

CIFF 2017: Jakob Lass on “Tiger Girl”

By Indie Outlook October 24.2017



The cinema of German filmmaker Jakob Lass is characterized by an intoxicating energy. His camera and characters are always on the move, involving us in their adventures with such playfulness and unpredictability that we can't help but be enthralled. I fell for his 2013 romance, “Love Steaks,” when I stumbled upon it on Netflix, and when I heard that Lass would be screening his latest picture, “Tiger Girl,” at the Chicago International Film Festival, I placed it right at the top of my priority list.

On the heels of her stellar turn in Julia Ducournau’s “Raw,” Ella Rumpf stars as Tiger, a rebellious free spirit who may or may not embody the mischievous id of the timid girl she dubs “Vanilla” (Maria Dragus). As the friendship between Tiger and Vanilla grows, so does the audacity of their schemes, as they don police uniforms to intimidate unsuspecting men. There are distinct echoes of “Fight Club” in the deftly subtle ways Lass blurs the young women’s identities, causing us to question whether both characters are different sides of the same person. The film is immensely provocative, increasingly unsettling and often quite funny.

Prior to his film’s CIFF premiere this past weekend, Lass took the time to chat with me about his ingenious approach to filmmaking, his disinterest in “polite art” and why day-and-date release strategies shouldn’t repel movie lovers.

Were you surprised to hear your films referred to in the press as “German Mumblecore”?

It surprised me because I hadn’t known about any of the American Mumblecore filmmakers. I was not familiar with the term “mumblecore,” and it’s weird to be connected to something that falls outside your own frame of reference. The same thing happened to many different filmmakers in Germany. Their work was placed under this label, even though they weren’t referencing films that had been previously referred to as “mumblecore.” We may have been inspired by each other, and a lot of us know each other, but I didn’t know anything at all about the American Mumblecore movement. Since then, I’ve seen some of those films, have liked what I’ve seen so far and have been able to draw the connections. I also understand the mechanics of labeling, but my films were made with no purposeful connection to those other movies.

My own list of filmmaking rules that I’ve developed is called FOGMA. It is a clear reference to Dogme 95 and is inspired by that movement’s self-imposed restrictions, which are designed to elevate

your creativity and give you even more freedom. I tend to have less and less text written down as the shoot approaches. The script is reduced to a few sentences per scene— like two or three, maximum four sentences—and there’s no dialogue. It simply describes what must happen—how the plot will turn, the movement in the narrative, etc. There are cases in which I’ve invented scenes on the spot, depending on what the circumstances were. If there was something interesting happening, I’d try to somehow integrate it into the narrative and then have my actors be a part of it. For example, the weird party that the characters go to in “Love Steaks” was something we just happened to learn about that day. We heard that there would be this party and we talked with the organizers to see if it would be possible to shoot there. After the rights were cleared, we sent in the actors, and it resulted in some beautiful moments on camera.

What attracts you to exploring the female gaze so refreshingly in your work? Even in films marketed to women in America, such as “Fifty Shades of Grey,” it’s always the female nudity being prioritized, whereas in your films, you flip that convention on its head.

I like nudity, but I don’t like when it is unbalanced. I feel like the only just and legitimate way to put nudity in movies is how I’ve gone about utilizing it. It’s for fun, of course, but I also feel that it’s important. I have read statistics on nudity in film and the percentages regarding the gender imbalance are shocking. Exploring the vulnerable side of men on film is a lot of fun, and it’s something that everyone should embrace. Vulnerability is so important and when you accept that side of yourself, it makes you a stronger and more holistic person in the end. Our fear of being vulnerable is one of the most terrible things that has happened to us as men.

I loved the scene in “Love Steaks” where Lara (Lana Cooper) places the frozen meat on the body of Clemens, played by your frequent collaborator, Franz Rogowski. How did you and Franz first begin working together?

In the beginning, I asked him to do choreography for a short film of mine. One of the actors didn’t show up, so we asked Franz to perform in a small scene. There’s a moment where the two main characters are sitting on a bench and it was Franz’s job to sit between them. He did such a great job at just sitting there that his 15 seconds of screen time ended up being the best part of the short. From that moment, I knew that he was an amazing actor and at that time, he had never acted in a movie before. He was a dancer and a choreographer. Now he’s a really hard-working actor and has been making films with some of the greatest directors in Germany as well as internationally. I think he has a very sensitive way of approaching a given moment and he has very distinct humor that I love so much. He’s not afraid to get his character into difficult or awkward situations. That’s such an important quality to have in improvisation. You can’t be afraid that your character will possibly end up as the loser of the situation. He does that with such grace, and it’s so much fun to watch.

