**A Double in Different Clothes: Marie Kreutzer’s *Corsage* (2022)**

At the very edge of the short-wave colour spectrum sits violet, which we can see, bordering ultraviolet, which we cannot. When the Impressionists first showed their work in the 1870s, some critics tried to argue that their purple-washed paintings were proof they could see the invisible. Others, like French critic Albert Wolff, reviewing their second exhibition in 1876, took it as a sign of madness, likening their heliotropic visions to the altered perception observed by doctors in female patients with hysteria (see Reutersvärd 1950).

Appropriate, then, that violet is the signature colour of Vicky Krieps’ unruly Empress Elisabeth of Austria, also known as Sisi, a woman whose only duty, as her husband curtly reminds her during an argument, is to appear. The cigarettes she incessantly smokes are lilac Sobranies; her gift to the incapacitated patients in the asylum she often visits, candied violets in tiny, beribboned boxes. When, early in the film, she feigns a fainting attack to escape another tedious royal engagement, she does so in the palest violet-grey outfit, trimmed in feathers. In the next scene, as she instructs her cousin in how to convincingly roll the eyes before falling sideways, we first glimpse of one of *Corsage*’s central concerns: appearances are not to be trusted.

And this film*,* written anddirectedbyMarie Kreutzer, is all about appearances – lasting, false, idealised. It constantly unsettles our biographical orientation by blending historical verisimilitude with contemporary references. *Corsage* thus extends the lineage of New Austrian film, being ‘counter-traditionalist’ in ‘[taking] on the very mechanisms of spectatorial trust in cinema’ (von Dassanowsky and Speck 2011, 1). Its Empress Sisi is a fiction, elements of the historical woman’s life cherry-picked and imaginatively embellished in a sensuous, headstrong telling of one year of her life. The actual woman who lived and died in a long-gone era here serves as the archetype of a woman trapped by gender. As Kreutzer and Krieps have noted in several interviews (see Barraclough 2022; Clarke 2022, Kohn 2022), *Corsage* parallels the symbolic violence still wrought on women in the public eye, most recently exemplified by the vitriolic scrutiny to which Meghan Markle has been subjected by the British tabloid press. Set in 1878, Sisi’s favoured cigarette brand wouldn’t be founded for another year; and the camera with which Louis Le Prince films her, grinning in black and white in the English countryside, not invented for another ten. These ahistorical touches add a slight zaniness to the film, as if the story has been detached from its time and is peering back at us, a double in different clothes.

We meet Sisi in her fortieth year: slowly falling behind the icon of her fabled beauty, continuing a hostile stand-off with her husband, enduring a series of dull engagements, and exercising a lot. She lives in luxury but is a woman confined: putting her horse through its paces in a riding hall as a maid accompanies her on the piano; hanging upside down from gymnastic rings in her private rooms, fencing with Franz Joseph (Florian Teichtmeister) in the palace. During these exertions, she wears the corset that inspires the film’s title: ‘corsage’, both French for the thin blouse worn beneath a corset and the state of living a corseted life. If the corset is ever to escape its narrative function as a symbol of extreme feminine constraint, it certainly won’t be through this film. The corset represents the whole institutional apparatus of royalty and its patriarchal order, but Sisi is an active participant in her confinement through her efforts to maintain the punishing ideal of her younger self. In a way, she excels at it. Her chosen diet is clear broth, wedges of lean meat and orange slices. In an early scene, when a maid announces the centimetres on the tape encircling her cinched waist – ‘43!’ – Sisi demands another be fetched who can pull the laces tighter. She later bitches to her favourite lady-in-waiting, Marie, about another maid, nameless and apparently useless, who doesn’t have the sufficient strength in her hands to do it properly.

You get the impression that Sisi didn’t mind being a renowned beauty before it became a struggle to keep it up, that part of her peevishness is because the praise she once freely received is no longer forthcoming. Instead, she’s criticised for being too skinny, too aloof, not Austrian enough and inattentive to her duties. At one point, Sisi contemplates the roped-off bedroom of her daughter, Sophie, who died in infancy and whose portrait hangs on the wall. She remarks to a nearby maid that Sophie was never really that droll or chubby in life, but “at least we leave behind a pretty picture of her”.

