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Nicole Lohfink: nachgefragt: Jennifer Reeder, School of Art and Art History der Universität Chigaco

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Jennifer Reeder begann ihre Karriere mit performance- und Video-Arbeiten als Kunstfigur ‚White Trash Girl', mit der sie die amerikanische weiße Niedrig-Einkommens-Schicht erforschte. Dabei ging es ihr nicht nur um die sozial-ökonomische Situation, sondern auch um die Weltsicht der weißen Unterschicht. Zu weiteren Themen ihrer Arbeiten gehören die Identitätssuche heranwachsender Mädchen und deren Gebrauch von Musik, Slang-Sprache und Mode, um sich auszudrücken. Ihr filmischer Fokus liegt vor allem auf der visuellen Gestaltung und einem Film-Look, den sie als ‚magical realism' bezeichnet. Nicole Lohfink sprach mit der amerikanischen Filmkünstlerin über die Bedeutung von Film-Stil, Medien in der Familie sowie Frauenfiguren in Filmen.

merz Your films have a solid fan base in various European countries. This transatlantic success might be traced back to your films being available on the internet on the one hand, and, on the other hand to the European enthusiasm for the “dark stuff”. When did you first notice your popularity outside of the U.S.?

Reeder Very early. I realised that my films had a pretty robust fanbase in Europe and particulary in the German speaking countries like Germany, Austria, Switzerland. I couldn't pinpoint exactly why this kind of guilty pleasure experience about the American culture attracts the international fanbase, but my films are critical and dark enough to appeal to people outside of the U. S. who need some suspicions about the U. S. It seems to me that Europeans are able to understand film as an art form. They appreciate those unexpected moves included as an art form in my films, whereas people in the U. S. tend to dismiss them as mere cinematic experiments. So I appreciate the European embrace.

merz You focus a lot on visual effects and stylized storytelling. Would you say this is a try to expand the traditional way of storytelling?

Reeder A lot of people would say that they are trying to innovate the form or tell a story in a new way. I do not think my stories, for example in "knives and skin", are new ones. They combine lots of genres. But I definitely try to tell them in an unexpected way. My story lines are not predictable. A scene can take a sharp turn at any time. Indeed I´m looking to give the audience a very particulate experience. So my script and character developement might perhaps be considered unconventional and this is intentional. It is kind of communicating in a non-verbal way and leads to an experience that can translate across all boundaries.

merz So your films are less about a naturalistic portrayal and more about approaching a surrealistic-expressionistic style, similar to Buñuel´s film The andalusian dog?

Reeder Absolutely. I'm much more interested in stylized form, although I still aim for an authentic feeling in terms of performances. But the film itself hovers just above reality.

merz Your work is considered to be feministic and you call yourself a feminist. Therefore your female driven films

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are often seen as feminist movies. What is your impression?

Reeder I think about that all the time. As a female director it is often pointed out that my gender identity might have had an impact on my work. And that's not pointed out ever the other way round, it's not like: "...AND it was directed by a guy!" I would definitely call my work feministic, because that is something you still have to talk about. We just do not live in a place where sexism or gender unequality is over, just because there are more and more films made by women or because there are more women in houses of politics. We are still far away from closing that gap. It is just more subtle and I think that conversations about equality need to be continued. Because even in an audience, that is mostly aware of the feminism of the film, there are still people who miss out on a lot of subtext. It would not occur to them to talk about the fact that most of the leads are women, that the film was directed by a woman, that the women eventually have the final say, or that the young girls in the film are not victims, but heroines in the end. For some viewers it is shocking when I point certain things out and they react like "Oh, wow, I did not even notice that..." So we live in a world where we should be able to take all of these things for granted, but we are not at this point yet. You just have to keep pointing it out and keep poking.

merz You have three sons – 14, twelve and six years old. Do you discuss these topics with them?

Reeder We talk about gender issues all the time. Recently, as they were getting ready for school, I took five minutes and talked to my oldest son about sexual consent. We had just heard about the sexual assault of a young woman on the news. He was like "Ya, ya, I know, I know" and I said "Ok, I just need to know that we had this conversation". It is my responsibility as a woman and as a mother to send these boys out into the world as good, responsible feminists.

merz Are your kids interested in media at all? For example in the trend of playing the game Fortnite?

Reeder Absolutely. They are voracious consumers of Fortnite. It actually is interesting to watch them consume media because it's almost all online. I mean, for example they are watching episodic series on Netflix or they are using apps on the phone in particular. Even my youngest one likes to watch these odd videos on YouTube, where people in bath tubes are consuming gummy bears. They are ridiculous. As a maker it is just interesting to figure out how I have to adapt the way I think about the endproduct of what I´m doing. I mean, obviously for me watching the film on a cinematic screen is the ideal location, but I also have to understand or at least think about making my work consumable on a much smaller screen in the future. I'm a huge fan of the episodic, I like how people are watching tv shows now.

merz Are your sons using media themselves actively? Do they shoot movies, take pictures and so on?

Reeder My middle son is interested in being both in front of the camera and behind the camera. He is a good actor, I put him in a couple of short films that I have done. And I think he might be interested in doing something behind the camera as well. My oldest son is convinced that he’s going to be in the NBA, which I am not sure about.

merz You mentioned the importance of having movies and stories not only about young women. Could you elaborate on that?

Reeder I think women are complex humans. There are so few films, even with women in the lead, that have a really authentic point of view of what it means to be a woman. And in particular what it means to be a mother. Therefore many of my films present lifelong coming-of-age processes and it is important that these mothers are complicated, difficult even, resisting the typical image of a cinematic mother or a grieving mother or a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Because women in real life are extremely complicated but cinematic women are still not.