What Makes ‘The Grande Bouffe’ Different From a Porno Movie?

BY FOSTER HIRSCH

FIERI never spend a weekend eating themselves to death in a grim, overdecorated mansion: the concept has the impetus of an allegory by Buñuel, the echo of wild house parties in Italian movies of a decade ago, the teasing metaphor of a “Last Year at Marienbad.” Four men tied to a brotherhood pact that tests endurance — the premise is also a kinky Continental variation on “Deliverance.”

Marcello Mastroianni take the chance of his cello Mastroianni and Ugo Tognazzi taking the chance of their careers, letting loose, talking dirty, abandoning themselves to the urges of the unbridled libido.

Ferreri has set out with a fierce will to challenge audience availability, and his Rabelaisian romp establishes new levels of rankly foul taste in art house — as distinct from 1st Street porno movie fare. In manner and matter, Ferreri is working on a level that the makers of “Deep Throat” could not — and would not — aspire to, but his movie’s lifelines are decidedly pornographic.

The first law of the true-blue porn movie is the tyranny of the flesh: we don’t see the characters in “The Grande Bouffe” otherwise occupied than at the front, their one obsession, consuming goal the constant satisfaction of the senses. Looking themselves away from the world in a manuscript of a house and shedding civilized restraints, Ferreri’s cardboard figures are participating in a porn-movie banquet, questors in a porn-movie screen, too much is not enough for these celebrants. Once embarked on an orgy of tasting and touching, they are powerless, imprisoned rather than liberated by the spirit of Dionysus.

There’s no joy at Ferreri’s table: their passions and appetites spent the revelers have no place to go. It’s the presence of melancholy and death in the face of a sensational bartholasm that distinguishes Ferreri’s feast of carrion from its lowbrow cousins. Characters in porn movies are evaluated with regard to their sexual prowess and their freedom from guilt, and they are never more than temporarily unhapped: more frequent and more intense sex can solve any passing reality. But here, the pleasures of the flesh are but handicaps of the coffin, and Ferreri’s pestilential houseparty is, finally, a warning, an exclamation, an inverse appreciation of bourgeois restraint.

Porn people, those guiltless joy-seekers, may inspire our envy and incite our lascivious fantasies, whereas Ferreri’s party-makers have only our pity, and our disgust. In porn, and in “advanced” movies of the antiques such as “La Dolce Vita,” says, or “L’Avventura,” decadence and décadence are chic, inviting; the houseparty in “The Grande Bouffe” is entirely without glamour. You’ll remember “La Dolce Vita” as the character of Paola the Innocent who represents the possibility of a higher and finer life than the one Marcello slips into. Here, Marcello has no options — he’s sunk, irretrievably, in a swamp of self-indulgence.

The movie entices no vision of romance or purity. The eaters have nothing left behind — in the world outside their death-camp — crummy, undistinguished lives. Stripped of the final vestiges of self-respect, they devote themselves to total self-abasement. (And the women who are their companions in degradations are in every way their moral equals.)

Adapting the audacious lawlessness of the porn movie to his Breughelian demolitions of intramural appetites, his parable, as many critics have read it, of the collapse of modern society, Ferreri has arrived at a tantalizing blend: the dirty movie with the heart of an impassioned (and moral) morality. The director has the puritan’s inevitable fascination with an anachronism: he’s thrilled by what he shows us, but he’s repelled, too — and it’s that morbidly disapproving, that unremorseful sense of shock, that separates his work, for all its saucy presentations, from that of the true, unstricken pornographers.

Morality aside, “The Grande Bouffe” is a liberatingly funny pitch-black comedy. Ferreri assaults us. You’re bound to be caught off guard by the over-baked outrage humor, the blotted, rolled atmosphere, the absorption with vomit and excrement, the colossal disrespect for human anatomy. Like pornography, it turns us (whether we’re willing or not, and if we pay our porno movie price of $5 we certainly ought to be willing) into voyeurs and accomplices. It appeals to our proudest curiosity at the same time that it disdains erotic indulgence. The movie tests our limits of shockability: how much can you take, Ferreri seems, combatively, to be asking.

His theme is the folly of moral sanctity, but Ferreri himself holds back: he is a strict, even severe director who allows not one arcy syllant or lyrical moment to intrude onto his bleak screen. Slowly, carefully, his film builds, snaring us by its opposing tensions. Porn brushed with intense moral vigilance, the movie keeps turning on itself, preferring and withdrawing erotic titillation, discovering laughter and terror in the retreat from social restrictions.

One of the most tantalizing disarray of the world of the superb actors, who keep indicating real paths and depth beneath the gaudy surfaces of their direction; stop-talking, looking from Marcello, one hot glance from Andrea Ferreol (the actress who plays, unfortunately, the condescending schoolteacher who outlasts them all, and the eaters who are turned into trash become utterly, see-through characters: real people that we feel can still be “saved.” Credible, valued by laughter that choked, we’re delighted by moror’s end, having been through a cathartic, unlikely experience: therapy as dish-dash.

Andrea Ferreol and Philippe Noiret are participants in a weekend orgy of food and sex in Marco Ferreri’s film, “The Grande Bouffe.”

THE TECH

starts October 26

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 14, 1973

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