

EYEBLAZE # 6

SANTA SANGRE



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Part 6 of our regular column in which we give short personal introductions to those unique gems of cinema that stand alone and are unlike anything else. Each week we focus on a film that has inspired and influenced our own work as filmmakers or has expanded our understanding of what cinema is and could be.

"It's wonderful to be born! It's wonderful to be ill because the illness becomes your master! It's wonderful to grow old because it makes you wiser. And it is wonderful to die because to be immortal would be so boring."

Alejandro Jodorowsky

The film:

One day while he was in Mexico City working on a comic-strip, Alejandro Jodorowsky met a stranger in a backstreet bar. The stranger revealed himself to be the famous Mexican serial killer, Goyo Cárdenas. He had murdered four women in the early forties and had spent most of his life in a mental institution, but during this time he suffered a complete transformation, he studied psychology and law and wrote several books and comics, he even got married and had four children. Jodorowsky was fascinated that this man had overcome his past and was now living a normal life, and used his story as a starting point for his new film project *Santa Sangre*. He infused it with his own ideas about psychotherapy and the influence of family history in determining one's actions, and the result is an exploration of the psychology of a serial killer who is trapped by the influences of his childhood experiences, and is obliged to carry out the narratives of his parents' lives through his own hands.

Santa Sangre is the story of Fenix, a young man confined to a mental asylum who seems to have shut away what was human in him, preferring to act like a bird. A shot of a soaring eagle takes us to his childhood as a boy magician in a circus in Mexico. His father Orgo is a big and hairy American knife-thrower who runs the colourful circus troupe Circo del Gringo. An example of macho masculinity, he is only interested in drinking and in the voluptuous



new member of the circus, a woman whose body is completely covered by tattoos. The Tattooed Woman becomes the tantalising target of Orgo's lust and his knife-throwing practice, moaning with pleasure as each knife hits the target on which she lays. On the other hand, Fenix's mother is Concha, an acrobat who is fervently devoted to a local saint, a young girl who had her arms cut off by her rapists when she tried to resist them and was left to die in a pool of her own blood. Concha is the leader of the worshipping cult, Santa Sangre – which translates as Holy Blood – and fights zealously to keep their temple from being demolished by bulldozers. Pulled and pushed between his two parents, Fenix finds friendship with a dwarf named Aladdin who never leaves his side and a deaf-mute mime girl called Alma – Soul – who also suffers at the hands of her

guardian, the Tattooed Woman.

Fenix's childhood trauma is revealed to stem from a tragic night when Concha finds her husband in bed with the Tattooed woman. Furious, she pours sulphuric acid over his genitals and attacks the other woman. Yelling with pain, Orgo pushes Concha against the wall and with his two knives he cuts both her arms turning Concha into the image of her beloved martyr. He staggers out into the street, raises his knife and cuts his own throat before his son's eyes, this renders Fenix in the state in which we find him, a catatonic grown man in the asylum.

In order to stimulate something in him, his carers take him with a group of Down syndrome patients to the cinema, they are handed over to the care of a young pimp who gives them cocaine and takes them through the red district dancing with the prostitutes. Here Fenix sees the Tattooed woman and something seems to stir him up. He becomes even more alive when he sees his mother from the window of his cell at the asylum and escapes to join her, together they kill the Tattooed woman and start their life anew with a new musical act in which Fenix becomes his mother's arms, standing behind her like a puppeteer. However, it is Concha that takes control of Fenix's arms whenever she pleases, and uses them to kill women that he feels attracted to.

Jodorowsky builds up the circus-like atmosphere with bold colours, a cacophony of Mexican music, circus animals and a cast of odd characters like you wouldn't find in anyone else's film. The high level of theatricality accentuates





the symbolism and psychological significance of these moments in Fenix's childhood. The death of the circus elephant is a particularly memorable scene, the troupe march along the town escorting a gigantic black coffin on a truck, their usually colourful costumes turned black. They arrive at a cliff by the town's dump and a bugle plays the last salute. On the other side of the dump are the city slums, people covered in dust start gathering in wait. Fenix's father cuts the rope and the huge coffin slides down, crashing on the ground, a great cheer comes from the slums as the crowd rushes to the coffin, eager to get the meat. They bash and break the coffin open, distributing parts of the elephant between them. Fenix is inconsolable, but his father tells him to stop crying like a little girl.

Even though the film explores the dark places of Fenix's psychology, *Santa Sangre* is not a dark or pessimistic film, it tells a story of redemption and transformation as Fenix finds a way to come to terms with the image of his parents and overcome the hold the past has over his present. The feeling we are left with at the end is much like Jodorowsky's own reaction to the serial killer's story – fascination with someone having confronted and overcome his own demons. Jodorowsky is an artist whose films leave you with a feeling of wonder at life, everything is fascinating to him and he has the ability to transfer this feeling to the viewer.

