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**Friday March 4th, 2016, 7.30pm**

**The Duke of Burgundy (UK/Hungary 2014. Cert 18)**

**dir: Peter Strickland**

**starring: Sidse Babett Knudsen, Chiara D'Anna**

**sponsor: Andrew Howard**

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Though never mentioned in the dialogue of writer-director Peter Strickland's third feature – after *Katalin Varga* (2009) and *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012) – the Duke of Burgundy is a small orange and brown butterfly whose declining population is mostly found in southern England. It's also the only male presence in a film that takes place in a pocket universe populated solely by female entomologists who are in sadomasochistic relationships with each other.

As in *Berberian Sound Studio*, the opening credits are an expert (and, for long-term devotees, hugely seductive) pastiche of a form of continental exploitation film that, like the butterfly, has become scarce since the 1970s. Whereas the blood-spattered oratorio of *Berberian* evoked the gialli of Dario Argento or Sergio Martino, *The Duke* opts for shaky pinkish freeze-frames of a woman cycling through thick woods accompanied by the ululating voices of Cat's Eyes (Faris Badwan and Rachel Zeffira), suggesting the demi-mondish, oddly arty psychedelic sex-horror melodramas of Jesús Franco or Jean Rolin. Lorna, the disapproving neighbour who never responds to the cheery greetings of the lead characters, is played by Monica Swinn, once a stern, sensual presence in films by these fringe auteurs, appearing in Rollin's *Les Démoniaques* (1974) and *Phantasmes* (1975) and Franco's *Female Vampire* (1973) and *Exorcism* (1975). Strickland is one of contemporary cinema's great deadpans but his credits are as full of jokes as the frames of a MAD magazine parody: this is a rare movie to boast a credit for perfumes (and a "human toilet consultant") and to embed an enormous amount of entomological information in its long closing crawl.

Because heterosexuality (or even non-sadomasochism) isn't an option in this neck of the woods, it's a mistake to look at *The Duke of Burgundy* as specifically a lesbian movie and hold it up against, say, *Blue Is The Warmest Colour* (2013) or even *Mulholland Drive* (2001). Here, the lifestyle depicted is not a minority affair but the absolute norm – as indicated by the charming, tactful and matter-of-fact 'carpenter' (Fatma Mohamed) called in to pitch a birthday present (a bed with a lockable compartment) from Cynthia to Evelyn, who admits that she's already sold one to a near neighbour.

The sense of an artificial, enclosed world – akin to the single vegetated patch of the planet *Solaris* in Tarkovsky's film or the limbo beyond the cracked gravestone in Lucio Fulci's *The House by the Cemetery* (1981) – is intensified by slow pans across the perfectly coiffed, elegant-if-tweedy all-female audience sitting rapt at entomology lectures given at an institute that closes for the winter. Filling out the ranks of extras in a manner that the



perpetually cash-strapped Franco would endorse are out-of-focus, pale-faced shop-window mannequins.

All this heightened unreality conjures up memories of 1970s artfilm preciousness (cf. Bruno Gantillon's *Servant and Mistress*, 1977) as well as the more disreputable euro-smut undercurrents of a decade that yielded numerous variants (including repeated essays by Franco) on *Venus in Furs* and de Sade's *Justine*, and compares and contrasts interestingly with the reclamation of similar source materials in the recent work of Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani (*Amer*, *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears*.)

**Synopsis:** Somewhere in Europe, sometime in the past. Evelyn arrives at a country house where she cleans for Cynthia, an entomologist who specialises in moths. When Evelyn fails in small tasks, the older Cynthia 'punishes' her. This punishment becomes consensual and the lovers live together, with the seemingly submissive Evelyn issuing strict instructions to the dominant Cynthia. However, their relationship become troubled when Cynthia, suffering from back pain, finds it increasingly burdensome to indulge Evelyn's fantasies. When Lorna, a spiteful neighbour, tells Cynthia that she has seen Evelyn polishing another woman's boots, Cynthia responds by becoming genuinely cruel and punitive in a manner that Evelyn does not enjoy. After this crisis, and a seemingly shared hallucination involving moths, Cynthia is unable to go through with their regular charade and breaks down. Evelyn comforts her and the couple re-affirm their love.

**Credits**

<b>Cynthia</b>	Sidse Babett Knudsen	<b>Director</b>	Peter Strickland
<b>Evelyn</b>	Chiara D'Anna	<b>Screenplay</b>	Peter Strickland
<b>Dr Fraxini</b>	Eugenia Caruso	<b>DoP</b>	Nicholas Knowland
<b>Dr Schuller</b>	Zita Krazskó	<b>Editing</b>	Matyas Fekete
<b>Lorna</b>	Monica Swinn	<b>Sound</b>	Rob Entwistle
<b>Dr Viridana</b>	Eszter Tompa	<b>Music</b>	Cat's Eyes
<b>Carpenter</b>	Fatma Mohamed	<b>Costume</b>	Andrea Flesch
		<b>Art Dir.</b>	Renátó Cseh

**UK/Hungary 2014 104 mins**

However, inside this highly artificial cocoon is an acute study of the stresses and strains on any perfect relationship and the power shifts within even a lasting marriage. Given that much of the emotional impact comes from very slight variations in scenes played out over and over again, it's a credit to both the experienced Sidse Babett Knudsen, (prime minister in the Danish TV series *Borgen*) and the less well-known Chiara D'Anna (promoted from a secondary part in *Berberian Sound Studio*) and Strickland's very tactful handling of them that the simple story of a woman whose bad back makes her less enthusiastic about bedroom games than her partner cuts deeper than many a study of death, infidelity or psychosis.

