

FILM REVIEW

Miss Violence (2013)

by Alexandros Avranas

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Halfway through Alexandros Avranas's *Miss Violence* (2013), a wide shot shows the family in the living room eating pizza and watching TV under the inconspicuous gaze of the patriarch (Themis Panou) who is seating on an armchair at the right corner of the frame. A modern pop hit starts playing on the television and Alkmini (Kalliopi Zontanou), the youngest member of the family, stands up and starts dancing for the camera, the latter's lens suggestively merging with the TV screen. Suddenly, the viewer is confronted with a rather confusing image as the little girl, who is apparently mimicking the highly provocative dance moves screened in the music video, becomes disturbingly objectified, emerging, indeed, as a sexualized spectacle herself. In narrative terms, this scene anticipates the girl's entrance into the vicious circle of sexual abuse and prostitution, in which the patriarch condemns the family's female members; something which will be horrifyingly verified towards the end of the film. The scene might also be read as an acerbic comment on the highly sexualized visual culture to which young children are exposed on a daily basis and which viciously privileges and propels particular forms of gender and sexual embodiment that in turn become intimate processes of identity formation, consolidating and reproducing hegemonic – and intrinsically patriarchal – notions of gender appropriateness and physical normalcy.

However, one cannot overlook the fact that the scene encapsulates an ethically problematic spectacle, verging on exploitation and begging the question of authorial responsibility and the limits of the representable. For, Avranas's film is as much an ethical project, focusing on a trenchant interrogation of the ethics of patriarchy, as it is an ethically problematic one, insofar as the line between critique and sensationalism seems at times to dissipate. *Miss Violence* is a cruel tale of sexual abuse, incest and pedophilia, of gendered, sexualized and also self-inflicted violence, crucially a litmus test on patriarchal violence. Nevertheless,

one remains undecided as to whether what is eventually achieved is a forceful deconstruction of patriarchal kinship or a graphic depiction of the perverse in a way that ultimately sanctifies the norm by demonizing its negative other.

Miss Violence did make a sensation at the 2013 Venice Film Festival, where it premiered, sweeping several awards, including the Silver Lion and the Best Actor for protagonist Themis Panou. From then on, *Miss Violence* followed a quite successful journey across the international film festival circuit (from Hamburg to Montreal and Sao Paulo), winning several other awards and nominations. Nevertheless, despite its festival success, the film was met with mixed reviews by film critics both home and abroad, owing to the almost exploitative treatment, as it is argued (Lyttelton 2013; Jansick 2013; Bleasdale 2013), of its controversial subject matter. The critics praise, of course, Avranas's methodical yet distancing mode of storytelling, which mirrors the "haze of alienation and unreality" through which "trauma victims experience life" (Wigon 2013), but also his calculated command of the medium; as John Bleasdale notes, "Avranas is undeniably an accomplished director, and stylistically there's a cold beauty to *Miss Violence*, similar to the works of Michael Haneke" (2013). The influences by distinguished auteurs, such as Haneke, on Avranas's directorial style are, indeed, recognized by many critics. For example, Christos Mitsis writes: "Utilizing the cold methodology of a Haneke (austere geometricity, washed-out colour palette) and the suggestive mastery of a Polanski (the menace that lurks off-screen), [Avranas] upsets the audience both emotionally and psychologically, leaving them helpless in the search of answers" (2013).

However, the film's critical reception has been primarily situated within the context of the contemporary trend in independent Greek cinema, known as the Greek Weird Wave. The critics agree on Avranas's deployment of the rigorous aesthetics found in such films as Yorgos Lanthimos's *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (2009) and *Alpeis/Alps* (2011), Athina-Rachel Tsangari's *Attenberg* (2010), and Babis Makridis's *L* (2012), which comprises deadpan performances, sparse editing, meticulous compositions and bleak colours (Jansick 2013; Lodge 2013; van Hoeij 2013; Bleasdale 2013; Wigon 2013). But they also identify *Miss Violence*'s point of departure from this wave in its more austere tone, which denies irony and black humour, and lacks the "odd metaphorical devices" (van Hoeij 2013) and the profound absurdism. Lodge (2013) even goes on to argue that the film's "uninflected realism" makes it difficult to sustain allegorical readings in the likes of *Dogtooth* and *Alps*. However, as Lyttelton (2013) pointedly observes, *Miss Violence* is "a slightly different beast, less oblique than *Dogtooth* and *Alps*, and crucially, even more extreme".

