

PANORAMA/ Viva, 2007

by Alexandre Fontaine Rousseau



It takes special courage to disguise as extravagant kitsch comedy that which constitutes, essentially, an auteur film with a very personal theme about the stakes of the sexual revolution and the post-feminist era. For, beyond the risk of being misinterpreted or, worse still, taken at face value, the danger persists that the experiment will simply misfire altogether, unable to find the right balance between humor and reflection. American director Anna Biller however dares to take this gamble with her first feature film, *Viva*, at the same time a highly playful homage to softcore cinema of the seventies, and a subversive satire of certain cultural hypocrisies. Assuming the roles of co-producer, production designer, director, editor and principal actress in the film, Biller has put her signature on a film which has the flavor of exploitation but which touches on "self-exploitation;" its achievement is above all one of knowing how to transform this exercise in style with a demonic plot into a work at the same time funny, intelligent, and provocative. She plays Barbi, a young housewife who discovers the decadent lifestyle proposed by certain sexual utopias, after having been abandoned by a cardboard husband with teeth too perfect for his own good.

More than a simple retelling of the work of Russ Meyer, *Viva* imitates the style of an epoch with remarkable precision in order to better critique its spirit. Here, individual behavior is influenced in one way or another by collective preconceptions. Whether they are conveyed by advertising or imposed by social groups, the stereotypes in the plasticized universe of *Viva* end up causing us to suspend our personal judgment of characters presented at the same time as pitiable and sympathetic. This exercise in artificiality enthusiastically cultivates itself on all possible levels until it literally incarnates the film's meaning. In addition to the deliciously outrageous game of a handful of actors giving their heart's joy to delirious ham acting, the very aesthetic of the film accentuates the impression of falseness emerging from the absurd suburban paradise that it depicts. The whole seems to be torn from the frozen pages of a *Playboy* magazine, from the omnipresent soft eroticism to the advertisements of various luxury products highlighted in a fundamentally caricatured way throughout film.

From the start, the excessive material desires of these blasé bourgeois people are defined by the requirements of a consumer society for whom the ridiculous, here, is multiplied tenfold by the excessive formal exaggerations of the setting. The characters are thus defined initially by their relationship to the goods which they possess, and fill their existential vacuum while living in a manufactured ideal which, in reality, does not satisfy them. Their happiness is dreary, without sparkle, and Barbi jumps from one role to another without ever being defined. But, after having been in the service of her husband in her gilded cage, she will discover with his help that sexual emancipation is not necessarily synonymous with freedom for women. A hippie throws himself on top of our heroine before even finishing his speech on the virtues of free love, and a wormy artist rapes her during a scene in which a sweet visual coating does not spoil the raw psychological intensity. The interests of women have, it seems, been forgotten in the course of the road by this sexual revolution imagined by men.

In this sense, *Viva* attacks the alleged aspirations of counter-culture with same strength as the conformism of mass culture. Behind the flood of well-delivered comic comebacks and slick art direction is hidden, above all, a cynical and biting discourse on sexuality, Anna Biller affirming in a dash of wounded individualism that only autonomy really leads to empowerment. The finale of her film thus reveals the extent of its bitterness: after having tasted debauchery and excess, Barbi returns to her anesthetized Eden a little less submissive but altogether unchanged. At this precise moment in the film, the spectator will be probably lost between the irony of the tone and the honesty at the film's core, which Biller reconciles with difficulty in the last act of this delirious spectacle.

Nevertheless, her film fully satisfies the expectations of film lovers in search of a completely exploded comedy of manners. Like a retro carnal circus amplified by a thousand, reenacting the fantasies of a past epoch, *Viva* emerges on every front as a brilliant success; and one is forced to admit that the aesthetic risk-taking is the principal attraction. After all, the film culminates in a zealously directed Grand-Guignolesque musical number of a medieval orgy directly inspired by the smart psychedelic parties in Meyer's *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. However, the true surprise reserved for underground cinema fans is that Biller's film is curiously less naive than that of the recent *Shortbus* by John Cameron Mitchell on the "free" love and the liberalization of sexuality. Its meaning is concealed behind absurd humor and colorful art direction, certainly, but all the same it contains a new take on a more than relevant question.