Everyday Cinema: The Films of Marc Lafia
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nonacting, narrative, installation, long form—these are all mobilized to create a reading event, a viewing event. Film, or video installation, or seen online, these become contexts, environments, and situations that allows something to be seen— they create different “kinds” of legibility. So recording is an event of the above that leads to a legibility. That’s what the films turn on, the bringing together of events of narration through strategies of recording and instruments of forms, of playback. It is the construction of film as that syntactical event that is to be read.

Q: Is that what you are going for in Paradise?
A: There it widens to question narration itself and ask how, as social beings, we narrate ourselves and are narrated. How do we speak, who has power and in turn whose narration speaks us.

Q: Your film confronts a typical Hollywood narrative and convention. It also questions—even challenges— politics, testing borders, boundaries, and the notion of excess and what encloses excess. You use, for example, the element of the bomb in the film. What were you exploring there?
A: Paradise tries in a very abstract way to be an allegorical film, a kind of science fiction film about control and society. But of course we don’t have all the sets and costumes, so we have to take an approach of defamiliarizing the familiar, like Alphaville or Symbiospsychotaxiplasm. The present is so familiar and things gets so internalized it is hard to see it when you are in it. At some point in the film the characters go to this other side of what is ordinary or everyday. In the park we put up this large plastic sheet and thought of it as a membrame, a border, like you say, that has this place of isolation on the other side. A camp, a detention, where there is this neurolinguistic programing. By creating this zone we get this sense of both sides having within them containment, propaganda, border control—all the logic of capital. All those things we don’t see or want to see in the everyday.

As to the bomb, the two children who cross over and became young adults are the sensualists, and one of them convinces themself that there is only one way to break through: by getting a weapon. And the other convinces themself that the other side, whatever that is, is to be found through the poetic displacement of yourself.

Both then become strategies of excess to deal with what is presented as excessive and invisible, the runaway logic of global capital, algorithmic systems, and control.
Q: Your work allows the spectator to become the producer of text. It is a tough line, especially as a director and a writer. You are creating a certain narrative, certain vision, and at the same time you are allowing a certain level of plurality. Can you talk about that?
A: In the reading of the film, yes, that’s true, you are rewarded if you are a productive reader.

Q: There is also the element of repetition, which seems to be a thread in your work. One thing that stood out is the scene with the student sipping from a bottle of water, and then spitting out the water over and over. Is there something you are trying to communicate through this element?
A: Maybe the water is the fountain of the garden, of paradise. I am not so aware of the repetitions—they are there, as we can’t help but repeat ourselves, repetition and difference, it’s our repertoire.

Q: I really enjoyed that scene. Your characters are extremely complex, in a good way. They are happy, they are sad, they are lost, but they are also experiencing what we call the free will of negativity. I noticed that, for example, in the hide-and-seek scene, and it plays out through the entire film. Your characters are losing something but at the same time gaining something else from that loss in return.
A: Salman Rushdie, whom I like—his writing and thinking—is always talking about how we leak into one another to the point that we each become the other. We set up certain boundaries, which are often self-imposed. But these boundaries, from a psycho-cosmic, psychedelic, or Buddhist point of view, are very artificial. But others are very real. And sometimes we do not know how to parse the two. And sometimes they are inseparable. As the characters move between this membrane on the one side, the “Wonka Camp,” a place where the characters are captured, and the other, the everyday, you begin to see there is this slippage between the two. At some point in the narrative I position the actors inside this membrane, and now there is this inside and outside and it becomes about bridging boundaries of space—psychic boundaries, political boundaries, their own personal boundaries, boundaries in terms of language, and so on.

Q: There is a strong coherent use of metaphors in your film. What are your sources and inspirations? You tend to use traditional and classic metaphors, but also you create some of your own and, at the same time, encourage us to create our own ones too. What is the process you are going through in order to achieve this?
A: I am not so sure. The films emerge contingently, poetically and associatively, moving along thematic registers. They can have a sense of something, or, as you say, metaphors. I do a lot of work before I really know where I’m going, building up a number of images and narratives. I am constantly reading, looking at five, eight, ten, twenty things
at once, maybe, paintings, theory, a Nathanael West novel, let’s say, some myth book, articles, interviews, comments sections, listening to music—so there are lots of sources.

Then when I meet with the actors and we start working together, it all becomes fluid. I come to a certain point where I am constantly thinking about everything and trying not to command things; I am feeling comfortable giving the actors a free will to move along the registers of themes and actions that I’ve explored and now we explore.

When making Paradise, the park set a limit for us. We had only a certain amount of time to shoot, so in the end, the demand of time and the given circumstances forced us all to come to decisions about how to take on the film. So the process is going through the thing, having to be logistical, realistic, centered, bounded. At the same time, the actors bring so much to the work, to the text, to the ideas. And if you create a space for them of trust and appreciation, things really happen.

Q: Which brings us to Revolution of Everyday Life. How did this film come about?
A: Whereas Paradise was all shot in a park I wanted now to shoot something in Manhattan, in the city, so after a while I discovered an area I liked, the fashion district, Twenty-third Street and Broadway. With new zoning, car traffic had become very minimal and the diversity in the neighborhood, very compelling. Taking cues from Raymond Queneau’s Exercises in Style, I wanted at first to make one short scenario sixty-nine ways—Queneau did a hundred but I was in love with the Magnetic Fields’s 69 Love Stories, so sixty-nine was the number. Wanting to do this was how it started.

But doing the same thing in a different style sixty-nine ways takes a good deal of control and exactness, and this cannot happen without money, permits, control, et cetera. So after a while I had to let go of that. So then I tried to make it a series of interconnected and overlapping stories told, in a sense, from the perspective of the neighborhood. At this corner today these things happened and here other things happened and then later at the same places other things happen. Six girls went to this same wig shop and put on wigs—and then they did this and then that over here. It was all going to be about repetition and difference. But from the point of view of place. It was to be about how cities and spaces outlive us. I got a forty-five-minute cut of it, but it felt too pat, so except for one scene, I started over.