

Art Agenda

Mean Girls: Keren Cytter and “Vengeance”

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“I’m so excited,” a young woman says, about an advertising meeting that would make your eyes water with boredom. “Don’t worry, that’ll pass,” her older colleague replies. It’s a flat cliché, and he delivers it with a withering smile of self-congratulation.



The woman appears put down, but you get the feeling that’s what she was looking for: the easy volley to give him the smash. She’s playing a short term game, trading on her looks. Women often do this—in reality for sure, but especially on TV, where scheming, men-obsessed women are the norm.

The scene in question is from episode five of Keren Cytter’s *Vengeance* (2012–13), a seven-part cycle that loosely adopts the structure of *atelenovela*. Different plot strands weave and intersect: a man cheats on his wife with his wife’s assistant at work, who is also jockeying to usurp the wife’s position in the office; gay men seduce women into telling them their secrets; women turn ex-lovers in to the police. At its core, the work investigates how different styles of acting and direction can be used to intensify the action—how an everyday interchange can be given thrums of foreboding and suspense, but also the ways in which melodrama (and perhaps even reality TV), with its finite stock of plot points, accommodate both the shrilly over-dramatic as well as the numbingly banal. (What is more boring, and more gripping, than a couple picking a fight?)



The co-existence of these two extremes is something Cytter has explored in her earlier video works, in which affectless dialogue suddenly meets vertiginous plot structure and spectacular actions—guns pulled, violence wrought, scenes upended.

In *Vengeance*, these extremes take on a more specific edge, moving from formal exposition to satire—a genre that calls for an object. And this object, it becomes clear throughout the cycle, is the “American obsession with money and success,” as Cytter put it to me recently. The action is set in the advertising industry, in different firms that are competing to put together pitches for the largest beauty product company in middle America; the account’s portfolio includes not only items like soap and shampoo, but also “foot masks, moisturizing materials, lip gloss, and, funnily enough, anti-aging hair products” [laughter].



Such details and dialogue throughout the series give precision to the vacuousness of the world on screen (conjuring expertly the long aisles of CVS and Rite Aid and the thinly veiled paranoia of prescription drug commercials on late night TV), while the titles of the campaigns, such as “The Daily Standard,” “Matters of the Heart” and “Wet Dreams,” allow Cytter to show how the simultaneously dim and calculating characters reduce everything—even and especially their personal relations—to making money and getting ahead. “I’m sorry to disturb you right now but I have a question concerning the matters of the heart,” says one of the advertising girls to her colleague. “The meeting for the first round is in one hour and I can’t find...”



The frontrunner, “The Daily Standard,” satirizes the quintessential man-as-fantasy customer, an aspirational status here deemed the “standard,” with its presumption of universal affluence. This projection consists of a laundry list of markers of wealth and taste; the campaign’s target, as the soundtrack repeatedly intones, is a thirty-five-year old male who dresses for his age, earns more than you, and drives an Audi. Who else?

While *Vengeance* is an able satire of American superficiality and ambition, it is particularly interesting in its portrayal of women and how they comport themselves in the office—a depiction that is remarkable both for its rarity in what we might call the mainstream cultural sector, and for what it shares with other recent films by female (artist) filmmakers. Rather than the sisterhood-feel of analyses of women in the workplace found in divisive pop psychology/self-help books such as Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In. Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013) or Huffington Post founder Arianna Huffington’s *On Becoming Fearless... In Love, Work, and Life* (2006), which seek to help chivvy women along, Cytter uses the natural misogyny of the soap opera to baldly lampoon how women overuse sex and sexual attractiveness.



The eponymous vengeance of the video, for instance, is wreaked by Tina, the assistant to Rachel, the advertising agency’s glowing superstar. It’s not quite clear what Rachel has done to deserve her treatment, but there she is at the end, in the climactic presentation of the series, felled and humiliated by a younger, better-looking woman. The takedown culminates in Tina swapping her PowerPoint for the pitch, so that Rachel presents to her colleagues, instead, an audio track reading “Rachel Glare is a numb and pitiful alcoholic” and a visual track of a penis.

