



EDITOR'S PICKS , IN HER WORDS JUNE 6, 2019

ENCOUNTER #105: CAROLINA HELLSGÅRD

Carolina Hellsgård is a writer-director, born in Sweden and based in Berlin. She studied Experimental Media Design at the Berlin University of the Arts and Film Directing and Screenwriting at Cal Arts in Los Angeles. Her critically acclaimed debut feature film "Wanja" premiered at the 2015 Berlinale and was nominated for the Berlinale's Best First Feature Award. Hellsgård's award-winning films have screened at numerous international film festivals including the Montreal World Film Festival, the Mostra Sao Paulo, the Göteborg Film Festival, the Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival, Films de Femmes and the Oberhausen Short Film Festival. She was the recipient of the Dorothea Erxleben Fellowship and a guest lecturer at the Braunschweig University of Art. In 2017, she was a Villa Aurora Fellow in Los Angeles.

Within the framework of the European Film Promotion and Sydney Film Festival's initiative "Europe! Voices of Women in Film," Tara Karajica talks to Carolina Hellsgård about women in film and her arresting, provocative and poetic second feature, "Endzeit - Ever After," a female-focused vision of the apocalypse that brings a vibrant new perspective to the zombie movie. Created by a cast and crew consisting almost entirely of women, "Endzeit - Ever After" usurps zombie film conventions and creates a gripping, unpredictable and emotionally powerful fairy-tale in which nature itself is a central character.

How did you get into filmmaking?

Carolina Hellsgård: I studied Film Theory at the Stockholm University and later filmmaking at the Art Academy in Berlin. I had a strong feeling that I wanted to convey the way I see the world to other people. Initially, I thought that I would become a writer, but found film superior in conveying more abstract feelings and fantastic worlds. Film's nature is close to dreams, and there is something mystical about the film image and how we perceive it, which has always appealed to me. In cinema, there is a way of reaching the essence of things, of feelings and injuries that lie hidden behind the character's faces. I believe that we can feel our own shadows in the projected images and thereby go deeper into what matters - our very own existence - without necessarily using concrete words.

How did *Endzeit – Ever After* come about? How did feminist folk-horror tropes mixed with ecology inspire you?

C.H.: I loved that the script was a mash-up of several different genres – horror, road movie, fairytale, buddy and zombie film. Another aspect I really liked was the character constellation – two very different young women develop an unlikely friendship. Both harbor secrets, which they eventually share with each other as they grow closer. They relate to each other through the aspect of guilt, which I find is a very interesting topic, and is something I can personally relate to. As a person, you often feel guilty about certain things; it's about all the bad stuff we did and all the good things we did not do. A horror movie is a great tool to confront the characters with their own lives, and question their own morals, as well as challenge their inner demons. How does one exist as a human being in this world? How do I treat other people? And when I face chaos and difficulties, how do I react?

Endzeit also has an ecological subtext that appealed to me and which can be interpreted as feminist. Nature strikes back regarding a patriarchal failing system, and thereby sets two young women free. The virus is presented not only as a curse, but also a blessing. Even though it is an apocalyptic film, I find it optimistic and empowering; it gives a foretaste of an alternate way of survival, perhaps even a kind of feminist utopia.

Can you talk about the title?

C.H.: The title is a mix between the German word for apocalypse / end of time, and the English saying "happily ever after", which adheres to Vivi and Eve's new life.

You say you make films about people who are isolated and don't belong, that your characters desperately seek inclusion in the society; that your films are about their daily fights and dreams and about showing their lives and ongoing struggles. Can you comment on that?

C.H.: With my films, I have set out to present marginalized existences, and how they deal with the difficulties that occur. Like I mentioned before, Film talks to the audience in an abstract way and has the power to convey dreams, memories, irrational thoughts at the same time, as it actually says something about reality and teaches us about our existence. It presents the incommunicable, the unutterable, the unthought-of. It gives us insight into our own life, presents different realities and foremost allows us to watch the behavior of others. To borrow some words from Maurice Merleau-Ponty: unlike literature, a film is not thought, it is perceived: "That is why films can be so gripping in their presentation of man: they do not give us his thoughts, as novels have done for so long, but his conduct or behavior. They directly present to us that special way of being in the world, of dealing with things and other people". With my films, I seek to explore the unconscious and make the invisible visible, at the same time as I present very concrete situations and struggles. Through a precise staging, I hope that the viewer can identify with the protagonists and get an insight into their daily struggles, but also their hopes and dreams. In the end, I strive to create understanding and empathy for marginalized lives.

With its very distinct and refreshing perspective, *Endzeit* raises existential questions about our world and suggests there are worse things than the collapse of civilization. Can you elaborate on that?

C.H.: To me, the worst thing is the lack of existential freedom and having to subject yourself to other people's control. In this sense, *Endzeit* is not only about guilt, but also about emancipation. Vivi and Eve leave a controlling society and venture into an apocalyptic world. In the end, they decide not to return to civilization, but choose nature and ultimately freedom. They prefer chaos to order, freedom instead of control, love instead of fear. Vivi and Eve embody the future and a new form of coexistence; this new symbiosis with nature is an exciting possibility for humanity. It is not the end, but the beginning, like Vivi says in the film.

