

Monstrous Women and the Subversion of Patriarchy in Nikos Nikolaidis's Films *Singapore Sling* and *See You in Hell, My Darling*

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Abstract

Greek filmmaker's Nikos Nikolaidis pastiche *Singapore Sling* (1990) and *See You in Hell, My Darling* (1999) use elements from four classic films – the first from *Laura* (O. Preminger, 1944), and *Sunset Boulevard* (B. Wilder, 1950), and the latter from *Les Diaboliques* (H. Clouzot, 1955) and *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (R. Aldrich, 1964) – recreating in this way the atmosphere of the original films and perpetuating the monstrous and/or schizophrenic nature of their female protagonists. In *Singapore Sling*, a mother and a daughter, after the death of the father, keep a man as a captive in order to use him as a sexual tool and as a toy for their gratification, and in *See You in Hell, My Darling*, two women are in love with each other and with the dead husband of the one of them who, however, comes back from the dead, and they try to get each other and the man out of the way. In both cases, although the women are portrayed as conventionally attractive women, who could be the object of the male gaze in any other film, they are presented as evil, schizophrenic, abject and monstrous, denying, in this way, objectification. Reflecting on film noir and on classic femme fatales, it can be said that these women articulate the repressed sexuality of the latter. The women in both films have agency and they refuse to depend on men, thus reversing the passive-female, active-male binary dyad. Furthermore, they ridicule the males, subvert patriarchy and become themselves the bearers of the active gaze.

Key Words: cinema, Greek, evil, monstrous, abject, film noir, femme fatales, patriarchy

1. Introduction

Nikos Nikolaidis is a postmodern Greek filmmaker, whose oeuvre comprises of introvert, personal films. Women and the feminine are considered to be of paramount importance in his work, since women carry (the majority of) his films on their own. Nikolaidis's characteristic approach to female representation can be seen in *Singapore Sling* (1990) and *See You in Hell, My Darling* (1999). *Singapore Sling*, subtitled *The Man Who Loved a Corpse*, and *See You in Hell, My Darling*, subtitled a *Necroromance*, constitute the pastiche section 'Those Who Loved a Corpse'. The diptych concerns two pairs of eccentric, schizophrenic, evil women who live in fictional environments reminiscent of Hell, going against patriarchy

and the law of the father. Although the females subvert patriarchy and attack the status quo, their representation at the same time can be considered problematic, since some misogynistic elements can be traced.

Nikolaidis for each of these films uses elements from two classic films and from the genres the latter films belong to, especially from film noir, and hence he renders genres as 'repositories of situations, styles and iconographies that can be used and combined, to set one another off, to highlight, pastiche-fashion, what is characteristic, interesting or suggestive about them'.¹ Nikolaidis's two new pieces of work stand independently, and the spectators can follow them regardless of having seen the source films or not. In the process of recreating the *idea* of the original films, Nikolaidis imitates and perpetuates the monstrous and/or schizophrenic nature of their female protagonists. These women can be compared to the upgraded version of the classic femme fatales, the femme fatales of the 1990s films, which are categorised under the 'phenomenon of "noirness" and "retro-noir"'.² Hence, Nikolaidis's female protagonists can be characterised as 'fatal femmes', a term coined by Julianne Pidduck to describe the incarnation of femme fatales of the classic noirs³.

2. Film Synopses

In *Singapore Sling*, a black and white film that pastiches *Laura* (O. Preminger, 1944) and *Sunset Boulevard* (B. Wilder, 1950), a wounded detective is found in the mansion of a mother and a daughter in the quest to find a woman named Laura. After the death of the father, mother has undertaken his role: from killing servants to having sexual intercourse with their daughter. The women capture, sexually exploit and torture the detective in order to find out what he knows about Laura, as they were the ones to kill her. The detective develops a relationship with the daughter and they plan to kill mother. After they kill her, the daughter assigns the detective the role of the mother, but he rapes the daughter with a knife in order to take revenge for Laura's murder. However, the daughter shoots him before she dies and he crawls to the garden to bury himself alive.

