



NEW RELEASES

The Sweet East

The Sweet East

Director: Sean Price Williams

Production Company: Base 12

Presented by: Utopia, Marathon Street

Executive Producers: Jimmy Kaltreider, David Kaplan

Produced by: Craig Butta, Alex Coco, Alex Ross Perry

Written by: Nick Pinkerton

Director of Photography: Sean Price Williams

Editor: Stephen Gurewitz

Production Design: Madeline Sadowski

Costume Design: Jocelyn Pierce

Cast:

Talia Ryder (*Lillian*)

Earl Cave (*Caleb*)

Simon Rex (*Lawrence*)

Ayo Edebiri (*Molly*)

Jeremy O. Harris (*Matthew*)

Jacob Elordi (*Ian*)

Rish Shah (*Mohammad*)

USA 2023

104 mins

Digital

A Utopia Distribution release

In a 1985 article for the *New York Times*, the American novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson comments on a perceived lack of ‘political seriousness’ in the work of many American artists, a failure that stems from both an ignorance of history and the disparagement of modern America.

At first glance *The Sweet East*, the directorial debut of cinematographer Sean Price Williams (*Her Smell*, 2018; *Good Time*, 2017) seems to bear Robinson out. The film follows the picaresque adventures of a high-school senior named Lillian (a blank-faced, gamine Talia Ryder) along the eastern seaboard of the US, starting in Washington DC, where a crowd of lairy high-schoolers flirt their way through a tour of the Capitol and a George Washington impersonator sporting wraparound sunglasses butchers the Shaker song ‘Simple Gifts’. Over the course of her surreal journey Lillian – who sports a reproduction Led Zeppelin T-shirt and retro plastic chokers – will encounter an Antifa ‘artist’ (Earl Cave) whose video installations aim to render ‘the experience of browsing as performance’; an Islamic sect leader (Mazin Akar) who dabbles in EDM, and a pair of Black cineastes (Jeremy O. Harris and Ayo Edebiri) making a Merchant Ivory-inspired period drama about the building of the Erie Canal.

The Sweet East is as critical – if not more so – of the American romanticist tradition that Robinson herself works in, here embodied by Lawrence (Simon Rex), a professor of 18th-century literature and covert white supremacist. Rex is best known as the lead in Sean Baker’s sleazy black comedy *Red Rocket* (2021); here he plays brilliantly against type as a chaste intellectual who takes Lillian under his wing, dressing her in his deceased mother’s clothes and lecturing her about both America’s ‘degraded culture’ (which includes *To Kill a Mockingbird*) and the ‘condescending European intelligentsia’ who look down on it. Lawrence quotes Edgar Allan Poe, watches only silent movies and doesn’t like anything ‘too contemporary’. At first, we fear he might be a Bluebeard figure, or a Humbert Humbert. Lillian doesn’t stick around long enough for us to find out, blithely abandoning Simon once he’s exhausted his usefulness.

If we’re left feeling oddly sorry for a neo-Nazi, that’s typical of the film’s deliberate ideological chaos. *The Sweet East* is a self-consciously messy film. In literal terms, the *mise en scène* swims with stuff, from the artists’ commune littered with bongos and dumpster food and discarded body piercings, through Lawrence’s time-capsule cottage, piled in leather-bound first editions and mothball-smelling eiderdowns (hand-embroidered with swastikas), to the suburban bungalow in South Carolina, draped in Stars and Stripes flags, where Lillian grew up. More figuratively, there are so many viewpoints and counterpoints circulating here that it’s impossible to tell what, if anything, the film has to say about the topics that it touches on, including religious extremism, spectacular violence and contemporary race relations.

There’s something weirdly regressive, too, in the film’s celebration of the medium’s own history. It heaves with nods to the canon. There are visual references to Renoir, Godard, Truffaut and Eustache (of whom screenwriter Nick Pinkerton is writing a critical biography); to Griffith, Chaplin and Lynch. Silent-era title cards punctuate the narrative. The washed-out, grainy image (shot on 16mm) lends the image a 1970s documentary look, the synth-y score a late-1980s feel. More than once I was reminded of Jim Henson’s *Labyrinth* (1986), not least when a monstrous puppet DJ looms from the darkness of a heaving nightclub, hoovering up cocaine with its Gonzo-like proboscis.