The film's cruel intentions are evident from its very opening – and eminently poignant – scene. The film begins with the suggestive shot of a closed door,

signaling from the start the hermetically sealed character of the familial unit that it features, as well as the cryptic nature of its narrative structure, which relies less on exposure and more on foreclosure (of vision, information, intelligibility itself). The door opens and a pair of girls appears (their heads cropped by the frame!) walking hand in hand to the living room where the rest of the family is waiting with a birthday cake. One of the girls, Angeliki (Chloe Bolota), blows the candles and dances with the family's patriarch to the sounds of Leonard Cohen's *Dance me to the End of Love* before she unexpectedly walks onto the balcony and jumps off. Cohen's Holocaust-inspired song along with the smile on Angeliki's face and her piercing gaze at the camera as she falls to her death, instantly transform the young girl to both a martyr and a ghost.

In effect, the ghost of Angeliki (her name suggestively pointing towards an angel; a benevolent ghost) will haunt the awkwardly balanced familial space that is foregrounded in the film, as investigations by the Welfare to unravel the causes of the girl's suicide disturb the otherwise 'quiet' familial temporality, but most importantly as the cracks and fissures of this ostensibly polished microcosm gradually open wide to unearth the atrocious secrets that lie beneath. However, this is not to suggest that *Miss Violence* is to be categorized as a domestic melodrama with a dash of whodunit. It is, indeed, another "beast"; it is raw, impassive, but still violent, especially with its audience. It is a film that communicates in ellipses and insinuation, as the haunting images of empty corridors and closed doors deny the audience – at least, for its greater part – any visual access to the horrific events that form the temporal rupture of the familiar familial narrative; as the deadpan acting style becomes a partition that obstructs the unfolding of character and the characters' direct gazes at the camera become obscure denunciatory testimony rather than revelation of inner emotional state; as the soundtrack is dominated by silence, which painfully rhymes with violence.

Violence is ubiquitous; sometimes unprovoked, often sudden and unexpected, but always deglamorized. In an early scene, Myrto (Sissy Toumasi) asks her mother (Reni Pittaki) to unlock the apartment's exit door but the mother refuses because, as she explains, the girl is in detention. Myrto responds instantly; a medium shot shows her headless torso as she holds a butcher knife and without much hesitation slashes her hand before the eyes of her mother. The scene is marked by absence of sensational close-ups and reaction shots, screams and melodramatic dialogue or music. The mother rushes to treat the wounded hand and soon after she slaps Myrto on the face without, however, commenting upon the event. Language is rendered redundant. Much as happens with the film's entire rhetoric, violence is screened in a raw, impassive, and above all, unrepentantly silent manner. Silence arguably resonates with the origins of violence, as showcased in the film, namely, the autonaturalizing temporality of patriarchy, which safeguards its reproduction and perpetuation through a strict

delineation of gender and sexual roles that are regimented through un-speakable, and thus un-questioned, violence. In effect, the emotional immunity if not mutilation that is drawn on the silent, deadpan faces of the family members is nothing less than the culmination of patriarchal abuse, which is visibly underscored as always already gendered (the patriarch is effectively never on the receiving end – well, at least not till the film's ending) and more often than not sexualized.

A few moments after the above incident, the patriarch returns home, making his way towards Myrto's bedroom only to come across a closed door. He rapidly opens the door before, in a surprising move, forcefully removing it, saying "In this house we have nothing to hide". The irony that underlies his commandment gains resonance, as doors gradually become a narrative motif in the film, signifiers more of concealment than disclosure, and most importantly of the traditional division between public and private space in the Greek culture. Discussing Michael Cacoyannis's *Stella* (1955), Achilleas Hadjikyriacou reminds us of "the traditional separate gender spheres that structure the Greek context", which restrict women to the domestic regime, while allowing men only to enjoy the public sphere (2012: 188). Interestingly, as Hadjikyriacou observes, "the door of the house" functions both physically and symbolically "as a divider of the two spheres, defining and separating the private/female from the public/male domain" (ibid.).

In the rigidly patriarchal space of the middle-class Athenian apartment that dominates the topography of *Miss Violence* the traditional gender-inflected spatial division is almost sacredly preserved. Especially the house's adult females, that is the mother and her eldest daughter Eleni (Eleni Roussinou), are portrayed as almost incarcerated within the increasingly shrinking confines of domestic life. The mother is witnessed fulfilling the letter of the patriarchal law of domesticity and only at times indulging in the escapism of wild life documentaries that are clearly juxtaposed as metonymy of a wishful return to a pre-discursive, and thus pre-patriarchal landscape. Eleni's life, on the other, is depicted as utterly reduced to the upbringing of her two children, Alkmini and Philippos (Constantinos Athanasiades), bathing them and helping them with their homework, while always being escorted in the outside world by her father and permanently sporting an obscure smile on her face and a mutilated gaze of absolute blankness. Unlike them, the patriarch emerges as not only the ruler of the house but significantly as the mediator between the private and public domains, holding the traditional roles in the organization of domesticity within patriarchal capitalism of the provider, the guardian, of the unapologetic agent of discipline, of power, of violence.

