



Registered Charity: 1156478. Patron: Jim Broadbent

Friday November 13th, 7.30pm

White Bird in a Blizzard (15)

dir: **Gregg Araki**

starring: **Shailene Woodley, Eva Green, Christopher Meloni**

sponsors: **Richard and Linda Hall**

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His acclaimed 2004 film *Mysterious Skin* aside, Gregg Araki is a writer-director who suffers from the 'earlier, funnier movies' syndrome, though his work is as thematically consistent as that of his indie contemporaries Hal Hartley and Todd Solondz, and more so than the films of perennial critics' darlings Todd Haynes and Richard Linklater. Following two comedies that represent Araki-lite - *Smiley Face* (2007) and *Kaboom* (2000) - *White Bird in a Blizzard* may have been dismissed when it opened in America because it lacks the ironically witty violence, kinetic energy and nihilistic sybaritism Araki brought to his signature 'Teen Apocalypse Trilogy' *Totally F****d Up* (1993), *The Doom Generation* (1995) and *Nowhere* (1997), to which *Kaboom* was a riotous throwback.

It's seldom acknowledged that Araki has become a more psychologically astute director than his 1990s films anticipated. Dealing with cause as much as effect, *Mysterious Skin* and *White Bird* are guardedly optimistic case histories of fictional teenagers destabilised by the aberrant needs of adults - in the case of *White Bird*'s Kay Connors (Shailene Woodley), her miserable, sex-starved parents; unhinged mother Eve (Eva Green) who lusts after Kat's boyfriend Phil (Shiloh Fernandez) - and in Laura Kasischke's 1999 source novel, sleeps with him - and outwardly wimpish father Brock (Christopher Meloni) whom Araki, diverging from the book, makes Phil's secret lover. As desperate as they are perverse, Brock and especially Eve are portrayed as sympathetic victims of social conditioning, unlike *Mysterious Skin*'s predatory baseball coach.

A less classical critique of suburban malaise than Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) or Haynes's Douglas Sirk homage *Far From Heaven* (2002), *White Bird* offers Kat's repression of despair as a metaphor for sublimating the trauma of separation. Kat associates sex - which enables a young person to make the necessary break from his or her parents - with Eve's unwitting abandonment of her. A close-up of Kat smiling at Phil (in direct address to the camera) as she assents to intercourse for the first time, reflecting, "And, just like that, in a blink, my virginity had disappeared...just like my mother" is given more dramatic weight than Eve's vanishing or Kat's later deadpan voiceover revelation that Brock killed her.

That Kat had subconsciously feared abandonment is indicated in a flashback showing her child self tented in a billowing white sheet while playing with Eve, and alarmed when she loses sight of her. The whiteness associated with Kat's fear is echoed in her recurrent dream of wearing white as she searches for the missing Eve in a blizzard; the feminist reading of the movie warrants suggest that Eve was originally lost to herself when she stood unsmiling in her white wedding gown, having consigned herself to a boring, orgasm-less life with Brock. Her latent sexual desires are stoked



Synopsis: US 1988. Seventeen year old Kat Connors lives with her parents Eve and Brock in suburban Ohio. She loses her virginity to schoolmate Phil, who lives next door with his blind mother. Years as a bored, sexually frustrated homemaker who despises her dullard husband have brought Eve to the brink of madness. After a spell of bizarre behaviour, she disappears. Kat and Brock report her disappearance to Detective Scieziesciz, Kat tells her psychotherapist Dr Thaler that she doesn't miss Eve. Neglected by Phil, she seduces the fortyish Scieziesciz and boasts about his virility to her friends Beth and Mickey.

Three years later, Kat is a Berkeley undergraduate. She dumps her straightfaced boyfriend Oliver and returns home for spring break. Brock introduces her to his girlfriend May. Phil spurns her. Kat renews her affair with Scieziesciz but walks out on him when he tells her that he thinks Brock killed Eve after catching her with her lover. Phil denies he slept with Eve but tells Kat that Brock knows where she is. Brock finds Kat, Beth and Mickey trying to open his basement freezer and tells Beth and Mickey to leave. Fearing the worst, Kat opens the freezer that night, but it contains only food. Kat parts tearfully from Brock at the airport next day.

She describes how Brock subsequently confessed to Eve's murder and hanged himself in prison. He strangled Eve after she found him in bed with Phil, burying the body in the hills before Kat could find it.

Credits

Kat: Shailene Woodley

Eve: Eva Green

Brock: Christopher Meloni

Phil: Shiloh Fernandez

Beth: Gabourey Sidibe

Detective Scieziesciz: Thomas Jane

Mickey: Mark Indelicato

May: Sheryl

Dr Thaler: Angela

Director/Screenplay: Gregg Araki (from the novel by Laura Kasischke)

DoP: Sandra Valde-Hansen

Music: Robin Guthrie, Harold Budd

Sound: Matthew Sanchez

Costume: Mairi Chisolm

Design: Todd Fjelsted

USA/France 2014. 90 mins

more by the beauty and satiety of the daughter who reminds her of herself 20 years ago than by the lunkish Phil.

After Eve disappears, Brock sends Kat to a psychotherapist. The smug adventuress she's become - seducing the fortysomething detective investigating her mother's disappearance and detailing their carnal affair to impress her virginal friends Beth (Gabourey Sidibe) and Mickey (Mark Indelicato) who function as a Greek chorus - evaporates in therapy which reveals that she is confused and defensive. The therapist's view that dreams don't always reveal truths comes across as a disingenuous means of prompting Kat to examine hers more thoroughly. When, in one of her recurrent blizzard nightmares, the ghostly Eve calls to Kat to rescue her from an icy grave, it's awkwardly overdetermined, reiterating Kat's bland comment that her corner of suburbia is "frozen in time" and prefiguring the shot of Eve's body (unseen by Kat) in the basement freezer.