There's a rack-focus shift as we realise that D'Anna's Evelyn, who at first seems an abused servant, is dictating the course of the couple's life together, which – outside of moth studies – is wholly dedicated to sexual fulfilment, even if that involves being locked in a box or acting as a human toilet bowl (behind closed doors). Evelyn is eager to be punished for her transgressions, but less keen on Cynthia's snoring... and gets impatient when back pain prompts Cynthia to abandon corseted, fetishistic gear in favour of baggy pyjamas.

For her pettishness, Evelyn is truly punished when Cynthia ignores their safe word ('pinastri', another moth) and rests comfy-footed feet on her face. Cynthia's final attempt at going through their scripted mistress-and-maid game, when she is on the point of complete emotional collapse, ranks among the best-played scenes in recent cinema. Of course, it's a film with its mysteries – including a remarkable hallucination that overdoses on moth imagery (and a soundscape of chittering insect noises) – but nevertheless it's extraordinarily lucid and deliciously entertaining.

#### **Another view (Leslie Felperin)**

*Inspired by the soft-core erotic eurotrash films of Jess Franco and others, but with an injection of hard-core art house weirdness, director Peter Strickland's The Duke of Burgundy is a specialist item that won't appeal to those with conservative tastes. However, for adventurous souls willing to board Strickland's freaky funhouse ride, this will be pure bliss: a funny, melancholy and peculiarly haunting exploration of an S&M relationship between two women. Indeed, it's a pretty spot-on evocation of the see-sawing power shifts that can go on in any relationship, but it just so happens that this one is between dominant Cynthia (Sidse Babett Knudsen) and her submissive Evelyn (Chiara D'Anna), two elegant ladies with a taste for silky underthings and role play who live in a strange, time-out-of-joint world where everyone is female and shares a zoological interest in insects, especially butterflies and moths. The latter half's descent into David Lynchian surrealism verges on mannerism, but it's still a tremendously potent, bewitching work.*

## **Programme Update**

The 3 films chosen to fill the gaps left in April and May for new titles released after the programme went to press, are:-

### **April 22nd. The Lesson (Bulgaria/Greece, 2014)**

Margita Gosheva is excellent as the initially uncompromising Nadezhda, a teacher in a small Bulgarian town who's troubled by petty thefts in her classroom and is trying her best to uncover the culprit. But financial woes are stacking up in her own life, after her unemployed and hapless husband spends money they don't have, and she must utilise all her energy to ensure that their house isn't repossessed.

### **May 6th: Tangerines (Estonia, 2013)**

A deeply affecting anti-war movie, *Tangerines* takes a simple story and weaves it into a rich drama; deftly balancing pathos, black humour and a pacifist critique of unnecessary violence, Zaza Urushadze's assured direction is completed by the tremendous performance by Lembit Ulfsak, a veteran actor all too rarely seen on UK screens.

### **May 27th: The Wolfpack (USA, 2015)**

In New York, the six Angulo brothers and their older sister live with their parents in a Lower East Side apartment that they are not allowed to leave because their parents feel the world beyond is unsafe. Home-schooled, they go outside only once or twice a year under strict supervision. Film is their shared passion and, unable to explore the world themselves, they do so via the medium of cinema, making endless lists of films & staging elaborate recreations of their scenes. Reminiscent of *Capturing the Friedmans* in its portrait of familial dysfunction, this astonishing, haunting and favourites very moving documentary won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance 2015.

### **Our next screening: Friday March 11th 2016, 7.30pm**

#### **Force Majeure (Sweden, France, Norway, Germany et al 2014. Cert 15)**

One of four films in our programme since the start of 2016 to have been nominated for a BAFTA this year (the others being *Wild Tales*, *Timbuktu* and *Theeb* - showing on March 18th), Force Majeure is a pitch-black comedy which tackles the man-as-hero-and-patriarch concept that dominates so much of film, to devastating effect.

Set in the Swiss Alps, the film shows us a seemingly perfect, happy nuclear family (Mum, Dad, two kids) enjoying an idyllic skiing holiday which is interrupted by an avalanche. The effect this has on Tomas the dad is nothing short of devastating, as he makes a decision that has massive repercussions for them all.

Spectacular cinematography and spot-on performance by the whole cast make Ruben Östlund's drama, which was nominated for a Golden Globe last year and won the Jury Prize (Un Certain Regard) at Cannes 2014 an uncomfortable, often funny but penetratingly truthful watch.