In that sense, as an undead horror, it responds humanity's transgressions against nature. Do you think that its ecological message will come through better due to its specific genre and that people will become more aware?

C.H.: A zombie is rarely just a zombie, but usually a manifestation of human emotions. In the case of Vivi and Eve in *Endzeit*, it is about guilt among other things. A Zombie film is a great tool for questioning our own moral choices and our existence, it prompts self-reflection. Like in Romero's films, it can also be a vehicle to comment on larger sociopolitical issues. While making *Endzeit*, I saw the zombie genre as a great opportunity to say something about how we live without being too didactic. The ecological message in the film is contained in the special breed of plant zombies. They are a mix between nature and people, and symbolize a new kind of co-existence.

In what way is your film a "different kind of zombie movie?"

C.H.: *Endzeit* has a more optimistic outlook on the world coming to an end than most other apocalyptic films. Typically, an apocalyptic film ends when the world itself ends. In *Endzeit*, instead, the apocalypse is the beginning of something new and exciting.

How would you characterize your style?

C.H.: I am a formal filmmaker in the sense that I seek a fitting cinematic form which reflects the psychological state of the characters. My debut film, *Wanja*, is about a bank robber who left prison, but couldn't break out of her own inner prison; there is an emptiness to her existence and the imagery reflects that. *Wanja* is sparsely staged and minimalistic and bleak. *Endzeit*, on the other hand, is a maximalist film; it reflects Vivi's view of the world which maximized since she's been in confinement for so long. The maximalist style also gives us a glimpse of what the world would look like if humans disappeared – nature and wild life would flourish. My third feature, *Sunburned*, is quite different; we worked with long takes and a moving camera. There is a playfulness to it that relates to the children's play in the film. I believe that my style changes for each film and that every project is a reaction to the previous one.

Can you talk about your two protagonists? How do you see them?

C.H.: I was intrigued by the fact that Vivi could be described as a weak character; she is needy and sometimes a bit annoying and although she develops throughout the film, she stays true to herself, and doesn't suddenly turn into a superhuman. Eve, on the other hand, is outwardly strong, but is flawed in other ways, and has her own inner demons to come to terms with. I really liked that both women are complex characters and that they don't fall into the trap of being one-dimensional "strong women."

Your film was made by a predominantly female crew. Why was it important?

C.H.: I enjoyed working with my colleagues and found that they were the most fitting for the project. I chose them because they were the most talented. The DP, Leah Striker, has a film taste that is very close to my own. We are both inspired by Tarkovsky films like *Stalker* as well as *Wonder Woman* and *World War Z*. *Endzeit* is a mix of different genres and conventions with action moments true to its the genre, as well as calmer and lyrical moments. It was important to me to work with someone who had an understanding of both art house aesthetics and more commercial work. Together, we decided on a non-realistic and slightly elevated visual style for the film. The work by set designer Jenny Roesler, as well as costume designer Theresa Grosser, also influenced the imagery. We created a special look that I can best describe as a baroque, almost romantic, horror film style. The score by composer Franziska Henke also underlines the romantic element in the film. The soundtrack is melancholic and at the same time captivating, and reflects nature as a powerful and invasive component.



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INITIATIVES, I AM FOR A QUOTA

What was the best advice you were given?

C.H.: I rarely get any advice.

How do you think the European Film Promotion and Sydney Film Festival's initiative "Europe! Women in Film" will impact your career, your visibility and the promotion of European female film talent in Australia?

C.H.: I feel honored to have been chosen for the initiative, and I look forward to networking and getting an insight into the Australian film business.

There has been a lot of talk about the situation of women in Film for the past year and a half. What is your opinion on the matter? How is it in Sweden/Germany?

C.H.: I believe that there is a gender imbalance in society as a whole, and as a feminist, I'm for equal rights for men and women. Obviously, women are marginalized in a number of professions, not only in filmmaking. Regarding tax funded film initiatives, I am for a quota: to split the funding equally between men and women. It is the only way to get around the discussion regarding quality, which often centers around men saying that other men's films are qualitatively better. With a quota, more women would get the chance to make films and gain experience and the imbalance would change naturally. It is about shifting the power balance so, of course, a lot of people are against it. But how I see it, it's the only possible way to achieve a structural change.

Are you a feminist? If so, how does it inform your filmmaking?

C.H.: I prefer to make films about women: it's not always a political statement, but rather something that feels natural to me.

Who is your favorite female filmmaker? And your favorite film by a female filmmaker?

C.H.: I have so many favorites: Lynne Ramsay, Lina Wertmüller, Andrea Arnold, Claire Denis, Céline Sciamma, Alice Rohrwacher, Angela Schanelec, Maren Ade, Valeska Griesebach, Eliza Hittman, Lucrecia Martel, Barbara Loden...

What are your next projects?

C.H.: I have just finalized my third feature project, *Sunburned*. Currently, I am writing a sci-fi feature, *Blue Eye*, set in Lapland, Sweden.

This interview was conducted in partnership with:



and

