

SICK MONDAY PRESENTS: STREET TRASH

Six newly commissioned short video works, followed by a screening of James M Muro's melt movie classic, *Street Trash*. CCA Cinema, Monday 4 June, 7pm

Wen Kroy (3:22) – Antoine Catala
The Boycot (5:50) – Sophie Carapetian
Meltdown Economics (4:08) – Dean Kenning
To Do Joy Complete (4:05) – Beagles & Ramsay
Black Friday (3:20) – Lee Holden & Josephine Wood
Sofa (3.49) – John Russell

STREET TRASH

Street Trash (1987) is one of the nastiest films you're ever likely to see. It's also one of the funniest. It rightfully claims the title of best 'melt movie' ever, and revels in the 'video nasty' exploitation genre. But it is not so much the melts themselves that make the film nasty – the extravagantly gruesome liquefying bodies of those unfortunate street drinkers who partake of the toxic Tennafly Viper (unearthed from the cellar of Ed's liquor store). Rather what sticks with you is the grim portrayal of a brutal and abject world of homelessness and addiction, an everyday reality dominated by violence, sadism and opportunistic gratification. It is an unforgettable image of civil breakdown in a decade characterized by greed and trickle down economics. What the 22-year old director James M Muro and script writer Roy Frumkes achieve in this classic work of comedy horror, is a great political satire of the most un sentimental and exuberant kind.

The universe portrayed in *Street Trash* is utterly broken down. Most of the action takes place amidst the rubble of abandoned buildings, and amongst the wrecked cars in the salvage yard that the street drinkers call home. Low-lying Evil Dead-type Steadicam tracking shots drag us through the dirt. The drinkers from the yard are filthy all the time, soiled clothes and thick grime smeared on their faces. There are constant intimations of how smelly everything is (the film opens with someone farting in street drinker Freddy's face; one character's fashion choice is a gas mask). One of the most grotesque vignettes comes with our first glimpse of Bronson, the psychopathic Vietnam vet who exerts dominance over the homeless horde of the salvage yard through brute force: atop a ceremoniously arranged burnt out vehicle on a mound of junk, like some cut-price Colonel Kurtz of the dump, he holds his half naked, skeletal, dirt-encrusted girlfriend. The two figures strike a distinct similarity to Michelangelo's *Pieta*, except that instead of the sublime pity expressed as Mary holds her dead, naked son, here Bronson jealously grasps his comatose companion as a provisional object to satisfy his lusty fantasies of military conquest – before unceremoniously dropping her.

With the exception of two characters (Freddy's young brother Kevin, and the yard secretary Wendy – even their burgeoning romance is itself somewhat creepy), nobody in *Street Trash* is very nice, even when we are led to identify with their escapades. It's fair to say that in the film's depiction of both the homeless, alcoholic 'underclass' and the uneducated 'working class' (business owners, police, mafia doormen), nearly everyone is pretty much a self-serving scumbag. This is the genius of the film, and it exemplifies very well the distinction Slavoj Zizek once made between imaginary and symbolic identification. For Zizek, 'the falsity of Dickens' lies in the fact that his *imaginary* identification with the 'good common people' betrays a hidden *symbolic* identification with the philanthropic gaze of the upper classes, who don't want their fantasy of the social order besmirched. *Street Trash* brutally confronts us with squalid reality at the bottom of the capitalist pyramid.

The socially liberal gaze is in fact mercilessly mocked in a hilarious early scene where 'normal' middle class 'passers by' are forced by the traffic lights into an encounter with a plague of homeless squeegee merchants. 'Don't worry I'll handle it,' says a bespectacled man to his hysterical girlfriend at the wheel. 'Everyone has to make a living,' he reassures her as Bronson violently rocks the car bonnet. The passenger then makes a dubious attempt to find common ground with Bronson, mumbling something about machine guns and how he serves in the reserves. 'Weekend warrior!' roars Bronson after pulling the guy from the car and mashing his face into the front windscreen (In a typically glorious *Street Trash* moment we witness him being hurled through the air from his point-of-view, the shot framed through his glasses).