In *See You in Hell, My Darling*, which imitates *Les Diaboliques* (H. Clouzot, 1955) and *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (R. Aldrich, 1964), Vera visits Elsa's mansion, and the non-linear narrative tells their story: the women used to be in love with each other, but also with the same man, whom Elsa married, but Vera had sex with on their wedding day, after the three of them robbed a van and took three suitcases full of money. The two women now try to destroy each other and get a bigger share of money, and Elsa reveals that she has killed her husband whose corpse is still floating in the swimming pool in the garden. The women try to dispose of the body, but he returns from the dead as a zombie. Elsa kills him again and after she kills Vera, she realises that she cannot live without her, shoots herself, and they all float reunited in the swimming pool.

3. Female Representation and Objectification

The representation of the four women shares many characteristics: they are all portrayed as conventionally beautiful, over-sexualised, fetishised, are all dressed in appealing clothes, lingerie, wearing high heels, and they manipulate the men that come in their way. It can be argued that they follow the classic femme fatales' representation but, since they are exposed to a contemporary, taboo-free era, they now express the latter women's repressed sexuality.

In *Singapore Sling*, the differentiation of mother and daughter from the classic femme fatales is that the latters' lust

was overwhelmingly for money rather than sexual pleasure [...] The classic femme fatale was known for her trigger-happy killings, not for her orgasms. Her sexuality per se was passive, limited to its allure.⁴

Unlike this characterisation, the women in *Singapore Sling* do not lust for money, as they already are affluent, but they are constantly after sexual pleasure and orgasms. Moreover, specifically, in contrast to Preminger's Laura who does not act as a femme fatal but her lethal attraction is constructed by the men, who build a myth around her imposing – radiated by the painting in her house – beauty and her absence, mother and daughter in *Singapore Sling* free the classic femme fatales' sexuality and turn it into perversion, signifying in this way the decaying modern societies.

Similarly, in *See You in Hell, My Darling* Nikolaidis imitates and adapts the binary innocent wife ≠ evil mistress and liberates *Les Diaboliques*' female protagonists' sexuality: the implicit lesbian relationship of the two women in the source text has been translated into an explicit lesbian relationship in *See You in Hell, My Darling*. In fact, lesbianism is portrayed in both films, and the audience is presented with erotic scenes between the women, between the women and the men, as well as with self-pleasure. This representation, although the women carry the films on their own, have agency and render the males passive, can be considered problematic since Nikolaidis seems to perpetuate misogynistic binaries and to fetishise them.

Nonetheless, women's objectification is mitigated by their overall behaviour and role in the film. A first instance that hinders their objectification is that they address the camera directly, narrating their story and crazy thoughts to the audience, hence working against their objectification by breaking the fourth wall and distancing themselves from the spectators. Furthermore, the four women's social awkwardness that often makes the audience laugh, as well as their paranoia can be said to work against their objectification.

Additionally, the women are presented as abject: they vomit, urinate on themselves or on the men, who passively accept it, and they resort to horrific deeds as for instance, in *Singapore Sling* when they place human organs on the kitchen table. With the term abjection, Julia Kristeva defines ‘that which does not respect borders, positions, rules and which disturbs identity, system, order’.⁵ The aforementioned images ‘are central to our culturally/socially constructed notions of the horrific. They signify a split between two orders: the maternal authority and the law of the father’.⁶ Therefore, these images of abjection of the monstrous feminine, which can be connected to the horror genre, hinder the connections with visual pleasure and constitute an attack towards the predominant patriarchal status quo.

Thus, although this treatment of women might have misogynistic connotations, it can be claimed that social awkwardness, paranoia and abjection can be read as a response to trauma caused by patriarchy. Mother and daughter were living with the husband/father in *Singapore Sling* and Elsa with her father in *See You in Hell, My Darling*, as the audience is informed during the film, therefore, after experiencing the repressive norms of the patriarchal family, they are finally emancipated by the male, they replace patriarchy with matriarchy and subject the males to what they went through in the past.