Who made it:

Alejandro Jodorowsky is most well known for his films *El Topo* (1970) and *Holy Mountain* (1973), which became cult hits in the 70's after *El Topo* was introduced to the New York film audience by John Lennon and became the first midnight movie. Even though Jodorowsky is most famous for his films there is so much more to Jodorowsky than movies. Before making his first feature film at the age of 38 he had already written hundreds of poems and comic strips, directed and performed in plays and performance pieces, studied mime with Marcel Marceau as well as studying and exploring various spiritual and mystical practices. And it is precisely this varied experience and interest that makes his films so rich and exciting.

After the success of *El Topo* and *Holy Mountain*, Jodorowsky set to work on writing and designing an adaptation of *Dune* which was to have starred Salvador Dalí, Orson Welles, have a score by Pink Floyd and set design by the likes of H. R. Giger and comic book artist Moebius. Unfortunately the film was never made but out of this period grew the intriguing collaboration with Moebius, the planning they had done for *Dune* was the starting point which led them to writing comic books together for many years, starting with *The Incal*.

Also at this time Jodorowsky was contacted by Philippe Camoin, who wanted to restore the Tarot of Marseilles. The



Tarot had been one of Jodorowsky's obsessions for many years, and it was hugely influential on his development of Psychomagic. Psychomagic is a type of psychotherapy that consists of prescribing creative and symbolic actions in order to unblock emotional and psychological problems, which usually result from unresolved family issues carried through from generation to generation. Jodorowsky believes that we can speak directly with our unconscious mind by acting out something symbolically. He sees all true art as a therapy which deals primarily with the language of the unconscious, that of symbols, and has the potential to be a revealing experience, somewhat like a religious ritual.

Today he lives in Paris and is in post-production of a new feature film based on his autobiography *La Danza de la Realidad* (*The Dance of Reality*).

Why it's important to us:

These days many people call themselves artists but when one looks at their work you are faced with closed doors. There seems to be a very modern sickness of self-consciousness and hiding behind intellectualism. Dull lifeless work is held up on pillars of words and complicated theories but it is so often lacking beauty and passion and scared of saying something that may be wrong or that may disrupt the possibility of future funding. There is a lot of asking permission going on, especially when it comes to filmmakers. Watching films made inside and outside of the industry amounts to much the same thing, everyone is scared of rejection, they desire the largest audience possible and attempt to get it by taking the middle ground, using the latest technology and filming things in a way that fits the latest trends. It seems as if these filmmakers never once stop and ask themselves why it is they want a large audience or even why they are making films to start with!

Jodorowsky is the antidote to all of this, his films are true to every part of his being, they express his own view of the world and he opens the door and invites us to join him. From watching his films and reading his books it is clear that he loves life, he is fascinated by everything and this passion is infectious. His films are fascinating in their form and style but the reason they work is that form and content work together and amount to the same thing. But do not get me wrong, it cannot be reduced to a simple sum of this shot equals this or that, the films would defy that kind of thinking because they are born from a deep engagement with and exploration of what's at the core of them. They are a truthful expression of a very interesting man who has a rich experience of the world in which he lives, and who never shows you a dead end, but the possibility for transformation.

'Either you make a cadaver, or you make a butterfly. There is the attitude — either you do everything so that things will die, or you do things for a mutation. I am working for mutation.' Alejandro Jodorowsky



How to see it:

Santa Sangre is available on DVD (region 0) and Blu Ray (region 1) released by Severin Films, they can be found on Amazon. This release comes with a great selection of bonus features – deleted scenes, audio commentary with Jodorowsky, interviews with most of the cast and crew and a feature-length making-of documentary, *Forget Everything You Have Seen: The World of Santa Sangre*. There is a region 2 DVD available but it doesn't have any of the bonus features.

Further viewing/reading:

It is certainly worth watching his feature films *Holy Mountain*, *El Topo* and *Fando y Lis*. When they were made, Jodorowsky believed that cinema had the power to change the world and wanted his films to provoke spiritual awakening.

Jodorowsky has written many books but only a few are available in English. The spiritual journey of Alejandro Jodorowsky is excellent, he talks of the time spent with his Zen Buddhist master, his meeting of the surrealist painter Leonora Carrington and many other encounters that are key to his understanding of the world.

El Topo – the book of the film is another excellent book, tricky to get hold of but well worth it if you can. It used to be available for free online but the website seems to have been taken down. It features extensive notes and interviews explaining why he chose certain symbols and what they mean in his film.

The two books, *The Way of Tarot* and *Psychomagic*, are worth reading together, this will give you a very rounded insight into Jodorowsky's ideas of psychology and spirituality. He is a very open and giving writer and we have found both of the books a great inspiration and go back to them often.

Fábulas Pánicas, Jodorowsky's early comics can be found here: <http://fabulaspanicas.blogspot.pt>

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