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FILM REVIEW

Norway
by Yannis Veslemes (2014)

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The kind of sensation, a first-time director has when cutting his or her teeth on genre filmmaking, is easy to detect and identify in the diegetic world of his debut – a world that is far too often full of abundant references to other films, inside jokes and playful experimentations on narrative conventions and archetypical leitmotifs. But what makes this venture so challenging and this practice justified when the teeth that are mostly tested on screen are long, pointed and sharp, prevalent and bloodthirsty? In other words, what are the features that still render the vampire genre relevant and inviting for a novice, despite its multiple configurations through the ages, and what are the different connotations it might generate in its different framings? The first Greek vampire film, *Norvigia/Norway* (Yannis Veslemes, 2014), is trying to bring new blood in this field of discourse, while it provides fertile ground for observation on the state of the art of genre-filmmaking in Greece.

The release of YannisVeslemes's debut feature in the international festival circuit came in the aftermath of a significant twist in the history of the genre in the last decade worldwide. On the one hand, Hollywood studios and television broadcasting companies in the US contributed to the radical popularization of the vampire among young audiences through the successful – in box office terms – screen adaptations of Stephenie Meyer's bestselling book series *Twilight* (*Twilight* [2005], *New Moon* [2006], *Eclipse* [2007], *Breaking Dawn* [2008], adapted for screen in 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2012 respectively), but also through the prime time TV series *True Blood* (2008 –2014) produced by the premium cable network HBO. On the other hand, a number of international art-house co-productions have outlined the figure of the vampire as a powerful cross-cultural element, that is no longer connected to a homogenized European past or a uniform gothic "aesthetic regime" (Rancière 2006: 26), but is *par excellence* a nomadic subject, escaping categorizations and exploring hybrid urban environments. In *Only Lovers Left Alive* (Jim Jarmusch, 2013), the two vampire protagonists (outspokenly named Adam and Eve) are committed to saving

humanity from definite decline, whether they are left wandering in the industrial desert of the post-bankruptcy Detroit, or strolling in the narrow alleys and secret passages of Tangiers. In *Låt den rätte komma in/Let the Right One In* (Tomas Alfredson, 2009), the vampire is an underage girl that is in constant movement – an element that is intrinsic to our collective experience of the modern – refraining from leaving traces in the thick snow. In *Bakjwi/Thirst* (Chan-wook Park, 2009), the Korean loose adaptation of Émile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) is emblematic of a dissenting reading of an example of literary naturalism, where the vampire is the accurate embodiment of the *bête humaine* that Zola describes in the preface of the novel. As for the "first Iranian Vampire Western ever made," as the movie *Dokhtari dar šab tanhâ be xâne miravad/A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Ana Lily Amirpour, 2014) is already proclaimed, it is an ironic pastiche of spaghetti westerns, in the vein of Kathryn Bigelow's sophomore film *Near Dark* (1987). The *Girl*, wearing the veil, is no longer one of these "branded creatures" (Nina Auerbach 1995: 5) that *wear* their identity, but she appropriates and plays with her mobile, hybrid identity, just like the characters of the mockumentary *What We do in the Shadows* (Taika Waititi and Jemaine Clement, 2014) from New Zealand. While in the 1970s, "the representation of the vampire became directly engaged with the reinvention of modernity" (Abbott 2007: 75), especially in the domain of American iconography, in the early twentieth-first century the vampire on screen arguably works as a catalyst for reevaluating the past and its legacy to the reality of a transnational world in the postmodern paradigm.

Norway can (and should) only be fully experienced within this expanded framework, as it engages in the same sets of inquiries with the aforementioned cases, but it moves several steps further. Presenting a vivid example of a new, rigorous cinephilia that not only excludes, but rather exploits the advent of home entertainment – thereby dissenting from Susan Sontag's claim that "cinephilia has no role in the era of hyperindustrial films" (Sontag 1995: 60) – the film establishes a unique assertive nostalgic apparatus. The director Yannis Veslemes, having spent a lifetime in the movies (like a true 'apostle' and 'crusader,' according to Sontag's name giving), is overtly aware of the recent developments in the theory and practice of the genre, and he attempts to summarize them in a deeply personal film – a retro-futuristic love letter for an era of filmgoing long gone. In the first place, he addresses the issue of the specificity of a vampire performance in the realm of cinema that activates the viewer's mechanisms of identification. "The spectators voluntarily sit in a coffin (the darkened cinema), watching a screen on which not only light but also (within and between every frame) darkness is projected (Waltje 2000: 29). But moreover and most importantly, he recognizes the vampire as the embodied performance of the past in the present, a hybrid creature trapped in an in-between state that ruptures our perception of temporality and forces us to re-examine the dialectical relation of 'objective history' and 'subjective memory.'

