

Sugar

By Maximilian Le Cain

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Occasionally a film comes along that acts as a reminder of where cinema is up to. It might not necessarily be forging ahead in prophetic innovation, but nevertheless encapsulates the state of the art form at a given point in its history with precision and intelligence. This has nothing to do with fashion, as such films are always ahead of the game as understood in the context of commercial cinema. By the time everyone else has caught up, its fresh ideas have invariably aged and become diluted.

Paddy Jolley and Reynold Reynolds' wonderful first feature, *Sugar*, is an example of such a film in tune with the state of cinema. The situation it explores is narratively minimal: a young woman (Samara Golden) moves into a tiny, cluttered, filthy flat. She suffers a breakdown which one is free to choose to attribute to her abject surroundings or not. Nothing is explained and hallucination follows hallucination. What we might infer about her situation comes as much from elsewhere as from the film we are watching, from the bank of cinematic expectations anyone who so much as grew up with a telly is equipped with - from Polanski, for example, unquestionably the film's artistic touchstone. But it was for him in *Repulsion* (1965) and *The Tenant* (1976) to form the context of the situation and delineate its albeit increasingly complex psychological trajectory. Although it does quote directly from the latter film, Jolley and Reynolds' movie is not concerned with glib *Scream*-like referentiality any more than it is a slavish reread of the Polish director's work. It assumes we know the relevant narratives already and leaps directly into the sensory experience of its material, presenting what is essentially a post-narrative headtrip.

As Peter Tscherkassky and Philippe Grandrieux know, cinema can plug straight into the nervous system and create a two-way flow, extracting images from it and reprojecting them to appeal directly to an immediate, physical apprehension of cinema. If *Sugar* is not quite operating at the same level as Tscherkassky or Grandrieux's masterpieces, it is because whereas their films start with an existing idea of cinema (Grandrieux) or cinematic material (Tscherkassky) and then take them into a further realm of ontological research, Jolley/Reynolds' is more interested in a phenomenological account of cinema, or a form of cinema, as it is. This is also the fascination of *Sugar*. There is a woman's body. There is a small room crammed with superannuated clutter

and the stuffy atmosphere of a previous tenant. This is the cinema, so the woman is at risk. Explanations are no longer necessary. When the woman bathes, her mouth begins to bleed. Why? Because, in such films, when there is a relaxed female body, there must be blood. And there are ghosts – the beautifully dense texture of decaying set and props watch her with the eyes of the dead. Most intriguingly, outside the flat there is apparently nothing - no reality. Just the white surface of the window, sounds, silhouettes, not only obvious artificiality, but a void. The woman's body collects around it the bric-a-brac and the events for which they are agents. That is how, *Sugar* implies, a film is created.

Is all this real or imaginary? Does the whole thing take place in her head? What are the psychological underpinnings of the story? *Sugar* has the rare maturity to ignore such burdensome questions. They may once have been the point of origin for a film such as this, but now genre is enjoying its decadent phase where images and events are self-perpetuating beyond causality. This decadence is made visible in the flat's musty contents which become animated with the innate narrativity that film history has imbued them with. *Sugar* has the mysterious power of a savage, ancient ritual performed by an isolated race who have long since forgotten its purpose or origins.

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