



THE ART OF TRASH

Interview with Anna Biller by Chris Alexander

Okay folks, here goes...

The following interview is a must read for fans of trash, cult and generally outlandish cinema. And sex. See, *VIVA*, a mind blowing recreation of early *PLAYBOY* magazine gloss and the sexploitation melodramas of Russ Meyer and H.G. Lewis fell onto my happy lap last week and, popping it in my player, I immediately fell in love.

The incredible, experimental, hilarious and hotter than hell in June pseudo-feminist exploitation film is NOT horror, I know this, so quit your slit eyed gawking. But if you, like me, kneel at the sticky alter of drive in and grindhouse cinema than baby, you will flip your wig over this brilliant boob riddled masterstroke of experimental filmmaking.

The picture - out now on DVD courtesy of Anchor Bay (in Unrated & R-rated editions) - is the brainchild of writer, producer, director and star Anna Biller. It's a bold gamble that paid off and it perfectly encompasses her adoration for all things sexy, seventies and subversive.

It's a film that needs to be seen by any self respecting trash movie enthusiast and Biller is woman who needs as much public forum as humanly possible. She's that talented. Trust me.

So I found her and I grilled her and here is that conversation...enjoy.

Anna, I live for stumbling across artists who are completely in control of their creative worlds. It appears you are. Do you work well with others?

You can't be a filmmaker without working well with others. No matter how much you create a world, film is a collaborative medium. And with low budget film, half of getting the film to have a great feeling is creating a great feeling on the set. Jean Cocteau talked about that, how the energy of each person in the room, including the technicians, somehow mysteriously works its way into the feeling you get on the footage itself. It's like a hologram, and it imprints or reflects negative or positive energy.

Ineptitude is the first way of making your cast and crew hate you, because no one wants to feel they are wasting their time on a worthless project, even if they are getting paid. So the main way I successfully create a world is by being extremely well prepared. Then the cast and crew can walk into a perfectly prepared world, where it is easy for them to do their thing and have it come out well. On low budget films everyone is winging it most of the time. I learned the hard way on my short films that the more you can do before the day of shooting, the better the results will be. I usually have a great rapport with my actors. I give them very firm direction, but then let them loose to create and bring in their own fantasies. You have to let an actor play if you want a good performance.

VIVA hit me like a Mack truck and was proof positive of my style over substance leanings. But if a work of art is ALL style, can that be the substance? Does substance evolve out of artifice?

I do think style is an under-used tool in most films. It's such a powerful way of expressing so many things, and lack of a deliberate and thought-out style often leads to a generic or uninteresting result. But I do think style has to be in the service of something else in order to be interesting. When I was researching for this film, I did use the style to create or find meaning at first, in the sense that the images I took from *Playboy* magazines were so strong as to create a whole world inside of my brain. But I gravitated to those images for a reason, as they reminded me of a whole way of thinking, received cultural values, ideas about gender and sexuality and freedom, etc., from the '70s. I was trying to convey the feeling of the time through the images and the acting, so that people would feel like they were really in the '70s when they watched the movie. And that's what makes the movie powerful for some people, I

think; that it doesn't just look like the '70s, it FEELS like the '70s. That's something that studio films never attempt to do.

I'm the film history teacher at The Toronto Film College and when I muse on the 30's, I always show THREE ON A MATCH. Have you seen it? You should remake it. Let's remake it together...seriously though, if you haven't seen it – see it. If you have...what do you think about it?

Yes, I've seen that film. It's similar to VIVA in that it portrays a good girl gone bad, and deals with very real themes of feminine experience. I have a special love of pre-code films in general, and I love films about bad girls. One of my favorites is BABY FACE with Barbara Stanwyck. And a truly astonishing film on that theme, maybe my favorite, is Dorothy Arzner's MERRILY WE GO TO HELL.

What did you think of Mary Harron's THE NOTORIOUS BETTY PAGE?

I always enjoy watching films with pretty, glamorous women in them, and Gretchen Mol was entrancing in it. I like the way they took the stigma and dirtiness out of her posing nude, almost as a political statement. But at the same time, taking the dirtiness out made the film strangely arid and perhaps a bit anachronistic. Didn't Bettie have any interest in sex, knowledge of her devastating effect on men, or lurid narcissistic fantasies at all, or was it all just infantile dress-up fantasies? Still it was fun to watch.

What do you think of Winnipeg filmmaker Guy Maddin?

I think he's very talented. I love the sets he comes up with, and his perfectly stylized flat performances. I think he's a real poet, he understands nuance and how to create sublime moments. He really knows how to create his own worlds.

Are you a fan of sleazy Italian horror films? Check out IN THE FOLDS OF THE FLESH. This is not a question.

I mostly love the soundtracks and the beautiful women. And the arty photography too. Some have better style than others. I've been reading sex and horror Italian comics lately too, they're quite wild. I'll check out that film.

For VIVA was it just old men's magazines and late 60's social films that formed your palette or was there something else at work

That was mostly it. That, British sex comedies, and memories of teenage experiences with men and how they do their pick-ups. And there is a very big influence of old Hollywood in all my films, whether I like it or not. So for instance, the headdress in the orgy scene was copied from something Anna Mae Wong wore in "Daughter of the Dragon." And the whole way that orgy scene plays out is much more like something from the '30s than from the '60s, even though it looks so much like the '60s. It's much more Mae West than Russ Meyer!

Are you an experimental filmmaker? Would you ever trade that freedom?

I do consider myself an experimental filmmaker, but I like to play with popular genres, as you can see. Most experimental filmmakers and critics would not consider me an experimental filmmaker because of that. I don't know if I have much of a choice in how I work. If I can't get into the material and ideas, I can't produce anything at all.

Is there a fine line between trash and art? Can trash be art? Do you ever see a film and fall in love with it, like it's speaking directly to you?

I think you're referring to films that most of society thinks of as trash, but that are actually good. But I think if something is art, by definition it's not trash. But I think you can like a trash film without it being art too.

See BLOODY PIT OF HORROR...it will become your favorite film, I promise you this. Let's remake it.

Okay!