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REVIEW

Everything is Rotten in the State of Denmark

Alexander Gorchilin's *Acid* (*Kislota*, 2018)

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Shakespeare's Hamlet has become a symbol for a time and generation trapped between erratic self-righteousness and existential crisis. Male, aristocratic, and aggrieved, Hamlet is an uncanny embodiment of privilege, revealing the ghosts of our past to be our own. The fact that like our social media presences, the young prince's actions are driven by a series of play-actings (take the way he stages his madness and his father's murder), establishes an additional phenomenal link between Hamlet and millennials: Hamlet might not have had Facebook, but he sure would have known how to use it if he did. In moving from theater to film and from acting to directing, Alexander Gorchilin has picked up on such associations for his portrait of today's Russian youth. Though not an explicit interpretation of Shakespeare's play, the parallels between contemporary renderings of the play and Gorchilin's *Acid* are too numerous to be coincidental. Like *Hamlet*, *Acid* is centered around the fate of an existentially alienated young man and driven by intrigue and debauchery, only that many more Hamlets (2-3) and excesses (countless indeed) are involved by the time it finally ends: *Acid* depicts the death it departs from (unlike Shakespeare's original play, which starts off post-factum), instrumentalizes sex for shock and arousal, and is overall all over the place when it comes to barking, swearing and shagging. It, too, has its Hamlets snap at a funeral because of feigned sorrow, despise their mothers while lacking their fathers, and approach their romantic opportunities with flamboyant self-handicapping.

The suicide of a mutual friend at the outset of *Acid* is to Pete (Alexander Kuznetsov) and Sasha (Filipp Avdeev) what his father's death is to Hamlet: an original sin that, through no fault of their own, catapults the protagonist(s) into a state of inner turmoil. The scene's special status in *Acid* is marked by its being soaked in orange-red colors, the camera squeezing its way into the apartment where Vanya (Petr Skvortsov) is literally losing it. Crouching down naked with a large duvet hanging over his shoulders, Vanya's crisis moment

forebodes what awaits Pete and Sasha as well as the viewer. In between the nervous bustling that attends trying to take care of someone in the midst of a nervous breakdown, Sasha is asked by a female friend who is also present if he will share his sexual powers with her, which invitation will be a recurring motive in the deeply patriarchal meanders of the storyline. Sasha will keep rejecting such offers from absurdly attractive women up to the point that Gorchilin finally finds a way to use them for shock, Sasha's pretense for celibating being some sort of penis trauma. The first shock of the film is Vanya's suicide though, which – to Gorchilin's credit – happens somewhat matter-of-factly, as real-life death does. The whole opening scene up to the suicide stands isolated and might have worked as a short film, or even as an epilogue to *The Student* by Kirill Serebrennikov (Gorchilin's long-time mentor), which also features Pyotr Skvortsov in the role of the untamable shrew. In *Acid*, the scene mostly seems to help Gorchilin in providing his protagonists with trauma and a deep-seated grudge against their parents' generation, both of which are revealed when at the ensuing funeral Pete barks at Vanya's mother for not even knowing what her son was like.

The funeral scene also introduces a different aesthetic paradigm, which works with cold colors and very careful framing, bringing out the depth and beauty of widescreen (often through iconic over-the-shoulder shots). Though the director and his DoP Kseniya Sereda occasionally slip into TV-like aesthetics through hyperbolic lighting and shallow focus, for the most part *Acid* is a sensuous joy whose aesthetic experience would be near-religious if we did not have minds too. In an early scene, Gorchilin spoils the immersive visualization of what it means to lose oneself in a club by interspersing pathetic and off-topic dialogs about Pete's penis ("you are circumcised?"), which is either a very poor metaphor for Pete's struggle to resist his desires, or a gross overassessment of male attractiveness (for the record, I would not even advance the latter interpretive possibility if people weren't constantly asking Pete about his penis with what appears to be genuine interest). Inevitably, Pete and Sasha follow a group of partygoers to a breathtaking flat where an artist ruminates about his art before Pete and Sasha are again nuzzled by beautiful women. Of course, Pete ultimately declines and watches the whole scene from afar (which might again have been quite an aesthetic experience if one could remotely indulge in that given the different levels of stupidity simultaneously involved). Gorchilin does not even seem to consider the possibility that his protagonist is simply insecure, instead choosing to fully buy Pete's teenage self-perception as some sort of broken artist. (At a later moment, Pete does at least seem to realize that his music is rubbish, but that caveat is worthless given that it comes near the film's end and without any sense of what role music plays in his life.)

The morning after the party, we realize that the film's title does not primarily refer to the drug, but to actual acid, which is drunk by Sasha for no particular reason (existential crisis not being a particular reason if you ask me), incurring a half-serious injury that prevents him from speaking for much of the film.

Don’t speak, don’t fuck. This tilts the film’s attention towards Pete, who is seen unbonding with his mother, searching for runaway Sasha, and rejecting another sexual advance from what appears to be his girlfriend (who may or may not be the woman who pressured Pete into having sex during the opening scene). It turns out that not-so-wealthy Sasha had been staying with fairly wealthy Pete for some time, which both their mothers find let’s say curious in a world that seems to know no compassion or love. We also find out that Pete and Sasha have been engaged in a contest where they both try to prove their cruelty to each other, which leads to a predictable albeit disturbing escalation of Gorchilin’s shock aesthetics. Given that the film advances via shock rather than either aesthetic, emotional or narrative advancement, it is difficult to reveal Gorchilin’s provocations without spoiling the film, which joy I will spare you. Suffice it to say that Pete will only lift his celibacy upon leaving the boundaries of legal and moral decency, and that this final act will exacerbate the glaring misogyny already prevalent throughout the film. Believe it or not, Pete’s injury will make him bleed during the act, suggesting a disturbing parallelization of women and men (which is especially disturbing given the act’s already questionable power-relationship). Undercutting the emancipatory potential even of Shakespeare’s plays, in Gorchilin’s universe women are either confused, insecure, or villainous, and nearly always both pretty and stupid. Even the homoerotic energy between Pete and Sasha thus takes on a questionable symbolism in suggesting that true love, whether platonic or not, can only be shared between men.

Like many films that depict Gen Yer aimlessness, Gorchilin does ultimately have his protagonists engage in a reflection upon their woes. Having gone in and out of prison upon his brief disappearance, Sasha seeks out his friend in the middle of the night to tell him what the viewer has been thinking all this time – that Pete is pathetic, and that their generation is lost for no particular reason. Sasha thus not only replicates the commonplace that rich people’s problems result from their not having any real problems, but also the converse notion that the poor possess the truth in an unadulterated fashion. (The implicit romanticizing of poverty may be one of the reasons why the film received state-support from the Russian Ministry of Culture.) Ironically, a film so keen on showing the illicit thus proves to be deeply moralistic by suggesting it to be the true origin of our troubles. Like much of ancient historiography that deliberates the fall of the Roman Republic, Gorchilin situates the seemingly impending downfall of *his* empire in the ruling class’ moral corruption. In *Hamlet*, moral decline brings about downfall in multiple forms, being linked not only to the fate of Claudius and Gertrude, but also to that of Denmark in total. That Gorchilin chose to adopt this moralistic superstructure from Shakespeare’s rather than his mastery of drama and suspense, proves that *Acid*’s façade of compulsive provocation belies a yearning for a long-lost past when we all knew our place, which is as far a place from subversion as a I could possibly envision. In the familiar dialectic of teenage discrepancy, Gorchilin’s protagonists rebel while really being utterly dependent and needy. If only Father were alive again!