Cytter's past works have repeatedly explored the question of fiction and diegesis—that is, a character suddenly breaking the fourth wall of theatrical action to address the audience, all the while in a fictive and performative mode. Her *Untitled* (2009), which was shown at the 53rd Venice Biennale that year, included the performance of a live production in Berlin as part of the action of the play itself, further deepening the *mise en abyme* of real and fiction that her films play with. *Vengeance* hews more closely to the straightforward structure of a *telenovela*, without the formal self-reflexivity of these earlier works—though there are times when the divide between diegetic and non-diegetic action seems to slip, as when a character presents his advertising pitch for the beauty products line, which he titles “Wet Dreams.” The room titters—I laughed too—but it's unclear whether the characters are laughing at the innuendo or, as sometimes happens, just randomly. When it comes to the work's characterization of female roles this dynamic becomes more pressing; indeed it is hard to tell in *Vengeance* what is Cyttter's satire of women in the workplace and what is her satire of soap operatic portrayals of women.

The distinction matters, I think, because few films are constructively negative about women in the workplace. The world is not short on sexist portrayals of women, but they are rarely as extreme or explicit as they would need to be to make a point. The subgenre of high school films in which bitchiness is celebrated and punished (*Mean Girls*, 2004, which Tina Fey wrote, or the classic *Heathers*, 1988) suggest the fascination with women acting badly as well as (arguably) an attempt to call it up as a noxious paradigm. *Vengeance* is not as narrowly focused as these films, but as the series progresses, it transitions to a different kind of perspective on female behavior than one is used to. It begins to merge its satire with the emotional upheaval associated with melodrama—that quintessential women's genre—in order to suggest a tragedy of how these women are operating.



Melodrama is a “female genre” in two senses, both in terms of audience and subject matter. It connects individual action to the compass of societal norms, which sit in judgment of the action, and the ideological and moral pressures that create these norms. As has been argued, it historically flourishes during times of moral or ideological insecurity, such as the post-war period in the US or Germany in the 1970s, when both countries were coping with shifts in population and changes to gender roles and national identity, respectively. I would venture to say it's experiencing a resurgence of interest among female filmmakers precisely for its ability to connect issues of femininity to “real issues” of the world we live in. Emily Wardill, for instance, uses it to look at the way that women's bodies are often controlled by outside systems such as psychoanalysis or the welfare state; and the recent film *Aune, or On Effective Demise* (2013) by Finnish artist Maija Timonen looks at a nineteenth-century invalid as an allegory for the mismatch between people's lives and the workings of the late capitalist economy. Cyttter's choice to give melodramatic shades to her satire of US working life should be seen within this larger framework in which melodrama heralds a reaction to a moral or ideological shift. In terms of the facts of Cyttter's own biography, this shift is her relocation to New York (she began working on *Vengeance* after moving to the US from Berlin), and indeed it's true that the satire grows sharper, and her

characterization of women's roles more astute, as the series progresses. But in a larger sense this shift is the move of women into leadership roles in the workplace, and the extent to which women's experience and education in their formative years has been successful in preparing them for a "real world." That these women's behavior smacks of the worst of high school is no accident. Like Wardill's and Timonen's films, *Vengeance* looks at women with an eye to understanding how they function in and amongst structures that are often adversarial to them. Women often aren't taken as seriously at work, and they perhaps do sometimes flirt to get ahead. But *Vengeance* also ventures to point out—lest we forget—that women can be their own worst enemy.



Tina, having upended Rachel, stands up before the audience gathered around a conference table with a smug albeit sexy smile, and delivers her pitch, which, bizarrely, apparently references Lacan on the preservation of social hierarchies: "The daily standard is a damaging tool utilized by social pressure to protect civilization." The women in *Vengeance* seem to know the game is rigged, but still can only get ahead by elbowing each other out of the way. It's a truism of how women operate, and Cytter, in her layered brand of presentation, reveals it as just that: a cliché, and, questionably, a truth.



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