



Wicked West: Close-Up on Neïl Beloufa’s “Occidental”

Neïl Beloufa’s second feature takes a bite of the poison of our times, blending thriller and comedy to avoid the notion of static identity.

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Close-Up is a feature that spotlights films now playing on MUBI. Neïl Beloufa’s *Occidental* (2017) is showing January 10 – February 8, 2019 exclusively on MUBI.



In the age of globalization, French-Algerian visual artist Neïl Beloufa addresses the slippery slope of human interaction, empathy, and prejudice, cloaked in kitsch 1970s hotel environment. Shot entirely at his own studio south of Paris, *Occidental* is his second feature film, yet Beloufa’s career is prolific with mixed media installations and docu-fiction short films. By setting the time and tone of the film fifty years in the past, the artist makes a clear commentary on the contemporary state of exception, exemplified by protests, suspicions, homophobia, and racism—all of it glazed in vivid reds, greens, and pink, soaked in a moody score. *Occidental* is both a critical nod and a tribute to an imagined, capitalized, pseudo-tolerant, Wicked West.

The film is centered around the Parisian hotel *Occidental*, a temporary home to two gentlemen, Antonio (Idir Chender) and Giorgio (Paul Hamy), who present themselves as Italian. Whereas their accent at times disappears, or they exhibit suspicious behavior in the form of drinking two cans of Coca-Cola (“Italians don’t drink Coke!”), the two men are set to spend the night in the hotel’s honeymoon suite. Their extravagant clothing—haptic yellow furry coat and black tracksuit—also draws attention to their mystical personas. Their arrival stirs up the existing tensions in the hotel lobby, where manager Diana (Anna Ivacheff) is determined to catch them in the act (of stealing?), while receptionist Romy (Louise Orry-Diquéro) is passive and smitten by their charms. Influenced by Nicholas Ray’s *Johnny Guitar* (1954) and Ernst Lubitsch’s *Trouble In Paradise* (1932), the film is a thriller-comedy, closing off representatives of all societal levels in a confined, dramatic space. Its isolation, heavily driven by the characters’ shifting dispositions towards each other, testify to how morality and suspicion is a product of convention, as well as to the fluid notion of identity. The hotel’s name mocks the grandiose, almost colonialist names of big hotel, such as Best Western, Imperial, Continental—*Occidental* here stands for a micro-cosmos that dissolves into entropy. Boxed up with images in a square aspect ratio, the film often shifts to CCTV clips, providing alternative points of view, as the camera is at once present within the hotel social circle, and objectively recording the behavior of occupants. The oscillation between subjective and objective is also present in Beloufa’s play on fact and fiction. Whereas his art is predominantly concerned with the delineations between fictional and documentary approaches, *Occidental* is a meta-take on that same opposition. While the film is fictional, as well as its characters, the debate on truthfulness and folly has shifted towards people’s inner conversations, intuitions, and convictions. The mystery of Antonio and Giorgio’s presence in the hotel is amplified by Diana’s suspicion, and deflated by the police’s subsequent arrival. The dynamics of one’s belief and one’s disbelief are also in constant flux, as in turn Romy and the assistant Khaled (Hamza Meziani) are convinced and then defensive of the strangers’ fault. Throwing accusations on the basis of their sexuality, nationality, and race, the discourse is already fraught with lies and truth—equally probable.

In a world of fake news and the fear of media manipulations, seeing how a similar debate unfolds and accelerates is disconcerting. The distilled environment of the hotel reception provides the perfect surrounding for a social experiment and commentary: since the cusp of modernity, hotels have been treated as a transitory space. As a temporary home, its exchange of identity for services seems rather appropriate: you can easily be anyone. The possibility of fluid (or fake identity) is marked by the hotel’s topical lack of specificity: as an intensified household, it is not bound by expectations and familiar faces. Such a notion of identity inspires the mystery thread in *Occidental*, and the characters all contribute to the fearful notion of phantasma, a phantasmagorical danger that transcends its imaginary nature to do physical harm. In the film, the hyperbolized phantasma is represented by a raving pink fire, an almost mythological culmination when there is nothing else to be done with (potential) criminality.

Occidental is a film about representation, both aesthetic with its flamboyant setting, grim saturated colors, as well as with characters externalizing their emotional turmoil. Behaviorism and social roles are acted out, rather than reflected upon; Neil Beloufa’s film is not an image of our societal misbehavior, it is an film-style observation of group dynamics and the mechanisms of power. Prompted by a sincere curiosity, *Occidental*

bites into the gritty side of human interaction, making the spectator distrust its characters and nonetheless believe their convictions.

By the end of the film, when Giorgio claims Diana is his lost lover, evoking episodes of their supposed meeting, it seems the accuser and the accused are bound not only by mutual finger-pointing. As the hotel space imbues its walls with (fictional?) memories, the ending sequence recalls dialogue from Alais Resnais' hotel-set *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). This dissolution into pretense or memory is ultimately a political gesture towards Beloufa's understanding of the role of art. By exposing its own artificiality, art should lay bare its own material without communicating any linear, thus ideological message. Neil Beloufa lets the viewer coin his or her own message, choose to believe or to suspend disbelief, indulge in "bad fiction," by making a conscious decision to participate. As a reminder of our own imperfections, whether personal or of our times, *Hotel Occidental* is missing one of its three stars, thus reduced from luxury to shady grunge. Maybe we are that one missing star, capable of its own reconstruction, whether factual or fictitious.

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