

Meanwhile, later in the film, when Noa has gained Brendan's trust, the main tension comes from watching the cogs in her head turn as she takes in her surroundings and contemplates her exit strategy while Brendan is not paying direct attention to her while immediately turning her focus back onto him, feigning interest in what he has to say when he does look in her direction. In both cases, the tension is aided by the clear and purposeful scene composition, the wonderfully gruesome and squishy sound design, and the muted yet chilling score. However, what truly sells both these scenes are the wonderful performances from Daisy Edgar-Jones and Sebastian Stan, who both offer the audience nuanced and human performances. The two actors create genuinely charming chemistry with each other that only helps to sell the deeply troubling power imbalance between the two characters.

Fresh works extremely well as a Horror film that is gruesome enough for fans of the genre with its implied bodily dismemberment and expertly crafted tension while still being accessible for those who may otherwise avoid this type of film. It works as a sharp critique of how cultural misogyny can lead to twisted expressions of romance and affection. Perhaps most significantly, it is as an excellent contribution to the idea of 'Cannibalistic Capitalism' by using fears surrounding twenty-first century dating in a patriarchal, capitalist culture. In short, the film is a wonderfully produced piece of Horror that can thrill its audience while leaving enough room for social commentary, making an original contribution to the existing canon of Cannibal movies.

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BIONOTE

Barnaby Falck is a PhD candidate at the University of Lincoln, UK, within the School of Media and Cultural Studies. Their project focuses on notions of what is deemed as 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' for public viewership in modern British viewing culture. More broadly, their interests lay in discussing Horror in its many forms, transgressive cinema, online cinema, and government intervention in national film industries. When not engaging in academic work, they take part in queer community projects in Leeds, where they live.