

The Northman

Today, Reflected in the Gore of Yore

John Thackary

2022

a review of
“The Northman”

Dir: Robert Eggers, 2022

There was an unavoidable discomfort in my bones upon deciding to view “The Northman.” It felt difficult to ignore how, from advertisements, the film’s early Norse historical setting seemed like unfortunate—if unintentional—catnip for fascists with a tendency for perverting Paganism to justify ideologies of volkisch nationalism. And yet, I was happily surprised.

What “The Northman” admittedly lacks in dramatic performance, it more than makes up for with a moving, mysterious artistry which, fittingly, could be called Pagan as much as it could be called cinematic; an affectionate immersion into the anarchic borderlessness of nature, the un-linearity of time, and the aching intimacy of reciprocal human relation; the type of perspective which, by its very definition, also happens to take a proverbial fist to the philosophical jaw of anything resembling fascism whatsoever.

In this adaptation of an ancient Scandinavian myth (one which also happens to have been the source material for the more famous drama “Hamlet”), we follow a young medieval prince by the name of Amleth embarking on a quest to avenge the murder of his father and the kidnapping of his mother by the titular character’s power-hungry uncle Fjornir (Claes Bang) in pursuit of the throne. As Amleth weathers maternal betrayal, he questions the meaning of “destiny,” and bonds with the earth-witch Olga (Anya Taylor-Joy), through whom he finds an ally and lover with the potential to entice him back to the world of sensitivity once more.

The film’s second act (with the protagonist’s older version now played by a hulking Alexander Skarsgaard) deals an especially effective gut-punch of sorrow in its portrayal of the bloodthirsty pillaging life the exiled Prince has since fallen into. The tonally incisive reservedness of this section’s violence strips the acts of romanticization, as if lamenting a tragic social avoidability—bringing to mind work from researchers like Barbara Ehrenreich positing the origins of mass-war’s irresistible camaraderie as perhaps a misplacement of desire for spiritual awe once found within the tangled web of nature.

Fortunately, the film also seems to subtly negate right-wing myths of early European ethnic purity. One scene smartly stomps upon the idea of Norse spirituality ever existing as a monolith, in briefly contrasting the misappropriated polytheism of the story’s landed-aristocrat villains with the vagabond Paganism of its scrappy heroes.

In the less systematized, more intimate and unpredictable methods of revenge, the styles of guidance ineffable in their logic which characters embodying the latter enact, we’re reminded of nature itself, or rather of nature’s inconsistency; the simultaneous beauty and raw destructive power that has for thousands of years struck such fear into the hearts of those thirsting for control that they have subsequently, foolishly endeavored to tame.

A flustered Fjornir deems gory murders of his henchmen by Olga and Amleth as “trollish magic” for which “his gods” could never be responsible. Perhaps historical roots run deeper than we give credit for in regard to who

defines the sacred and—as a frequent result—who is granted candidacy for genocide if their modes of worship don't line up with those of groups in power.

To borrow analyses from historian Cedric Robinson—it's clear that even before the horrors of the Middle Passage and the racist enterprise of “discovering” the New World, intra-European racial caste systems had existed in addition. Perhaps “The Northman” doesn't so much ignore race as it shows us a particularly embryonic version of it, in all its sinister complexity.

An area where the film comes off as more direct, however, is in an entrancing, paradoxical play between actors and camera. Two moments of note soar with adrenaline thanks to their performers' dedicated physicality and the camera's insistence upon obscuring them.

The two leads do seem to struggle a bit with their characters' vocality. From time to time, Skarsgaard delivers his lines in default action-hero mode, and Taylor-Joy's more heavily Scandinavian accent comes off as somewhat stiff. And yet their feelings are, without doubt, there.

When these feelings get embodied in some of their most visceral forms—a moonlit battle between Amleth and a Guardian Spirit in a dust clogged catacomb, or the concluding, cathartic battle between Nephew and Uncle through a volcano mouth's ash-plumes—it feels as if our inability to visually make out characters' features amid the debris becomes part of the thrill. Going off of nothing but vague motion and the shrieks of survival which accompany them, it is as if the emotion of the action—not its morphological detail—becomes the stunt itself.

Despite these sounding dour, delight still finds airtime in this project. Director/Co-Writer Robert Eggers' flare for macabre humor feels tempered here compared to his earlier work, but still not entirely absent. Amleth and Olga's relationship oddly reads as one of the most tender romances—if limited by brevity and period-specific norms of affection—that I've seen put to film in recent memory.

A brief, forest-set sex scene filmed from afar under moonglow, frames the couple as but one of many interlocking pieces of natural beauty. Goosebumps abound when Taylor-Joy unleashes her performance of Olga desperately casting a spell in a moment of anguish for her beloved. And the same actor's line-reading of the sentence “I'm not finished with you yet,” in a scene of sensuality and healing, possesses such genuine warmth as to sound like a heartrending invitation to calm rather than the pronouncement of intent for non-consensual sexual domination that it may sound like on paper. As was once noted by Afro-latinx transdisciplinary artist, bronte velez, may be the relinquishing of control can feel orgasmic in certain contexts of sexual and non-sexual action; when the line blurs between care and power, and a surrender to generosity can surface.

But what is particularly thoughtful is “The Northman's examination of vengeance and its relation to time. Its finale conceptualizes the serving of self and care for others as not only possible in tandem, but even interdependent. Pain of past wrongs upon you, concern for future retribution upon your loved ones once you achieve your vengeance, and the helplessness of present endeavors to enact one's vengeance, have the potential to all be resolved in a single moment; time in a loop, like seasons in a year, wherein death means not the act of ceasing to exist, but the shifting of shape.

If fascism is the forced retreat to a horrific mythic past, and utopian leftism is binary-minded social acceleration which sacrifices the present, in all its amorphous possibility, for the sake of dogmatically conceptualized, non-amorphous futures, then Paganism—one of many concepts of Indigeneity, closeness with the land, knowledge of its cycles and their interpersonal analogues—is the rejection of both these linear trajectories.

Perhaps life feels closer, the flesh more vulnerable to intimacy in all its fleetingness, when we pause, find the balance in valuing every tense equally, find joy where we can. If we stop relying on the idea of a one-way arrow of history, a justification for martyring ourselves, then cycles can allow for autonomy. Interpersonal, not ideological, accountability to others and ourselves. Nourishment and consequences on one's own terms. You make your bed. You lie in it. You attract what you put out. You end as you begin.

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