Street Trash tells it straight: there is no nobility, dignity or redemption in poverty. Poverty corrupts. Everyone's an entrepreneur through sheer desperation, whether inside or outside the law, but the characters are devoid of any hope for social betterment. They are the living expression of Milton Friedman's deregulated, free market paradise, exposed in all its rotteness and falsity (remove social security benefits and people will thrive, argued Friedman in his 1980 TV series *Free*

to Choose). The venal, survival-of-the-fittest individualism of the 80s 'American dream' is hilariously debunked in this film, which was released the same year as Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* – only here the critique of neoliberalism unfolds from filthy street level. Across from the badlands of yet-to-be gentrified Greenpoint, Brooklyn where the film is set, we catch occasional glimpses of the Manhattan skyline. (And take a closer look at the label on the Viper bottles!) This is all oblivious to the gaze of the film's protagonists who inhabit a claustrophobic world without prospects or distance, a rabid Hobbesian dystopia of 'all against all', a nightmarish vision of a post-welfare society where the smartest thing is to cling for dear life to one's own private toilet chain as solidarity, empathy and common decency are flushed down the bog hole.

The overriding spirit of the world of *Street Trash* is in fact *opportunism*. In a world without stability, without boundaries, where the safety net has been cut, one lives day-to-day, moment-to-moment, and one looks for opportunities, i.e. people, to exploit in the rapacious pursuit of one's private lusts (booze, sex, money, mastery, revenge). This is the behavioural norm which unites otherwise disparate characters in the film. There is nothing beyond anyone's own immediate enjoyment, no space for enlightenment or critical perspective; neither private sanctuary nor public sphere. Life is hell and so you get your kicks when you can.

As an example: the film's notorious castration scene¹ becomes a joyous excuse for a riotous game of piggy-in-the-middle as the unfortunate victim, who's had the random bad luck to piss through an opening in a wall without clocking that Bronson (with his knife carved from a human femur bone!) is on the other side, chases his severed penis through the salvage yard, to the accompaniment of a Benny Hill-style soundtrack ('that's my property!'). The car yard owner Mr Schnizer is another disgusting creature of appetite and, amidst tough competition, probably the vilest character in the film (his idea of seduction is to pin down his secretary in the office chair with his immense body fat and then pretend to have a heart attack). In one episode, after bemoaning what a terrible day he is having, he sees a dead, naked female body face down by the creek: his face lights up as he contemplates the unlikely opportunity fortune has thrown his way, before descending the secluded bank to have his wicked way.

This brings me to the most problematic aspect of the film, the sexual violence and misogynistic banter (often with racist overtones springing from the Vietnam trauma theme that runs throughout the film). A particularly hard to take scene is the gang rape episode and murder of the aforementioned woman, whom Freddie takes back to the yard to have sex with after encountering her intoxicated, and puking into a gutter outside a nightclub. It is difficult to watch not simply because of its content, but because it is played for laughs as a sort of zombie parody: the insatiable, lustful dead of night moving in for the kill. While men on the whole do not have their dicks cut off after accidentally pissing on the wrong guy, women do get raped, and it is this scene in particular, with its invitation for us to enjoy, which forecloses the sublimating force of narrative and aesthetic excess that makes the film in other respects so compelling.

What dates the film in a good way are the glorious analogue special effect – for which we have to thank Jenny Aspinall (she'd perfected melts a few years earlier on *Toxic Avenger*). The melts are really a lot of sick fun, accompanied by great squelchy, flatulent audio effects, and aesthetically something of a Technicolor relief from the grimy squalor, even as they are the ultimate bodily expression of the inability of the characters to maintain both physical and symbolic boundaries. I'll say nothing else about them here except that there are seven onscreen melts, six caused by drinking Viper (there is also a final surreal off-screen melt), and that each person melts in a different colour: (in chronological order) blue, green, yellow, red, purple, orange and yellow-green. In one funny moment of reflexivity, a mortician proudly unveils his creative handy-work, carried out upon a fleshless victim of Viper: 'Check out my masterpiece!'. 'If it had a smile it would be a *Mona Lisa*', says the vicious, illiterate cop appreciatively. But despite many such moments of self-reference and knowing homage, *Street Trash* succeeds by never turning into tedious postmodern irony. It paints its transcendent idiotic excesses and depravity from life.

Text by Dean Kenning, 2018

STREET TRASH is curated by Dean Kenning, the first in a series of three programmes for Sick Monday.

Sick Monday is curated by Dean Kenning, Liam Scully and Vanessa Scully.

¹ Like many 80s 'video nasties', notoriety attached to one particular scene – in the case of *Street Trash* this was undoubtedly the castration scene (as I watched the film for the first time after purchasing the lurid looking VHS at a car boot sale, I suddenly recalled how as a teenager my cousin had braggingly related this scene to me).



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