Clearly, the film reconstructs such a highly recognizable political economy with the aim to dismantle it through performing a multi-layered critique against ideologies of sexual difference; from the capitalization and splitting of the female body to the collusion of the mother in the discourses of patriarchy. As Luce Irigaray argues, patriarchal capitalism produces three bodies for woman: the wife/mother (use value; private property), the daughter (commodity/exchange-value), and the whore (use-value and exchange-value) (1985: 185-86). Evidently, in *Miss Violence* the mother often emerges as an agent of patriarchy, ensuring the execution of the father's orders in the fear of her own victimization. However, it is significantly the body of the daughter that monopolizes the rhetorical and aesthetic framework within which the film performs its critical discourse; for it is a body whose kin position is set aside – if not utterly obliterated – and more often than not assumes the role of the whore.

Although the precarious familial positioning of the younger female members of this anomalous kinship structure is already insinuated early in the film, it is ultimately made palpable in the most blatant way about fifteen minutes before the ending in the film's most appalling scene, that is Myrto's multiple rape scene. A low-key-lighted long take shows Myrto being consecutively slammed from behind by two men in a filthy low storey room with the second man also forcing the young girl to drink alcohol while slapping her on the face and buttocks. The man leaves the girl sobbing on the bed and trying to recompose herself, before the figure of her father appears at the background of the frame ascending the spiral staircase that presumably connects the claustrophobic bedsit with the ground floor. The father walks calmly towards the bed, sits on its edge and waves to Myrto to come closer. The girl makes a desperate effort to leave but her father rapidly grabs her arm. The film cuts for the first time after almost three minutes to a close-up of the father as he forces the girl to sit on his lap. The cold eyes of the emotionless patriarch, as he rapes his underage offspring, dominate the low-key lighted frame, accentuating the graphic revelation of the film's thorniest issue and entrapping the viewers into the unbearable witnessing of the ultimate horror of incest; or, at least, of the horror which the film crucially associates the incest taboo with.

Interestingly, incest emerges as a recurring narrative theme in contemporary Greek cinema, particularly in the strand of films labeled as the Greek Weird Wave. The diverse modes in which this provocative theme is alluded, invoked and/or represented in films such as Panos Koutras's *Strella/A Woman's Way* (2009), the aforementioned *Dogtooth*, *Attenberg*, and *Alps*, as well as Syllas Tzoumerkas's *Hora Proelefsis/Homeland* (2010), reveal contemporary Greek filmmakers' relentless vehemence to address the vexed issue of the archetypal patriarchal Greek family in challenging ways that denaturalize its long-established ideological status as the structural core of Greek society, the

quintessential cell for the nation's blossoming. Indeed, this thematic perseverance might reveal a contemporary aesthetic tendency to cut the thread that holds the nation's self-representational tradition attached to an institution that, directly or indirectly, might be responsible for the present economic, political and, above all, social turmoil. Family is thus brought to the forefront of a relentless aesthetic attack with the incest taboo emerging as a pivotal narrative mechanism for this attack's deconstructive enterprise.

According to Judith Butler, "the incest taboo legitimates and normalizes kinship based in biological reproduction and the heterosexualization of the family" (2000: 66). As she explains, "The abiding assumption of the symbolic that stable kinship norms support our abiding sense of culture's intelligibility" has produced "that moralized sexual horror that is perhaps most fundamentally associated with incest", which establishes certain forms of kinship and kin relations "as the only intelligible and livable ones" (ibid.: 70-71). However, she admits, "the incest taboo contains its infraction within itself", for "normalization is invariably disrupted and foiled by what cannot be ordered by regulatory norms" (ibid.). In this way, the incest taboo "does not simply prohibit incest but rather sustains and cultivates incest as a necessary spectre of social dissolution, a spectre without which social bonds cannot emerge" (ibid.: 67).

