

Manipulated Desire: Review of *Seduction: The Cruel Woman*

By Aaron Geraghty

Along the banks of Hamburg Port sits an unsuspecting building. Inside, however, passions and perversions bend to the will of a cruel seductress. **Elfi Mikesch** and **Monika Treut**'s *Seduction: The Cruel Woman* (1985) was the fifth and final film featured in the European Eighties Tribute at Crossing Europe. A first time collaboration between the Austrian (Mikesch) and German (Treut) directors, it had a late night screening on the festival's closing weekend. Produced by Hyena Films which the pair co-founded, *Cruel Woman* would mark the beginning of a long professional partnership as Mikesch would later do cinematography on many Treut-directed films including *Virgin Machine* (1988) and *Genderation* (2021). Both Treut's fiction and documentary films have focused largely on queer stories, making her a pioneering figure in German LGBTQ+ cinema. *Cruel Woman*, her feature-length debut, remains one of her and Mikesch's best known works. It was inspired by **Leopold von Sacher-Masoch**'s novella *Venus in Furs* (1870) and references heavily **Jean Baudrillard**'s theory text *Seduction* (1979). Controversially, it was banned in Germany between 1997 and 2015 due to its sadomasochist content which the federal board of censorship deemed too obscene.

The queer horror centres on Wanda (**Mechthild Großmann**), a dominatrix who runs a pleasure house where audiences come to watch her humiliate her "slaves". American woman Justine (**Sheila McLaughlin**) arrives and tries to disrupt Wanda's pecking order as she vies with fellow "slaves" to be chosen for important roles in the seductress' fantasies. Jealousy consumes Wanda's lover Caren (**Carola Regnier**) and husband Gregor (**Udo Kier**, certainly no surprise in such a set-up).

Cinematography duties were shared between Mikesch and Treut, with their repeated use of slanted camera angles giving the movie a signature look. Combining **Anne Jud**'s highly stylized S/M wardrobe with **Xenia Katzenstein**'s ethereal set design, art director **Manfred Blösser** beautifully arouses a sense of the uncanny. The acting performances are kitschy; while charming and enhancing the hyperreal style, they fail to entice investment in the outcome of the characters. The plot does little to maintain interest. It's low-stakes and its conclusion feels out of sorts.

Still, in addition to well-defined style, the film has its subtextual merits. The ghosts of industry linger in the background of *Cruel Woman*, where passing ships and clashing steel can be heard shrieking from the nearby docks. White curtains dance to howling winds, a ghostly intrusion coming from beyond the walls of Wanda's villa. Inside is a dreamworld clouded with smoke and blue lighting, and enhanced by the appearance of a majestic white horse. The hyperreal setting undermines the desires of Wanda's subjects as illusory, they're heightened by the environment and her ability to seduce. This encapsulates Baudrillard's theories on seduction in which he argued, while power once resided with those who controlled the means of production, now it lay with those who possess the ability to seduce. The docks outside represent the old production society, while inside is a seduction society where Wanda is able to manipulate desire.

The movie concludes with Gregor's jealousy turning into violent rage when he shoots Wanda dead during a performance in front of a jeering crowd of men. A Baudrillardian reading of the ending would suggest that the masculine production society is trying to regain control over the feminine seduction society. Baudrillard's binary conceptualising of gender, even if based on the performance of constructed norms, seems reductive and incongruent with the movie's feminist content and platforming of queer narratives. Commitment to this element of his philosophy makes for a weak plot that confounds the film's underlying themes, but its remarkable aesthetic is wholly singular and sublime.