

FILM REVIEW

Symptom (2015)

by Angelos Frantzis

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Symptom is the fourth feature in Angelos Frantzis's cinematic journey, and it was an unplanned one. It came to life while the director was still struggling to find funding for his next film *Still River* (2018) as he couldn't stay inactive any longer (Kranakis 2014). Probably five years is the longest acceptable hiatus for Frantzis, as the pattern of his filmography shows: the impromptu *Polaroid* (2000), the fantasy mystery *A Dog's Dream* (2005) that followed, and the right-of-passage raw fairy-tale *In the Woods* (2010). Planned or not, the film fits perfectly into the director's filmography, not only because one can find all his usual collaborators in front and behind the camera, but because thematically it expands on a constant investigation of contemporary expressions of myth.

If *A Dog's Dream* was an oneiric version of the Athenian cityscape and *In the Woods* was a fairy-tale about sexual awaking and embracing nature, *Symptom* stands in-between those two, as an adult fable set on the borders of nature and wasteland. If one wants to be immersed into the film's atmosphere, it is better to avoid reading anything about it; even the 27-word IMDb description is enough to lead the spectator on how to interpret the imagery, but arguably this is only one (and rather limiting) way to experience this multisensory film. If one has to give some hints about the film, it is much better to present some main points of the narrative rather than to try to offer an interpretation: The residents of a secluded island have to face a genderless creature with glowing eyes, wearing a skeleton mask with horns and a leather jacket. Their only hope is a young woman who seems to be the only one able to face the creature without falling under its charm.

In a personal interview conducted with Angelos Frantzis in 2005, on the occasion of the release of *A Dog's Dream*, he said: "When I make a movie I make it for the spectator; not the audience, but the spectator who is going to connect with it". In other words, the director treats his spectator as an emancipated subject, an active participator of the creation of the work of art (Ranci re 2011). Thus the

director provides the images and any dialogue he considers necessary but leaves the spectator to connect the dots to give a meaning to the story. This task of drawing associations is not an easy one, while it contradicts the notion of the movie as a product for massive consumption and prevents a large part of the audience, not only from engaging, but from even having the chance to watch the film as it doesn't fit in the established distribution circuits. It is no surprise, then, that little has been written about the film. *Symptom* never got an extended coverage, despite the attention it had attracted as a work in progress in Co-Production forums in the International Film Festivals of Karlovy Vary and Thessaloniki, and its screening in numerous festivals, such as in Athens, Istanbul, Sao Paolo, and Torino. The film is destined to remain among the "great movies that no one talks about" (Gocic 2017). Frantzis appears to be used to this: his films are welcomed by audiences in festivals, but never become a success in the box office (Mpozoni 2015).

Symptom belongs to the fantasy genre, including elements of melodrama, without really allowing any more categorisations, as it stands on its own, and as the lead actress Katia Goulioni notes "[b]y saying it is a thriller you impose an idea and you may betray the spectator" (Kranakis 2015). In other words the movie is not about genre, but about the notion of myth, which resiliently remains part of the everyday experience, despite the 19th century idea that it represents a lower conceptualisation of the world (Armstrong 2006). Frantzis's myth for the residents of the island functions as a way to naturalise situations and to normalise failures of their society (Barthes 1993), however for the spectator, it raises issues about current perceptions regarding time, space, gender and cinematic expression.

The notion of space is defined by the particularity of the island, which has been a favourite *topos* in popular culture and can provide a utopian or dystopian setup (Kinane 2016). The geography of the island has defined boundaries and forms an environment that one cannot easily escape, or a place detached from the problems of the world. Against the bright and touristy images of the Greek islands, this isolated piece of land is trapped in the windy and melancholic autumn and winter. *Symptom's* cinematic *topos* is an amalgam of two islands (Amorgos and Tinos) and Athens, seamlessly merged by Ilias Adamis's spectacular cinematography and his mastering of the dim light, and skillfully edited by Tonis Apostolidis; a place where loneliness reigns and the presence of the creature with the glowing eyes grows like a symptom of an infected wound. And it grows silently and in a hypnotic way, preventing the residents from reacting before it is too late. The sense of disconnection is usually underlined by the introduction of a lonely figure within these deserted landscapes, a living body in a background of entropy which leads to the birth of the 'devil'. The build-up takes place in silence and a series of long shots: a group of teenage boys silently

gaze at the spectator, put on white masks, ride motorbikes, and then attack a boy sitting at the edge of a rooftop; a woman walking in the street carrying shopping bags notices the creature in the dark and stares at it without any reaction; probably as the word spreads, the power of the creature grows and in the next scene, a woman driving a car sees the creature running among a herd of sheep, she jumps out of the car to check out this creature only to realise that the creature is in the car watching her, and then she starts undressing to the creature's discomfort. The latter defines how female bodies react to the creature's presence: contrary to the useless sound code that the men create, as it is discussed later, the women act, and the creature flees.

