

***Beast*, dir. by Michael Pearce** (Agile Films/Stray Bear Productions, 2017)

Michael Pearce's debut feature, *Beast*, is a self-consciously dark, adult fairy tale. The marketing campaign emphasises this via the trailer's selection of scenes in which Moll (Jessie Buckley) moves purposefully through a forest at night, her curling red hair like a flame through the dark woods, along with Pascal (Johnny Flynn), the brooding, blue-eyed lover she desires unwisely but uncontrollably. The pastoral imagery and expressionistic use of colour temporarily lift this erotic thriller out of its contemporary setting and into the ahistorical realm of fable. Joyce Carol Oates describes the fairy-tale mode as crude and transparently wishful. It is a form that often (but not always) reflects 'the unquestioned prejudices of a conservative patriarchal folk culture', but nevertheless contains 'an incalculably rich storehouse of mysterious, luminous, riddlesome and ever-potent images'.<sup>1</sup> *Beast* utilises this storehouse to explore human ugliness, pathological violence, and the wilful amorality of romantic love.

The story takes place on an island idyll off the coast of Normandy. Our protagonist Moll is a shy, reserved girl who was home schooled after a childhood transgression involving girl-on-girl violence. When she meets Pascal, their class-divided romance seems almost retro and quaint; his black jeans cause a ruckus at the country club, and her rebellion against the snobbish mores that have been imposed on her seems to be a postponed rite of passage. The tone changes though when a young girl's body is found in a potato pit and Pascal is the lead suspect. From here, it emerges that Moll is not simply in love with a man who is accused of being a serial rapist and murderer; she truly believes him to be one, seemingly from the moment she was told he was jailed once before for sexual assault of a minor.

As this suggests, part of the film's suspense lies in the sense of narrative and generic disorientation. The viewer is uncertain of what outcomes to expect and what rules of darkness, sickness, and romance govern this cinematic world. The film's title suggests a beast-bridegroom narrative like 'Beauty and the Beast' as obvious inspiration, but Johnny Flynn's appearance is far from off-putting and her attraction to him is far from mysterious. In addition, the trailer scene described above suggests 'Little Red Riding Hood', and Moll's chaotic attraction to masculine, earthy, violently sexual Pascal resonates with the idea of being led, not so reluctantly, from her expected trajectory and running wild. When we are first introduced to Moll, singing in a choir led by her domineering mother, the surrounding

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, 'In Olden Times, When Wishing Was Having ...: Classic and Contemporary Fairy Tales', *The Kenyon Review*, 19.3-4 (1997), 98-110 (p. 103).

scenery of cliffs and sea, along with the punitive control of her voice, all suggests 'The Little Mermaid'. Unfortunately for Moll, it turns out that the fairy tale she has found herself in is 'Bluebeard', the prototypical example of what Sue Short refers to as the 'flipside to fairy-tale romances, and the fantasy of living happily ever after with a stranger'. For Short, such tales frequently revolve around 'beasts who cannot be romantically redeemed and who offer death, rather than deliverance, to the women they become involved with'.<sup>2</sup> However, what is arguably most interesting about the film is that it does not act as a cautionary tale about taking a demon lover. Instead, it plays on the temptation to believe in a narrative of redemptive, heteronormative romance. In doing so, it highlights the extent to which the iconography of such narratives remains powerful even when we as adults/feminists/socialists/intersectional scholars know how these stories can and have been used to support patriarchal hierarchies of power and difference.

In an extension of this idea, the film's style colludes with the fairy-tale imagery, telling the story through intimate close-ups and intense camera identification with Moll. The sensuous *mise-en-scène*, horizontal panning, and focus on touch and texture all evoke the 'haptic visuality' that Laura Marks describes as a recurring motif in feminist and intercultural film, one that encourages an immersed, embodied dynamic between the viewer and the images onscreen.<sup>3</sup> In the scene where Moll and Pascal have sex in the woods, the camera is so close to their bodies that it obscures them. This has the effect of making 'vision difficult and thus to invite the viewer to feel rather than see the film, to make contact with its skin', as Jennifer Barker says of experimental porn film.<sup>4</sup> In the following scene, the camera focuses on the clamminess of Moll's face and neck as she lies back on a plush cream couch, her lips and fingernails embedded with dirt. Pearce succeeds in making the viewer want to get even more submerged in the diegetic world of the film. When asked what draws her to this man who is undoing all that should be good in her life, she replies, '[h]is smell' – and the viewer can only imagine what that scent might be like. The visual cues and evocations of other senses encourage an embodied spectatorship that allows the viewer to identify closely with Moll's experiences rather than coolly observe them.

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<sup>2</sup> Sue Short, *Fairy Tale and Film: Old Tales with a New Spin* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2014), p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> See Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California, 2009), p. 23.

Concurrently, when Moll becomes isolated after Pascal's arrest and detainment, we are immersed in the embodied representation of her moral disorientation and physical disgust. The transgressive nature of remaining loyal to a man accused of sexually violent crimes has not only contaminated Moll in the eyes of the community; she absorbs the shame into her body as well. After providing an alibi for Pascal on the night of the victim's abduction, the police confront her with photographic images of the girl's brutalised and discarded corpse. Moll later burrows into the waterlogged earth to make her own shallow grave and swallows clay to see how it felt to be one of those girls. The viewer (and perhaps she) can only speculate as to her motivations: guilt, morbid curiosity, or even bizarre sexual jealousy. Moll's self-actualisation ultimately involves destroying Pascal, but again it is ambiguous whether this is motivated by self-preservation, feminine solidarity, or revenge and as such cannot be untangled from her boyfriend's predation and violence.

In this way, the film eschews traditional cause-and-effect psychologising explanations for its protagonist's actions, in favour of representing moment-to-moment reactions to her environment and new information. The experience of watching *Beast* is anxiety inducing, as much as it is voyeuristically pleasurable. Moll as a character becomes even more compelling when this relationship makes her realise that she is not now, nor has she ever been, a 'nice', 'normal' girl, and we stayed enraptured with her tactile emotional chaos until the film's tumultuous and satisfying conclusion.

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