As far as lesbianism is concerned, its use in the two films can avert visual pleasure. The bonding between mother and daughter has been considered by scholars as the origins of lesbianism: for instance, Mandy Mereck and Merl Storr talk about a narcissistic identification with the phallic mother.⁷ In *Singapore Sling* Nikolaidis traces this mother-daughter narcissistic identification and projects it through the two women. However, lesbianism in this case is not used as an indicator of the women’s sexual identity but as an expression of perversion in a form of fetishism and overconsumption, as a permanent lust for sexual pleasure and the quest for instant gratification.

Narcissistic identification is also detected in *See You in Hell, My Darling* where the two women appear to be similar: they are first introduced through a mirror as a reflection of each other and Vera also says: ‘sometimes we looked at ourselves in the mirror and got confused; and then we changed our voices to figure out who was who’. Although the spectators are presented with a sexual scene between the two women, it is not a sexual act per se but a recreation of Vera’s and Elsa’s husband’s intercourse on Elsa’s wedding day. This scene between the two women is presented in a parallel montage of a flashback of the actual scene, distracting visual pleasure. Elsa’s love expression for Vera shows the preference of female companionship, and the simultaneous rejection of the male.

4. Phallic Women with Active Gaze and Male Castration

The connection of classic film noir with these two films and the recreation of the classic femme fatales, build on the consideration of these women as phallic. In

Singapore Sling the women imitate *Sunset Boulevard*'s femme fatale Norma Desmond in jewellery, excessive make-up and use of cigarettes, a representation which *See You In Hell My Darling* women also follow. According to Janey Place, such sexual iconography of the images

with their wispy trails of smoke [that] can become cues of dark and immoral sensuality, and the iconography of violence [...] [which] is a symbol of her 'unnatural' phallic power⁸

and the mise-en-scene of the films, demonstrate these women's dangerous sexual power over their victims, as well as emphasises the 'perverse, decaying side of film noir sexuality'.⁹ Also, the fact that all women carry a gun further highlights their phallic power since the gun that 'the classic femme fatal carried coded her phallic, [...] her masculinity was also demonstrated by a ball-busting dominance over her male lover'.¹⁰

The phallic representation of women has rendered the men redundant which leads to these men's metaphorical (or literal) castration. In *Singapore Sling*, as part of their incestuous behaviour and a result of the passage from patriarchy to matriarchy, the mother and the daughter recreate a role-play between father and their servants. In this role-play daughter pretends to be Laura who has to perform fellatio to father, performed by the mother, in order to get hired. When daughter-as-Laura gets closer to mother-as-father, the latter lifts her skirt and reveals a (fake) penis. It is now clear that mother has become the head of the family; she has become the fetish – going against the patriarchal norms that do not recognise female fetishes – she has turned down the passive-mother role and has become phallic. Consequently, both the phallic mother and the daughter who takes part in this constitute a threat towards men, and, thus, towards patriarchal society, and signify male castration and substitution of their power.

Male castration is highlighted when the detective is assigned the role of the mother after he kills her. The daughter recreates the master-servant role-play described above, however, the man instead of performing the role of the father, performs the role of the mother-performing-the-father, and he is presented in the mother's excessive clothes, jewellery and make-up. The detective has lost his identity and is presented as masqueraded, carnivalised and feminised. When the daughter-as-Laura gets closer to perform fellatio to the captive-as-mother-as-father, instead of a penis, he reveals a knife with which he is about to rape the daughter. The substitution of the penis with a knife confirms his castrated nature as a remnant of matriarchy. The detective in the final scene tries to assume his male identity back by wearing his male clothes, but although he has killed both women, he dies bulldozed by mother, daughter and also Laura, as he suffered all this for her.

The husband's passivity in *See You in Hell, My Darling* signifies his castration: he has no agency, he is lurking in the garden, his movements are slow, he has a distorted vision due to his broken glasses. He is a zombie. His passivity allows Elsa to throw him on the floor and simulate sexual intercourse as if she had a penis to penetrate him, without him reacting at all. This scene can lead to Elsa's consideration as phallic, since she holds a gun, in contrast to the man's metaphorically castrated nature. Moreover, when the two women try to get rid of his body before he comes back to life, they consider burring him next to Elsa's father in the latter's grave in the garden, because this is where he belongs. Patriarchy is dead. The two women do not need a father nor a husband/lover. On the contrary, they ridicule the dead men when they ask the father to move over in order to add an extra person in the grave, if he does not mind. Furthermore, a statue on father's grave, which seems like a wooden handcrafted caricature, appears to have breasts on which two golden earrings have been placed, a fact that feminises the male.

