

Saul Austerlitz:

“Don’t You Cry Tonight”: Guns N’ Roses and the Music Video Folly

Film critic Stuart Klawans coined the term “film folly” to refer to outlandishly ambitious films like D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* and Mikhail Kalatozov’s *I Am Cuba* – epic productions stemming from vast budgets and gargantuan egos. Film follies, by their very nature, are always doomed to fail at some level, but their ambitiousness also renders them uniquely fascinating, and anomalous – the white elephants of film history. Guns N’ Roses’ videos “Don’t Cry,” “November Rain,” and “Estranged” meet the definition of film folly beyond a shadow of a doubt. Where the average video confined itself to a narrow band of locations, and a modest budget, the Guns N’ Roses trilogy ballooned to epic size, with all the trappings of a Hollywood blockbuster. Their enormity made them ripe for parody (in fact, a 1994 *Spin* article poked fun at their tangled, near-incoherent symbolism), but they remain marvels of the video’s ambitions to cultural significance, and emotional heft. And with the ever-shrinking promotional budgets for videos in the new century, it is unlikely that their equal will ever be seen again. If the early era of music video was a gathering of strength, moving toward ever bigger, ever grander productions, these Guns N’ Roses videos were the form’s apex, the high point in a curve that swung downward in their aftermath toward the smaller, more economical, less heroically ambitious videos of today.

Snickers often break out during Guns N’ Roses videos – the vision of Slash’s seething (possibly homoerotic) jealousy, as expressed in his keening guitar solo, but “November Rain,” is a particular favorite – but the videos do not mind. They are too much in love with their own swooning grandiosity, their opulence rendering all questions of taste entirely moot. To criticize them overly much is to demand of the music video that it be something other than what it is – grandiose, opulent, fantastic, and absurd. Loss is the through-line of the trilogy- the loss of separation, of death, of illusions. For all their bombast, “Don’t Cry,” “November Rain,” and “Estranged” are deeply adult in their evocation of wounded spirits, their summoning of the bittersweet and the tragic a far cry from the fantasy wish-fulfillment of the average music video. Guns N’ Roses’ grandiose ambitions, which led them to release two overstuffed albums on the same day, and Rose’s tendency toward outsized displays of emotion, culminated in this trio of clips, the biggest and brightest follies in music video history. Easy to disdain, but hard to hate, “Don’t Cry,” “November Rain,” and “Estranged” are the epitome of the music video’s crass magnificence.