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**Coming Soon to Acropolis**

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ABOUT THE FILM

An old woman's voice recalls a terrible event from her distant past: on a summer night in 1996, five teenage girls meet in a suburban house, absent of parental supervision. To pass the time, they begin to tell morbid stories of the world outside, trying to best one another in a grim competition. As the night becomes darker and their play becomes more serious, their world of fiction is consumed by reality in this feverish Decameron-in-miniature.

98 min. | U.S.A. | 2019

In person: Graham Swon and Ayla Guttman

In Conversation: Graham Swon with Gina Telaroli

The following interview was originally published in the Brooklyn Rail, October 2019

Gina Telaroli: I'm curious about your transition from producing to directing and how your work as a producer might have informed the movie, in how you made it or even in the story (stories!) you decided to tell?

Graham Swon: I am just trying to make movies exist, and functioning in whatever form is most useful for that. So, while of course the roles are different, I didn't find it to be such a huge transition. I think most "independent" directors are also working as producers, whether they take that credit or not—the structure of production directly leads to the final aesthetic, and I think this is even more evident when you are working with limited resources. Before I was producing films, I was writing and directing theater. I find it all to be part of the same basic process.

For what it's worth, I do find I feel a lot of connection to films made by producer-directors: Roger Corman, Howard Hawks, Andy Warhol, Val Lewton (the last not a director by credit, but unquestionably an auteur.) I don't know if that affinity is because I've worked in both roles, or if I've worked in both roles because of that affinity.

To answer the question of why these stories, it's a bit more complex. I am very interested in true crime, but I find the way their stories tend to be treated in cinema rather nauseating, and exploitative of the pain of the victims for the pleasure of the viewer. I wanted to find a way to approach this subject matter which felt to me, for lack of a better word, ethical. How to make a horror film that would respect its victims, and perhaps make its viewers think about them in a different manner.

Swon: I guess I am very classical in this sense. I am interested in working with traditional actors, rather than friends or colleagues; I don't know why that has somehow become abnormal in our circles. Many independent filmmakers may feel they lack the resources to find actors, but it is completely achievable. We received several hundred applications and auditioned around 40, first individually and then in groups. It was important they all could exist logically together, but also represent their own little worlds.

They were completely focused and professional. I tried to learn from watching them, to find ways to let their mannerisms and personalities inform the characters. We rehearsed as much as possible, especially for the long stories. I don't think working with teenagers is particularly different from working with any other actor, other than that perhaps they are more fully committed than most adults, and that you have to be extra conscientious of working hours and other restrictions.

Peggy Steffans was a different matter, and no audition was necessary there. She was my first choice to use as the narrator, and I was thrilled when she accepted. She has a marvelous voice, and I am a huge fan of the work she has done in the past, particularly with Adolfas Mekas and her late husband, Joe Sarno.

Rail: Speaking of the narration, I'm curious about when and how that came into the picture? The earlier cut I saw didn't have any and I'm wondering what made you realize that another kind of storytelling was needed?

Swon: It was in the script, but not the first cut. Once I locked the edit, I rewrote and expanded it, as I realized it was a tool that could give me more freedom to choose what to retain; it was at this moment I decide to ask Peggy, and to place the narrator in the future rather than the present. I always liked that the entire film is another story being told. I can't really imagine the film without it anymore.

Rail: As a filmmaker who has long been using extended dissolves/compositing in my own work, I was wondering if you could talk a bit about the use of dissolves in Secrets? Alongside the narration, they provide an interesting connective tissue throughout the film.

Swon: It's the haze of memory, images that are diffuse instead of concrete. The principle sensation I want to achieve is that of watching a film late at night, drifting in and out of consciousness, struggling to hold on to each image—it's an underutilized technique. I think there are so many possibilities in cinema that are often ignored in narrative work. I was interested to bring in some ideas you see in experimental cinema—superimpositions, extreme duration—and put them into a narrative context. Also, I just adore the feeling of this effect. Hard cuts are so violent... I like to think of a film as one continuous image. And of course, this is one of the reasons I love your piece, Silk Tatters (2015), so much.

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Rail: It’s a rare thing these days to see a low-to-no-budget NYC independent film that isn’t cast with the same rotating group of actors/NYC film scene people. I’d love to hear more about your casting process and what it was like working with teenage girls?

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**Acropolis Cinema presents:**

Graham Swon’s

*The World Is Full of Secrets*

January 31, 2020 – 8:00pm – Echo Park Film Center

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www.acropoliscinema.com