Long before the introduction of the main female character (whose name is Electra evoking references to Euripides's play and the disobedient heroine), the decoupage of the film creates a sequence of action-reaction relations between the creature and the islanders, which expands to similar juxtapositions between Electra and the residents, and, above all, the creature and the young woman. Electra seems to be the main reaction to this presence, equally enigmatic and silent, imposing over the residents, who seek for her help across the film. Katia Goulioni excels in this role, through a physical performance that derives from Tanztheater, with her body becoming the main channel of dramatic expression through a series of repetitive tasks (Parsch-Bergsohn 2013). Electra, who is rejected by her grieving mother and has to deal with her sister's death, becomes the superheroine that the island needs to face the devil. Electra goes beyond undressing and urinating against the wind as the other two women do; she harms herself and hunts the creature in abandoned places, where no one is willing to approach. Goulioni's achievement is that she manages to turn this lonely female wandering figure in abandoned sites into a brave heroine, not allowing gendered stereotypical connotations, such as the 'crazy woman'. She suffers silently, she takes the lead among the residents and trains them to be prepared for the exhaustion that comes when facing the 'devil': "Faster! Faster!", she screams, and when a man faints, she doesn't allow the others to pick him up. Some reviews mention that Frantzis gives her very little to do (Joe 2016); however, one can argue that the director gives her the space to perform the character without imposing dialogue or over-choreographed movements, and this liberty is the reason she gives a gripping performance.

The dipole between good and evil, male and female (all too common in the fantasy genre) has been blurred too many times in the history of cinema, but in *Symptom* the distinction is even more unclear. The 'devil' – a masculine word in the Greek language that always refers to a male entity – is not the male killer against the *final girl* (Clover 1993). The creature is seen wearing heels, but the clothing alludes to a male motorist, while Electra has her body fully covered and does not perform her gender either, with some critics referring to her as a

wildling and a tomboy (Galanou 2015). Notably, the haunting figure never attacks – it just stares. However, the white mask, the horns, the black leather, and the ambiguous gender identity are enough to subvert the balance of safety and order for the residents. At the same time, as the figure triggers a series of cinematic references, from the masked serial killers of horror films to *Donnie Darko's* (Richard Kelly 2001) Frank or the rabbits of David Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006), it creates an uncanny atmosphere and undermines the expectations of the spectator. The creature inhabits places where the manmade environment decays, humps garbage piles or the rocks, wanders around abandoned containers, landfills, and quarries, but the anticipated attack never manifests. Soon the initial assumption that the residents react to the presence of the evil is put in question, as one wonders if the creature is the reaction to a series of immoral actions by Electra and the residents themselves.

The structure of the film follows a rhythm, which creates antitheses between the four parts of the film. The first 20 minutes, comprising a quarter of the film's total duration of 83 minutes, pass by without any spoken word. This aponia becomes even stronger when Electra sits before her mother who refuses to engage in any type of conversation, rejecting her daughter with her silence. The sounds of nature, motorbikes, cars, and violence are thus magnified, as they become the only narrative underlay for the images, alongside the haunting soundtrack of Coti K., the director's usual collaborator in the musical score. Even when some form of dialogue is introduced, for another 24 minutes the phrases are just another addition to the soundtrack and remain sporadic and cryptic, as we meet the residents' task force and their fruitless attempts to deal with the creature. But when Electra enters the creature's hiding cave she discovers a photo of a girl she has in her own bedroom – an image that initiates a flashback in the film's narrative.

The flashback goes to a time prior the incarnation of the 'devil' on the island and tries to give an explanation for Electra's self-harming attitude, her perseverance to fight the creature, and their mutual attraction. The flashback reads like a reaction the first slow paced muted twenty minutes, and the pace of the dialogue changes drastically. For the following 20 minutes Frantzis and his co-writer Konstantinos Antonopoulos condense expositional information as an intrinsic part of a convincing conversation. The setup of a pre-marriage dinner of various upper-middle class, educated people, who love to engage in pretentious conversations that distinguish them from the rest of the villagers, allows for introductions to names, relations, moral stances, and ideas. Nonetheless, the gist of this part is found in silence and the painful stares of Electra and Andreas, her sister's soon to be husband, as they try to control their urges before they give into physical desire. By the end of this part, the revelation of Electra's 'sin' and

betrayal that lead to her sister's suicide reveal that the monster is her own creation. But is it just her fault?

