Lance Lubelski

Sleeping Beauty. Dir. Julia Leigh. Perf. Emily Browning, Rachel Bates, Ewen Leslie. Screen Australia/ Magic Films/ Screen NSW, 2011. Film.

Lucy (Emily Browning) is the bored, dull, shallow protagonist of Julia Leigh's first feature film. Lucy moves from the life of a student working a series of jobs, snorting cocaine in restaurant bathrooms, and having sex with strange men (they decide who will sleep with Lucy with a coin toss), to the surprisingly underwhelming decision to become a prostitute in a remote mansion, serving rich old men drinks in white lingerie. She then agrees to be sedated for a succession of nights while rich men do what they please to her "sleeping" body. Is this the source for the title of the film, or does "Sleeping Beauty" refer to Lucy's generally soporific approach to life? Both interpretations may be accurate. At any rate, the climax of her job as the "Sleeping Beauty" is not cathartic but preposterous, contrived, unbelievable, and frankly maddening.

The film is, I think, supposed to be about the pervasiveness and banality of the contemporary sex trade even in First World countries like Australia, where the film is presumably set. The film is actually a vehicle for all parties involved — filmmakers and cast alike — to gaze at and objectify the body of the lithe and pale Lucy. However the film fails since Browning's Lucy is unappealing, dispassionate and filmed in ways that neutralize any sex appeal she may hold for the viewer. Lucy's character, Browning's performance, and indeed every facet of the film are inert and lifeless, devoid of entertainment and cinematic value.

Lucy behaves in ways that defy reason and remain unexplained. Similarly, the film itself moves forward because it has to, without the decisions of the characters or the technical aspects of the presentation conveying any deeper meaning. This is art-house fare at its most hackneyed, lacking in either the creepiness of *Eyes Wide Shut* or the acting acumen of the performers in the more recent *Shame*. Why does Lucy work a series of menial jobs, as office assistant, waitress, experimental subject, and eventually prostitute, all of which she clearly abhors? Is it for the money? This possibility seems nullified when she returns to her flat from one of these jobs only to burn some of the money she has just earned. Does she

do these jobs because she is a bored young woman, unable or unwilling to spend a sober and reflective moment alone? Possibly, but if this is so, why is she bored? What is her background? The viewer only learns two pieces of information about her past in the entire film. First, she has a mother to whom she lends money, since she gives her mother her credit card information during a phone call. Second, she has a friend (a boyfriend?) called Birdmann (Ewen Leslie) whom she sees and cares for as he is apparently dying. Both of these pieces of information suggest that Lucy is a kind and generous person, but this is not manifested in any of her other actions in the film, a shortcoming to be blamed entirely on the screenplay.

Leigh is concerned with surfaces, not depth. She hopes that cold, precise, clean surfaces will convey meaning that neither the screenplay nor Browning can provide. These surfaces do not convey meaning, but instead lead to a very drawn-out, tortuously dull viewing experience. The film's few promising moments are left unexplored. We learn no more about Lucy's relationship with her mother. We do not know exactly why she denies that her "vagina is a temple," as her madam asserts. We do not know why she burns the money, or why she rents an expensive high-rise apartment after starting work as a prostitute. She is not interested in what money can buy her or in the people around her. She is also not depicted as particularly unhappy, just passive and cold, closed-off like a marble statue or a mausoleum.

All of this begs still further questions: what does Leigh think of Lucy? Of women in general? Of men? Of her audience? The answer is, I think, the same for all of these: not much. Lucy is not heroic or unheroic — she is just there. As much as the men, the women in this film exploit Lucy, who Leigh perhaps believes deserves it. And Leigh is not at all opposed to boring her audience to tears while also objectifying a beautiful and perhaps promising young actress in Browning.

And what about Browning the actress? As of late, she has acted in this film and in *Sucker Punch*, both of which exploit her body for no other reason than for exploitation's sake. Why has she made these professional decisions? This reviewer hopes that Browning will have better choices in the future and seize them.

Works Cited

Eyes Wide Shut. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman, Todd Field. Warner Bros. 1999. Film.

Shame. Dir. Steve McQueen. Perf. Michael Fassbender, Carey Mulligan, James Badge. See-Saw Films / Film4, 2011. Film.

Sucker Punch. Dir. Zack Snyder. Perf. Emily Browning, Vanessa Hudgens, Abbie Cornish. Warner Bros. / Legendary Pictures, 2011. Film.

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