Watching Krieps as Sisi, iconic braided coiffure and all, it is difficult not to remember that this queen, too, left behind a pretty picture that stands in for her. Yet the serene catalogue of her afterlives – the many portraits that survive, the saccharine Romy Schneider movies, even Chanel’s short film starring Cara Delevingne with the house’s camellias instead of stars in her hair – are rebutted by this prickly reimagining. Here, Sisi is petulant, alternately affectionate and cruel to the women who wait on her, selfish, bored, compassionate, desperate. In other words, she is portrayed as a dimensional woman trapped behind a public image that threatens to erase her, an image which is all anyone really wants from her – even her own daughter, a child who chastises Sisi for the impropriety of smoking in public.

Watching the film, I was reminded of Teresa De Lauretis’s comment that ‘there is no such thing as a historical film […] All that a film can do is to document […] the history of its own time, the history of its present’ (2008, 1). While *Corsage* certainly points us towards other famously imaged women who chafed under the scrutiny and expectation that came with their position, its underlying message is more ambiguous, and more painful. It shows the futility of succeeding at hegemonic femininity, despite its pleasures and partial rewards: render yourself, if you can, a beautiful object, thin, lovely, admired. Marry, bear his children, bear more. And then? What then? Having produced an heir to guarantee the continuation of the Habsburgs, there is little left for her to do. Rather, Sisi’s feminine achievements have become a standard impossible to maintain and a role already fulfilled. Lots of men gaze at her, but few wish to speak to her or listen to what she has to say. Her own husband has no interest in discussing the ongoing war in Sarajevo, despite her repeated efforts to engage him. Instead, she is loved in the manner of a beautiful child: adored when she is good, tolerated when she is not.

Little wonder that Sisi sours as her continued success at self-control fails to produce the freedom, influence and recognition she so craves. Instead, she skirts the edge of invisibility and begins to dance with it. This Sisi exhibits several symptoms identified in the 19th century hysteric – she flirts with unsuitable sexual partners; she has a disordered relationship with food, she is manipulative towards her maids. And rippling constantly throughout, the impression that she is suffocating – whether testing how long she can hold her breath under bathwater, or in the welts striating her back after her corset is removed, or screaming in front of Louis Le Prince’s camera, soundless words lost to the mountains which also do not hear her. Like so many women preceding her, women around her and women to come, Sisi longs for the impossible: release.

It is the patients she frequently visits with whom she recognises a kind of kindredness: the soldiers convalescing in hospital after being sacrificed to her husband’s war and the dumb inmates of an asylum. Sisi’s class and position, her beautiful wardrobe and movement through these spaces, distinguish her from the abject people she passes, but the parallel between them is clear: their mutual suffering inflicted by the same inescapable system. During one visit, Sisi crouches by a woman, red-faced and straitjacketed in a scorching bath. A doctor explains that she is receiving this treatment because her grief at the loss of her baby was excessive – that she should be able to take consolation in her several remaining children. In another, the empress recognises a man sitting on the edge of his bed, seemingly lobotomised. “Don’t you remember me?” She asks, smiling. “Last time I was here, you told me I was pretty.” A noise distracts her, and she turns to silently observe: a woman who, bound to her bed by her wrists and ankles, screams, and thrashes, and screams.

Vicky Krieps is glorious in character, a luminously beautiful, dissatisfied woman who wants to be watched but resents that her only function is representational. Returning to her rooms after her fake fainting attack, she briefly stares the camera down as she strides up a stairwell, hands full of skirt, a pair of Salukis bounding around her in languid slow motion. Over the top plays the film’s theme by French songwriter Camille: ‘Go, go, go/ Go away’.

The world Sisi inhabits is revealed to be a sham: shabby, stiff and phony. Yet it imprisons her nonetheless. She tries to flee the stultifying court several times but never gets very far. In one scene, she jumps out of a palace window only to break her leg and have her cousin joke over breakfast that if she’s going to try to kill herself again to please not do so in his lake. In private, bristly sideburns are peeled off and placed in a box, and false teeth wait overnight to be tucked back onto rotted gums. Much later in the film, the falsity of appearances forms a smokescreen behind which Sisi finds a way to disappear, leaving an image in her stead. This is the deal, the film tells us: accept that you will be bound again and again by a system that confines you to an allocated space and tells you to find happiness there, or let your suffering lay bare a path “of *refusal*, an escape, a *rejection*” (Cixous and Clément 1986, 14). Even crowned with immense privilege, Sisi cannot bear her position and embraces a different annihilation: one she has chosen for herself. As she begins to chart her path finally and irrevocably away, she cuts off her famous hair. We see it draped over the back of a chair, magnificent and alive as an animal. In the next scene, as her hairdresser sobs over the gorgeous, disembodied hanks, Sisi sits nearby, on the floor, eating a little box of candied violets.

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