Is the sin of one woman the sole source of evil? The last part goes back to physicality and silence, only broken by Electra's ultimate plea for forgiveness to her mother, which is treated with a deafening silence, expelling the young woman into non-existence. "Mama, will you love me, even a little? I do not exist without you. Everything I do is for you": those are a few of Electra's last words before she goes back into the creature's shelter. The unpacking of the shared elements between the 'devil' and Electra lead to the final act, where the residents arrive at the quarry and they stone the creature to death as it walks out of the dark cave, into the morning light. Once the creature lies dead on the ground, they remove the mask to discover Electra.

The first half of the film could place *Symptom* in the typology of the Greek Weird Wave (Gonçalves 2016; Gocic 2017), as it features silences, repetitive movements, an unorthodox way of speaking, among others. But when the flashback kicks in, it shows that Frantzis belongs to a different cinematic realm. Contrary to his counterparts of the Greek Weird Wave, Frantzis's universe places the 'weird' outside of the everyday, and inside the story, his film is not an allegory on today's society but as he describes it, "a poetic investigation on the dark and uncanny side of existence" (Kranakis 2014). His imagery draws on Pina Bausch, Dimitris Papaioannou, and Land Art, with elements of the fantastic as seen in David Lynch and a pace that brings to mind Bela Tarr and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. On the other hand, all of these references do not do justice to a creation that is idiosyncratic, personal, and honest; Frantzis is not really borrowing anything, he just finds in film the medium to narrate "what you cannot write, what you cannot tell" as he personally defines cinema (Mpozoni 2015).

The final revelation has been foreshadowed with various hints that the 'devil' may be a woman, for instance when Electra discovers the candle and the picture of her sister, which used to be in her bedroom, in the creature's shelter. But the creature was not always Electra and it was not a costume that she was putting on. The myth is not an event that happened sometime in the past, it continues to happen and helps us to move forward and to deal with the chaos of reality (Armstrong 2006). *Symptom* attempts to summarize the essence of the 'devil', and the secluded closed circuit of the island allows for the dense representation of society that looks for scapegoats for every systematic failure (Stavarakakis 2008). Electra allows herself to become the scapegoat by putting on the costume. The silent reaction of the residents to this revelation demonstrates that they probably know that they have not resolved the problem; however, for the time being, they can pretend that order has prevailed. The physical manifestation of the 'devil' and the 'weirdness' are symptoms of betrayal, broken family relations, immoral actions, and deviant behaviour, and, suddenly, a whole mob of ones

'without a sin' cleanse their island from the 'unethical woman'. They seem to forget the teenagers at the beginning of the film that attacked the boy at the edge of the roof (this image is presented again in the film with the creature in a similar position at the edge of a roof).

Symptom is not a mystery of what has happened, is a filmic exploration of a myth, and that is why it builds up in the beginning through images and the words are added later. And as it is a myth, there can be a lot of interpretations, but there will never be one version. In this aspect, Frantzis's film is a success. His authentic passion for cinema, attention to detail, and synthesis of concepts present a complete vision and a cinematic experience that overcomes budget limitations without allowing the viewer to notice the financial constraints. It is admirable how he managed to achieve this level of quality on a tiny budget, and how he has the energy to work in the same way that he worked fifteen years ago in *Polaroid*. In conclusion, we need to return to Frantzis's comment from 2005, with regards to the spectator of his films. *Symptom* is not a straightforward story and it really depends on the spectator to draw the links between the different qualities of the four parts of the film. Do the cinematography, the music and Goulioni's performance allow the spectator to trace the narrative thread and engage with Electra's Sisyphean challenge and patience? Frantzis can make a commercial film, but this is not the kind of cinema he represents, so he is not willing to 'betray' his spectator. By framing this secluded world in-between nature and the manmade environment, imprinting the tendency to search for scapegoats in his cinematic environment, underlining the fact that a woman is to carry the blame for everything, and creating a strong female character outside the expected norms, grant the spectator an experience worthy of exploration.

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