Are Pinkerton and Price Williams politically serious filmmakers? Do they offer anything more substantial than a snide satire of modern society? The pair have themselves described the work as a rejection of cynicism about America, driven by the urge to present a ‘democratic rabble’ of voices. It certainly succeeds in the

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latter regard, but the film's final moments, which feature a bleak act of mediated violence and a promise of worse to come, seem to undercut any sense of optimism.

Still, if you put aside its politics and submit to the sheer scale of the thing – to Williams's delicate, drifting camerawork and light-filled images, Pinkerton's wry teasing of his more po-faced peers – *The Sweet East* reveals itself as an undeniably exhilarating ride, surreal and satirical, and not quite of this world. With the possible exception of Dušan Makavejev's *Sweet Movie* (1974), I can think of no other film like it. It is a risky, uncompromising artwork, which acknowledges the complexity of America's political and philosophical traditions and the muddle that they leave us in while refusing to take sides. In this much, if nothing else, it takes its subject matter very seriously indeed.

Catherine Wheatley, *Sight and Sound*, May 2024

Inspirations

More than most movies, *The Sweet East* is rooted in deep cinephilia. Here are three of the films to which it is most heavily indebted.

Dyn Amo (1972)

Nominally based on a stage play, Stephen Dwoskin's *Dyn Amo* begins with a striptease performed by Jenny Runacre, at first indifferently, but then, as the camera closes in on her face, and the music – a Phil Spector production, 'Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah' – starts to loop and distort, with special intensity, as she returns the spectator's gaze. The Brooklyn-born Dwoskin was one of London's leading underground filmmakers, and he shot *Dyn Amo*, his second feature, in a real Soho strip club. The film culminates in a remarkable, sustained turn by Linda Marlowe which forces the viewer to question where character begins and actress leaves off; feminist critics at the time saw the film as laying bare the normally suppressed mechanisms of cinematic voyeurism. Like all Dwoskin's early 1970s films, *Dyn Amo* has an outstanding score by minimalist composer Gavin Bryars.

O Lucky Man! (1973)

Lindsay Anderson's prominence as a critic and commentator made it difficult for British reviewers to see his films in isolation from his forthrightly expressed views, but it is never wise to look to artists for political answers, and *O Lucky Man!* is a portrait of Britain that has survived the passing of the political context in which it was made. Malcolm McDowell plays a sales rep for a coffee manufacturer, whose tour of duty in the north-east of England turns into a nightmare, before he is rescued by a touring band led by Alan Price, formerly of the Animals, plus a hanger-on played by Helen Mirren. Price's songs for the film are shown being performed in the studio, an idea inspired by Bertolt Brecht's 1939 play *Mother Courage and Her Children*. *The Sweet East* borrows a piano cue used for the band's arrival in London (and not included on the soundtrack album) to mark Lillian and Lawrence's arrival in New York.

Edgar Allen Poe (1909)

For many years it was common to credit D.W. Griffith with the invention of the close-up, but before he introduced it into his toolkit he directed this misspelled mini-biopic. One of more than a hundred films that Griffith made in 1909, it is a half-reeler consisting of four scenes in three settings, done in five shots, showing Poe tending to his sick wife Virginia, being inspired to write 'The Raven', pitching it to publishers, first unsuccessfully then successfully, and then returning home, proceeds in hand, to find that Virginia has died. In *The Sweet East* Lawrence shows it to Lillian, who is 'just glad they figured out how to make movies less boring than this', but Griffith is one of the film's presiding spirits. The name Lillian echoes that of Lillian Gish, whose many starring roles for Griffith include *Way Down East* (1920), evoked not only in *The Sweet East's* title but in one of Lillian's escapes.

Henry K. Miller, *Sight and Sound*, April 2024