The role of the gaze in this film is of paramount importance. As mentioned above, the male is presented having a zombified gaze, but on the contrary, women have an active one. This can be seen in the women's direct address to the audience, offering a female look, as also happens in *Singapore Sling*. Their active gaze is reinforced by the fact that Elsa is presented wearing glasses while reading since, according to Mary Ann Doane,

glasses worn by women in the cinema do not generally signify a deficiency in seeing but an active looking, or even simply the fact of seeing as opposed to being seen.¹¹

Moreover, towards the end of the film, the parallel montage of the actual aforementioned erotic scene between Vera and Elsa's husband is seen as a whole. The sexual intercourse is presented in a subjective point of view, which turns out to be Elsa's, who witnesses Vera and her husband having sex while recording them. The most significant part of this scene, apart from the fact that the man is not visible and thus sidelined, is that Vera returns the gaze by turning and looking at Elsa, at Elsa's camera, at Nikolaidis's camera and at the spectators directly, showing that she knows she is being watched and engages the spectators in the game with Elsa. It is now clear that it is a game between the two women and the male in this story are obsolete.

5. Final Remarks

Nikolaidis's film noir influence has contributed to the consideration of the four females protagonists as 'fatales femmes'. These women are represented in a provoking way, they are fetishised but at the same time they appear as a threat to the male and to the patriarchal system. The four women indeed have agency,

subvert patriarchy and discharge the male gaze, rendering their gaze stronger, however, their representation is still problematic. Questions such as why are they conventionally beautiful, why are they sexualised, why they really need to be represented as abject to subvert the patriarchal norms and why they need to be in places reminiscent of Hell in order to achieve that rise which questions connote elements of misogyny. These elements in conjunction with the fact that the two films are very personal might signify that these monstrous and evil women portray the filmmaker's fantasies and fear for women as castrators.

On the other hand, as Kaplan says,

some women feel empowered by the knife-wielding S&M heroines; some are gratified by the explicit expressions of passionate female orgasms, and of women seducing men to limp victims who trail after them, asking for more S&M.¹²

Thus, the projected narratives can also be the fantasy of a woman, who might see the films as a form of revenge for patriarchy and repression she might have experienced, and male castration is a deed that will appeal to her lust. After all, the costumes and the settings that radiate sexuality and create the iconography are chosen by Marie-Louise Vartholomew, Nikolaidis's wife. Wherever the truth lies, the four 'fatale femmes' abject nature, as well as their deeds against the male, as seen through their relations to the captive detective and the zombified husband, can be read as a response to trauma and can also be claimed to hinder their objectification and subvert patriarchy.

Notes

¹ Richard Dyer. *Pastiche*. (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 127.

² Ann Kaplan. Introduction to *Women in Film Noir*. (London: BFI, 2000), p. 1.

³ Julianne Pidduck. 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme;(Dis)Figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence'. *CineAction*. 20 March 1992, p. 65.

⁴ Chris Stayer. 'Femme Fatal or Lesbian Femme: *Bound* in Sexual Différance'. *Women In Film Noir*. op.cit, p. 152-153

⁵ Julia Kristeva qtd in Barbara Creed. *The Monstrous-Feminine*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 8.

⁶ Ibid, p. 13.

⁷ Mandy Mereck qtd in Chris Stayer. *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-orientations in Film and Video*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 135. Merl Storr qtd in Claire Whatling. *Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 43.

⁸ Janey Place. 'Women on Film Noir'. *Women In Film Noir*. op.cit, p. 54

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Chris Staayer. 'Femme Fatale or Lesbian Femme'. op.cit, p. 155.

¹¹ Many Ann Doane. *Femme Fatales*. (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 27.

¹² Ann Kaplan. op.cit, p. 9.

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