Maria Dragus also came from the world of dance, and I’ve greatly admired the entrancing, subtly nuanced pokerface of her characters in films such as “The White Ribbon” and “Graduation.” I’ve never seen her more outwardly expressive than she is in “Tiger Girl.”

I knew that I had to cast Ella Rumpf as Tiger, even though she was much younger than I had wanted her character to be in the first place. I wanted Tiger to be in her mid-20s, but that would’ve resulted in a different movie altogether. Ella and Maria were both 21 when we shot the film. I had a really hard time finding someone who could complement Ella and be a great Vanilla. It was actually Ella herself who introduced me to Maria, because they had worked together when they were teenagers. Maria had never done improvisation on such a big scale and she had to jump in very closely to the shoot, so it was tough at first. Even though she is a very experienced actress, it was a huge step for her— particularly considering the huge arc of her character’s evolution—and she did a great job. We shot the film in sequence, and the dynamic that Ella and Maria had already forged in their own lives certainly influenced what you see in the film, though their characters are very different from who they are in real life. We put a lot of effort into defining the stages of their development throughout the shoot, and the dynamic between their characters didn’t come easily.

When I [interviewed Maria](#) earlier this year, she told me that she hadn't considered the feminist elements in the film—placing women in roles of authority normally reserved for men—until the enthusiastic audience response at Berlinale.

That feminist angle was an intent of mine in the beginning, but then I forgot about it while I was shooting the film. I was simply immersed in the story. I'm a little hesitant to label the film in any way. This might be considered a feminist movie today because it has complex female characters, but I sincerely hope that in a few years, it will be considered normal, everyday business. The title "Tiger Girl" came to me very quickly, and one of my main inspirations for the film was this idea of a character who is almost supernatural. She's practically not of this world but is still somehow in between.

You're also exploring the sociopathic tendencies of police officers who feel invincible because of their uniforms.

That was an even bigger topic for me that I was trying to approach in a not-too-direct way with this film. What happens when you give people institutional power and what does it do to them? How much institutionalized power do we want to give individuals and what measures must be taken in order to control those individuals? We need some sort of feedback loop that is controlling those who are monitoring us. I think that's a very important topic, and it will be increasingly important as the years progress.

I was really struck by Tiger's observation, "Politeness is a form of violence against yourself." Does that statement reflect your own beliefs regarding the dangers of overly polite art?

Yes! This line is also in the trailer, and some commenters online have misunderstood it, writing, "We have so many impolite young people already! Where is this heading?" But politeness, in this case, is not the same thing as empathy or caring for one another. Those are human values I strongly believe in. Fake politeness, on the other hand, is a form of violence. I like what you said about polite art. I don't see any need for it. Art should be disturbing to some degree, and it should be challenging you somehow as a viewer. That's what I expect from any work of art—that it will challenge me to redefine my beliefs. I see many movies that aren't challenging but preaching—either directly or indirectly—and I think that's a very bad thing. We've gotten so used to watching movies that have a very open message and you just go, "I'll put the message aside and just enjoy the movie." I would really challenge this habit of making movies that preach beliefs as opposed to open new questions. Great art should ultimately make you want to start thinking for yourself.

Do you feel the simultaneous theatrical and online release that you desired for "Love Steaks" is the way of the future for filmmakers?

I still believe that it should be the future, especially for smaller films that have a niche audience, but I'm backing up a little bit from this political dance floor. I spoke out about this topic at the time of releasing "Love Steaks," and it was the right timing, but there's so very little flexibility on this issue, and also so much fear. All I want is to get my movie to audiences, and I love when they see it in the theater. We worked for months on the sound design and finding the perfect colors. On a laptop, the colors are transported quite well, but the sound is really bad. The technical aspects are merely one benefit of going to the cinema. Getting the chance to experience a film with strangers and laugh along with them is a great thing. The best moments I've had in a theater are when I've felt connected with a group of anonymous people. They're feeling pretty much the same as I am in that moment, and that's something you can't recreate in your home cinema.

This is just one of the big challenges that the invention of the internet has brought to us. We are not catching up with the internet in so many places, not just in the film industry. The day-and-date release strategy opens up more options for people to see your film in places where the film isn't available in theaters. People who aren't adapting to new technologies will be having trouble later on, which is a

sad thing. We really wanted to include cinema owners in our “Love Steaks” release, but they were the people who were against it. They felt that such a release would threaten their business, but I don’t believe that to be the case. People will always want the theatrical experience, regardless of the options at their disposal.

“Love Steaks” is currently available on Netflix.