

Drawn into the Vortex

by Hunter Drohojowska

Vortex is a post-modern film, an elegantly styled moving picture of clichés drawn from the Hollywood lexicon. It's a beautiful *film noir*, literally, shot all in darkness and claustrophobic interiors, the visuals in service of a sketchy plot of political intrigue and murder. I say the film is post-modern because most of the film's information is delivered in a sort of shorthand, presuming, I think correctly, that the audience has an intimate knowledge of the movies as a medium. Familiar characters and storylines have been appropriated from the B-movie genre and made into a collage to create a look that almost supercedes content. These elements of the late night movies of the past are employed with ironic self-consciousness, in keeping with post-modern tendencies in architecture and art. There is an Arthur Miller quote, "Entertainment is accepting without resistance; art is accepting with resistance." In post-modern art, those distinctions are blurred. The distance between art and entertainment, art and audience, is compressed. *Vortex* is a movie by artists about entertainment, yet it is entertaining.

Vortex is written, directed and produced by Scott B. and Beth B., a pair of New York artists whose namesake is the B-movie genre. They've acquired a reputation as talented New Wave filmmakers in super 8. This is their first 16mm venture, and their biggest budget to date, around \$100,000. Given the rich effects of this film, that's a figure that should, but won't, shame Hollywood.

Vortex is as memorable for its concept as its story, which is schematic. Lydia Lunch, poet and New York music no-waver, is hilarious as dead-pan private investigator Angel Powers. A high-placed congressman is murdered and Powers is hired by the congressman's aide to catch the man responsible, reclusive millionaire industrialist Frederick Fields, portrayed by Bill Rice. Fields, the symbol of dying capitalism and a man who lives on a diet of white sugar and paranoia, has only one remaining contact with the outside world, his ruthless aide Anthony Demmer, played

with the intensity of James Cagney on speed. The millionaire had ordered the congressman eliminated for taking payola from NAVCO, the competitor for an arms contract with the U.S. defense department. His firm, Fieldsco, is a model of corporate power at its most malevolent, crushing human relationships and busily developing defense weapons and security devices that use behavior modification. Lunch is practically the only savory character in the film, an exhausted holdout of individualism, with lines written in the style of that other individualist, Raymond Chandler, who wrote "The truth is a dead man's secret." Her sleuthing techniques include studying her notes in the bathtub, an adagio seduction of Russo, and a rooftop victory in the end that is pure Hitchcock. In the end, good triumphs over evil, but we are left wondering, to what end.

Vortex stars a number of figures from the New York art world — artists Ann Magnuson and Richard Prince on screen, Charlie Ahearn, Robin Winters and others in the credits — and Beth B. is the daughter of artist Ida Applebroog. The first-rate soundtrack was composed and played by Adele Bertel, formerly of the Contortions, Richard Edson, the Bs, and Lunch. This collaboration of artists and musicians is synergetic — a combusive, wry, amused energy percolates through the film. You have to wonder why there haven't been any similar attempts in L.A., this fecund center of the music, film and art industries. The only such film has been *Young Turks* by Stephen Seemayer, which received positive reviews, including one by me, in part because it was a lone attempt to go beyond the confines of a single art discipline.

Vortex is the product of a garage band philosophy — "Anyone can do it." It reflects the thinking of artists who write, play music, look at movies, and act out their versions of reality on more than one level, in more than one medium. Not all artists can do this, but certainly some artists can, and do it with the discipline inherent in *Vortex*, not a sloppy pseudo-happening in the name of discovery through



Lydia Lunch: *Anyone can do it.*

random chance. Certainly *Vortex* is flawed, mostly a victim of poor pacing, but its sophistication shines through its gaffs, especially in the contrasts of content and style. The title, meaning a situation that draws into its center all that surrounds it, applies to the artistic collaboration as much as to the movie theme. The depressing story of rampant megalomania and murder is delivered with off-handed,

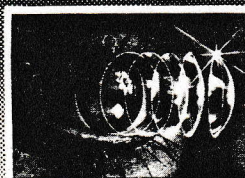
cool nonchalance. The film belongs to members of a generation that don't expect to shock or educate anyone with tales of government and corporate corruption. Today, the hellish political situation is a given, not news to anyone who owns a TV.

The film is full of black humor, the truth expressed as cliché. The filmmakers looked to the dubious future and decided to express it by mining the empty forms of the past. All is fiction. The film ends up as a deconstruction of the B-movie genre. *Vortex* is visually stunning, but instead of manipulating the audience's emotions, the film reveals *how* they are traditionally manipulated. The characters and the plot are stereotypes; they are the skeleton of what might be a typical Hollywood B-movie. It is post-modern savvy, displaying a bitter, satiric understanding of what have come to be working truths. ■

Vortex will play through May 2, at the Fox Venice.

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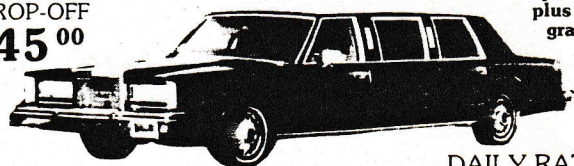
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