In Butler's queer re-reading of Sophocles's *Antigone*, the eponymous protagonist's claim to and act of burying Polynices against Creon's edict originates in a latent incestuous love for her brother, for which she is determined even to bury herself alive. Antigone's renegotiation of the law of structuralist kinship effectively establishes, as Butler argues, the final act of Sophocles's Oedipal trilogy as the basis for a post-oedipal psychoanalytic approach, insofar as Antigone is not construed as a mere perversion of the law in a way that establishes perversion as a structural necessity for the law itself to be constituted and maintained. For, in this line of thought, the perverse remains entombed in a form of negative dialectics, as the essential and negative feature of the norm, which, nonetheless, denies any rearticulation of the norm itself. Butler does not necessarily argue for incestuous relationships here. She rather wonders whether the kinship trouble at the heart of Sophocles underscores incest as precisely the effect of language, a normative and normalizing structure, which organizes kin relations as well as the actors, positions, and places of normative family and establishes them "at the level of the symbolic [as] a necessary psychic support against an engorgement by the Real" (ibid.: 70). In effect, kinship itself is exposed as a discursive structure; indeed as the effect of language.

In *A Woman's Way*, the otherwise contentious theme of incest is treated in an unashamedly tender manner. The dramatization of a passionate transgressive relationship between a father and his transsexual son refuses to culminate in a

tragic end and the film rather opens up an aesthetic space for a more productive (and queer!) resolution to the primordial Oedipal drama. In *Dogtooth*, the incest taboo is completely obliterated and an incestuous coitus between the family's elder siblings is paradoxically ordered by the father himself while supported and facilitated by the mother. Arguably, the unapologetic defiance of the incest taboo in the above cases (regardless of how different they are from one another) is essentially the defiance of patriarchal kinship itself – which, as Butler illuminates, relies on the taboo for its legitimization and normalization – through its exposure as an incoherent and contingent structure.

Unlike *A Woman's Way* and *Dogtooth*, however, *Miss Violence* follows a more conventional – although much more disconcerting – pathway in its treatment of incest, which essentially foregrounds it as perversion of the law of patriarchal structural kinship. With the Greek patriarch being portrayed raping and prostituting his underage daughter, in Avranas's film incest is intertwined with pedophilia and, of course, gendered and sexualized violence, thus showcased as precisely the essential negative feature of the norm, associated with what Butler describes as the “moralized sexual horror”. ‘Entombed’ in this form of negative dialectics, *Miss Violence's* violent foregrounding of the perverse transforms the entire film into an aesthetic embodiment of that necessary spectre that the incest taboo engenders, the “spectre without which social bonds cannot emerge”, to recall Butler's words (*ibid.*: 67). Yet, this is a spectrality that ultimately verifies the structure rather than challenging and disarticulating it; or at least a spectrality that does not allow for a queer collapse of structures and rather insists on structural necessity as existential prerequisite.

The final act of the film begins with a shot of Alkmini dancing again for the camera. This time, however, the viewer is not to be identified with the television screen but with the girl's very intimate diegetic audience, namely her grandfather and one of his middle-aged friends, as the subsequent shot reveals. Thus positioned in the defendant's dock the viewers are challenged to reflect upon their own share of (ir)responsibility, as insatiable yet apathetic consumers of a visual culture that relies on the exploitation of the body of the Other, which is always already gendered and/or sexualized. Unfolding in slow motion the next shot shows the unnamed man approaching the girl and posing on her side for a photograph, which the grandfather takes with his polaroid camera – again an implicit comment on media's unapologetic proliferation of images of (sexual) abuse. The man then takes the girl's reluctant hand and leads her to his bedroom, closing the door behind them – indeed, another closed door. The film cuts back to the family home with a tight frame that shows Eleni sleeping on the sofa. Alkmini enters the frame sobbing and mumbling “Mum”. A close-up accentuates the little girl's distress. However, before she manages to draw her mother's attention a hand grabs her off-screen. In the next scene, the mother is shown wiping butcher

knives under the suspicious gaze of the patriarch. The next morning Eleni finds her father on his bed covered in blood and bursts into a silent yet hysterical laughter. The film's penultimate shot shows the mother sitting calmly on the sofa having in front of her the younger members of the family standing in a straight line like soldiers. The pervasive silence of the soundtrack is only disturbed by the mother's order to Eleni to lock the flat's door. The film comes full circle with a tight shot of the firmly sealed door. But this final image is more confusing than redeeming. For, behind the closed door another order, another structure is probably given birth to. We could call this order matriarchal; we could also wonder how different this one might be from its oppressive predecessor in its insistence on preserving the division between private and public space.

Indeed, what are the ethical repercussions of *Miss Violence's* denouement? As the film reasserts its universe's moral order by substituting one order for another, one wonders whether Avranas's film is ultimately a patriarchal dystopia unexpectedly turned feminist fantasy rather than a subversive aesthetic space for the productive deconstruction of patriarchy. For, how regressive would it be to contend that the dismantling of patriarchy is still a matter of gender battle rather than one of gender trouble?

Note: All translations from Greek are by the author.

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