



VeZZOli

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"It's like a painting in motion, so you see many different aspects of the characters without being burdened by a big plot," says Gore Vidal of Italian artist Francesco Vezzoli's *A Trailer for the Remake of Gore Vidal's Caligula*, an allegory of decadence, madness and imperialism. The impressive cast – Helen Mirren, Benicio Del Toro, Courtney Love and Milla Jovovich among them – re-enact key scenes of the notorious 70s blockbuster, creating an almost ironic pastiche. But with a straight-faced introduction and voice-over by Gore himself, the five and a half minute video becomes believable, respectable; a powerful parody of the Bocchanonian excesses of the art world and society today.

Caligula is Vezzoli's most famous work, and is already part of the permanent collections of the Tate Modern and The Whitney Museum. His patrons include The Prada Foundation and, most recently, François Pinault, who commissioned *Marlene Redux: A True Hollywood Story*.

Marlene Redux has little to do with the original documentary on which it is based. With Vezzoli as the central character, we are taken back to his childhood in Italy, to meet his art savvy parents. In trash TV fashion, the documentary accelerates through a review of his career. We see an outtake of the Prada Foundation commissioned reality TV show spoof *Non Love Meeting (Le Comizi di Non Amore)*, which featured Catherine Deneuve, Marianne Faithfull, Jeanne Moreau and Antonella Lualdi (the star of Pasolini's 1964 film *Comizi d'Amore*). It also explores the flip side to his video work: his embroidery. (For the installation at the Prada Foundation show in the 51st Venice Biennale entitled *120 Seats of Sodom*, Vezzoli had images of the characters from the Pasolini documentary printed on 120 Rennie Mackintosh "Argyle" chairs and then embroidered them with tears – a conceptual bridge to Pasolini's film *The 120 Days of Sodom*.) It also flashes back to earlier pieces like *The End of the Human Voice* featuring Bianca Jagger talking on the phone to "her lover" Vezzoli, a direct reference to Warhol's film *Lupe*.

Redux takes a turn after we are shown how the success of *Trailer* and the pressure of the new Pinault commission has impacted on the life of this "sensitive artist". The original documentary on Marlene Dietrich was made by Maximilian Schell in 1984 when she was 83 years old and living as a recluse. Marlene never actually appears in the film, but on set is Anni Albers, the wife of Josef Albers. As refugees from Nazi Germany and as the main instigators behind the infamous Black Mountain College, it was Anni and Josef who brought the Bauhaus and modernist theory to American art. *Redux* shows some brief outtakes from scenes shot with a character actress playing Anni Albers, but little else references the original film.

We soon enter a future fantasy nightmare where Vezzoli falls into a spiral of self-abuse. Like a rock star in swift decline, we see interviews with rent boys betraying his sexual deviances, and we see Vezzoli unable to deal with the notoriety that now surrounds him. *Marlene Redux* ends in tragedy with the death of the artist. Metaphysically he has become Marlene, Anni, and in the end, as the film climaxes, he becomes a *Caligula*-like exaggeration of himself. His own (staged) death in *Marlene Redux* is a coded, sexualised encounter with media fetishism and celebrity desire.

Another Man: What's the thinking behind *Marlene Redux*?

FV: My work is about studying the fine line and finding out where the boundary between art discourse and entertainment get blurred. So I thought what if an artist was profiled in the style of an E! channel *True Hollywood Story* – the perfect metaphor for our gossip, celebrity obsessed world.

AM: The premise was to retell *Marlene*, and in a way you failed. But from that came the new piece. From the ashes of *Marlene* came the idea to do a *True Hollywood Story*. A story of failure and deprecation.

FV: The roots of this failure relied on the weight of the commission. I have so much respect for François Pinault. For me, knowing that the greatest collector in the world was behind it was great...

AM: ...and then you became Marlene...

FV: ...I became Marlene, the unpleasant star. In a way, it was the most unpleasant project I have done. It was some fun, but it was difficult.

AM: It didn't seem natural for you to become the subject of your work.

FV: I think that is the nature of being an artist – I don't know what a true artist is – it's about having this enormous introverted torment and finding the least clumsy way to turn it into extroversion. Do you want to know where I had fun? I had fun when all my early video was chopped together very fast.

AM: But it loses much of its original meaning because the work is put into this trash TV, *True Hollywood* format.

FV: But that's the whole point. Let's go deeper. This entire piece is about the fact that the art world no longer provides intellectual protection for the artist. That's the paradox. We are no longer protected. Museums are gigantic. The media is all...

AM: ...why should you be protected?

FV: ...because as artists, we've been educated, until ten or so years ago, the moment institutions welcomed your work, they would protect you critically and intellectually. The smaller the system, the better you can protect yourself. I go to biennales and I see how people look at my work, they walk through, on the phone, they chat, it's just a big art fair. Here's my answer: give them greatest hits, speed it up, chop it into pieces, trash it and move on.

AM: When Gore Vidal hosted a party at the Beverly Hills Hotel (*The Gore Vidal Trilogy* was shown at Larry Gagosian in LA earlier this year), there was a performance element to the work. Did you see it like that?

FV: Absolutely. Why would anyone want to go to a dinner these days unless it's a performance? Every corporate structure has events. It's a party obsessed world.

AM: The fascination with celebrity and glamour seems to stem from your childhood. When you were a kid, you were reading and finding out about Warhol's Factory, Studio 54, hearing the stories. Now you can actually live that.

FV: Yeah, but I don't want to live it. That fascination is over. When I was ten years old, those people were real glamour. Then I succeeded in having them as actors in my work. For me, real glamour today is something else. I link the word glamour to Joan Didion or François Pinault. People who live in hiding.

AM: So what does glamour mean to you?

FV: Glamour leaves out all excess and extravagance. The true glamour is preserving parts of your own dignity by not being present. Miuccia (Prada) at home with her kids, that's glamorous.

AM: I called you once and you said, 'I'm just sitting here and doing embroidery.' I had no idea you made the needlework pieces yourself.

FV: They wouldn't mean anything if I didn't do them myself, because they are like pages of a diary. I'd never say, 'Needlework is the new painting.' I mean, come on. I mean needlework can be interesting if all these works are read like pages of my neurotic diary. It is the perfect counterpoint to all this glamorous extravagant extroverted ambition. I'm only capable of doing embroidery in my home town. It's the part of my work that functions only when I'm close to my roots.

AM: Tell me about your fascination with divas. Is it similar to the film world where people come together to make a movie and they don't see each other again until the next movie?

FV: It's like fabulous anonymous sex. I work with them and I steal what I want from them. That's the way I see my collaborations.

AM: Do you feel like you're stealing from them, or do you feel like you're gaining something from the process?

FV: Stealing between brackets. It's stealing their time, their youth, stealing their presence. The only one I remained in contact with is Jeanne Moreau. I have a respect for people and I don't want to invade. So, in a way I would want to call back the divas I've worked with again only when I know that I can offer them another gorgeous part. That's the true nature of love and friendship.

AM: What are your current cultural obsessions?

FV: At the moment I'm feeling incredibly ignorant about politics. I want to read and know more.

AM: Do you think that your work will become more obviously political?

FV: It might be of a more political nature but never obvious.