White Bird discloses its secrets less through obvious dream symbolism than in the alienation inherent in the *mise en scène*, which is dominated by medium shots depicting characters uneasily regarding each other across the widest possible expanses within confined spaces as they occupy opposite edges of the frame. Eve ogles the nervous Phil over the Connors' swimming pool; Kat and Brock contemplate Eve's fate across the cluttered basement after Kat has opened the Pandora's box of the freezer. The ensuing chiaroscuro shot of Brock - his face half-lit, half dark - captures his divided soul.

Kat's journey is structured as a psychoanalytic quest for reconciliation with the irrecoverable Eve (unlike *Gone Girl*, *White Bird* holds out no hope that its missing woman will return). Foreshadowed by shots in which the preadolescent Kat discovers, by prowling round the house, that her mother was unable to orgasm and her father used pornography, the undergraduate Kat's initially casual search for Eve embodies a need to atone for rejecting her during the period when she was sexually engrossed with Phil. Kat rationalises her tentative seduction of Detective Scieziescicz (Thomas Jane) as a response to Phil's loss of desire for her, though as a gruff, knowing, macho man, this 'other' is the polar opposite of her apparently milquetoast father and dumb Phil, secret bisexuals. Her choice of such a dangerous lover can be construed as a potentially numbing reaction to her mother's disappearance, an act akin to the grieving heroines resorting to promiscuity in Carine Adler's *Under The Skin* (1997) and *Wild* (2014).

More subversive than the seduction itself, which evokes a lamb entering a wolf's cave, is Kat's objectification of Scieziescicz in terms of his "cock and balls...hairy chest...primal smell" when she describes him to Beth the day after they first have sex. Straight male viewers in the audience are more likely than women or gay men to flinch at this candid appraisal of a piece of rough by a 17-year old girl, but Araki confounds the expectation that Kat will be harmed by Scieziescicz when he shows their post-coital tenderness. Kat's initiation of a sexual relationship contrasts positively with her mother's submission in the 1960s (Eve is 42 in 1988 when *White Bird*'s story begins) to soul-destroying marital bondage.

Long in denial that she has been affected by her sudden motherlessness, Kat is redeemed - restored to feeling - when, during the basement confrontation, she finally cries after Brock falsely claims that he doesn't know where Eve is. Although the watchful viewer will glean that Phil was instrumental in Eve's disappearance, Kat is protected - by the discreet placement of the last flashback - from the nightmare of learning that he went to bed with her father. (Fascinated by mother-daughter dynamics, Kasischke skilfully exploited the simple Freudian schema, in which Kat's only sexual rival is her mother).

Finally returning to university after her rapprochement with Brock, Kat is left alone to grieve for Eve, whose vanishing is more germane to her evolution than the fact of her murder. This quietly hopeful conclusion demands a sleight in the film's chronology, since Kat's flight is interrupted by a glimpse of Brock's future arrest.

Woodley's portrayal of Kat, which includes nudity, disturbs the sincere wholesome image she established in *The Spectacular Now* (2013) and *The Fault In Our Stars* (2014): Kat is closer to her initially ill-behaved daughter in 2011's *The Descendants*. Her seemingly effortless flow of condescension, smirkiness, naivety and slowly dawning compassion makes Kat a convincingly complex late adolescent. Except in flashbacks that show the lovely younger Eve beguiled by motherhood, Green pleasingly showboats as a 'woman's picture bitch goddess', replete with Joan Crawford-like outrage and Bette Davis' style hectoring; Crawford's hysterical erotomaniac in Curtis Bernhard's 1947 *Possessed* is analogous, though the sneering laugh with which Eve conclusively emasculates Brock might have challenged Crawford, even if she'd been directed by Sirk in his 1950s pomp.

Additional screenings

*The Society is pleased to add 3 additional films to the programme before the end of the year, as part of **The Time Is Now** initiative (a BFI-funded project sparked by the release of *Suffragette*) to mark the struggle for women's rights.*

The films are screened at EMMTEC, the University of Lincoln and are free to LFS members, on production of membership cards. Non-members may also attend free, but must register via the-time-is-now-lincoln.eventbrite.co.uk

The films are

November 18th: *Difret* (Ethiopia 2013. Cert 12a). 7pm

November 24th: *Thelma and Louise* (USA 1991. Cert 15). 6.30pm

November 25th: *Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer* (UK/USA 2013. Cert 18)

Our next screening - Friday November 20th, 7.30pm

The Tales of Hoffmann (UK, 1951. Cert U)

The Tales of Hoffmann is our classic film this season - and it's worthy of the tag. Written, produced and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (among the UK's most innovative film-makers of the last century), it anticipates the current trend for filmed theatre by more than half a century, adapting Offenbach's opera of the same name. It's performed to a soundtrack specially recorded by Sir Thomas Beecham and performed by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and stars Moira Shearer, Robert Rounseville, Robert Helpmann and Leonid Massine.

The original 3 strip Technicolour print has been given a 4k digital restoration by the BFI, Martin Scorsese's Film Foundation (Scorsese states that P & P were the reason he became a film-maker) and StudioCanal, being first shown in this restored format at the 2014 London Film Festival and revealing a colour palette that has to be seen to be believed. Prepare to be astonished.