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Civil War film 'Beguiled' gets reimagined from new point of view

Coppola flips this '70s flick from campy male gaze to competitive female gaze

A young girl out picking mushrooms discovers a wounded Union soldier in the woods. It is 1864, and she is a pupil at the Miss Martha Farnsworth's Seminary for Young Ladies in Richmond, Va.

She brings him back to the cloistered school where a handful of women and girls are waiting out the war. Within these gated confines they flutter, vying for the man's attention as he convalesces.

He beguiles them, whispering to each that they have been chosen for his exclusive favor — an impossibility.

The cockerel's harem dream-come-true turns out to be his worst nightmare when the jealous belles join forces to exact retribution. Mean girls of the Confederacy, unite.

Such is the plot of "The Beguiled," the 1971 film directed by Don Siegel ("Dirty Harry," "Invasion of the Body Snatchers") based on the 1966 novel "The Painted Devil" by Thomas Cullinan. It starred a young Clint Eastwood as Cpl. John McBurney, and Geraldine Page as the stern headmistress Martha Farnsworth.

A little Freud goes a long way. The Nixon-era movie was released during the infancy of sexual

liberation, before cable television delivered nudity right to one's home and at a time when Playboy magazines were kept hidden in sock drawers.

Siegel piled on the repression, incest and sexual hysteria to deliver a pile of campy, softcore pulp.

"The basic desire of women is to castrate men," Siegel explained, and declared "The Beguiled" his best work.

Enter Sofia Coppola nearly a half-century later to repair the insult. Her version of the macabre Southern Gothic thriller has been reimagined from a woman's point of view. That is not to say the

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film's perspective has shifted from McBurney to that of the sheltered citizens of the seminary. The difference is between a man's and a woman's take on the same material directors, the male and female gaze.

It's different all right. Which is not to say more entertaining.



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Colin Farrell as McBurney is a much better fit than Eastwood as a charming, everyman mercenary. Nicole Kidman, always somewhat icy, is both protective and sadistic as Miss Martha (while Geraldine Page in the role was simply demented). Coppola jettisons Siegel's fevered psychobabble and hysterics. Her girls are in Darwinian competition.

Coppola, who won best director at the Cannes Film Festival in May, says she wanted to focus on the way women communicate with each other through indirection, looks and gestures. She hired

chosen to make a Civil War movie with no mention of slavery.

In Cullinan's book, the household's female slave was a textured character whose husband had been sold by Martha to raise money. One character was biracial but passed for white.

Understandably, African-American critics have complained about this exorcism. At a time when a third of the humans living in Virginia were chattel slaves and a war over this very topic was raging in the school's backyard, nary a Negro even wanders down the road.

"The slaves left," explains the girl who finds McBurney.

Southerners should protest too that notwithstanding the consultants, the film has so little flavor of the South.

Coppola's is an interior movie, in which raised eyebrows, averted eyes and the rustle of skirts say as much as the dialogue. It feels coolly remote and European, Bergmanesque.

The actresses, including Kirsten Dunst as a bottled-up teacher and Elle Fanning as a sexually aggressive bad girl, play corseted, repressed characters that are in their own way also imprisoned. (Even the sordid Siegel took leave from his orgiastic fantasies long enough to acknowledge that the white women, the slaves and McBurney were each suffering a particular form of bondage.)

In comparison to the ladies at the school, their captive seems unrestrained. He breathes life into the brittle, parchment-toned environment, adding color and heat. Farrell's McBurney is the freest person in the movie — until he isn't.

Both the male and female gaze are only for him. Ironically and perhaps inevitably, Colin Farrell runs away with this movie, which was intended to be by, for and about women.