In *Norway,* it is the *performativity* of the vampire that leads us through the construction of a new form of subjectivity that goes hand in hand with a new cinephilia: the lead protagonist is a vampire who asserts that his heart will stop the moment he stops moving to the sound of music. And to a certain respect, this premise is the core of *Norway'*s narrative world that tests the implementation of its own, peculiar pacemaker in lieu of a rigid, standardized *syuzhet*, in an overall fluid and flowing construction. The backbone of the film is indeed the set of dance steps of a vampire named Zano (Vangelis Mourikis), who guides us through different units of time and space, or more precisely through *non-places* – ambivalent anthropological spaces of transience that have no familiar attributes of place and convey no sense of belonging. These non-places claim an inherent cinematic quality, due to the presence of the dancing vampire in their environment. If Giorgio Agamben associated the experiments of Gilles de la Tourette on footprint reproductions of his patients with the early work of Eadweard Muybridge on the snapshots of a horse's gallop, in order to manifest that "the element of cinema is gesture, and not image" (2000: 57), the filmmaker follows the thinker's steps and proves how the gestures of an otherworldly creature that transcends natural time and synchronizes his movement to a mechanic rhythm is the purest expression of the cinematic form: "the gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such" (ibid).

The vampire is already introduced in the opening sequence, where we find him on the move, traveling on a train and about to disembark. Zano is a one-of-a-kind vampire – he is drinking and eating more things than blood simple, he is indulgent to garlic and able to see his mirror image. This non-stereotypical creature becomes our only signifier of time and space: he has just left behind the cold winter of 1984 ("the winter of '84 was pure hell") and his new destination is the city of Athens, not the modern metropolis, but a super-modern setting, represented on screen by a toy model. The first stop in his journey is a the foyer of "Ciné Star" – an emblematic adult movie theater, housed in an art deco building located in the center of Athens, that was shut down in 2010 after decades of recession –, where he naturally finds his first victim in the face of a prostitute. The second stop in his journey is "Disco Zardoz," that is no other than "Rebound," the influential and oldest new wave club in Greece, that is now renamed after John Boorman's sci-fi film (1974), which is set, respectively, in an abstract wasteland in the future post-Apocalyptic Earth. Zano moves from the dance floor to the private room of the owner of the disco; the walls of the room, covered by cheap posters of naked porn models, the portrait of the late leader of the Greek Socialist Party, Andreas Papandreou, and stills from theatre stagings of Greek Tragedies, transform this room into a time capsule, where the owner (performed by Markos Lezes, a famous comedian that culminated in the Greek video production in the '80s) watches his old films in a VHS. As Zano drifts to the

end of the night, riding on actual and imaginary vehicles, from vintage cars to flying sleighs, he passes through a fable forest, with the companion of heroes that could have leapt out of a fairy tale – Alice in an unknown wonderland, and Peter who bides a (ware)wolf from behind the trees. (Earlier in the film, an older woman in the bar that called herself 'granny' said loudly to Zano "What big teeth you have!" as in an absurd flip side of Red Riding Hood.) At the end of his roaming awaits a half-living, half-mummified Methuselah resembling Adolf Hitler, who demands from Zano to bite him and give him eternal life. In other words, at the end of the journey stands what André Bazin defined as the mummy complex (2004: 195) – the need for illusion, as an attempt to dismiss the reality of time, and the basis of representation art.

When Zano first meets the owner of the disco Zardoz in his private chamber, he asks him if he is an actor. The owner's response is revealing: "I used to be one. I am a business man now. Do you know what I liked the most about the movies? The characters I played will never die. I'm a kind of immortal in a way." Echoing these lines, the director asserts immortality in his own right, defending a cinematic experience that is transcendental, timeless, and independent of temporal correlations, medium specificities or even technological formats. Whereas the term *zombie media* includes the methodologies of reuse and re-appropriation of obsolete media technologies as an attempt to address larger questions on media performances in their society of reference (Hertz and Parikka 2012), Yannis Veslemes seems to introduce his own take on the methodology of *vampire media*, suggesting a model of a new cinephile filmmaking that unfolds older configurations of filmic experiences and triggers a more conscious scheme of spectatorship. And luckily, he is not alone in this effort. Fellow Greek directors support him with their actual, flesh-and-blood presence on the set, playing minor parts (such as Christos Dimas as the bartender of Disco Zardoz, or Alexandros Voulgaris as the messenger of the prostitute's death), or just making cameo appearances (such as Ektoras Lygizos, who dances manically under the discoball). The opening of the film in Athens (*in the cold winter of 2015*) was limited to one after-hours screening per week, in the legendary – literally underground – movie theater "Asty" in the centre of the city. All over the universe, spectators that only come out at night are called to follow their senses in the pursuit of these cinematic "incarnations of unbridled sensuality" (Hess-Wright 1974: 45), that will transfuse this 'dark' matter that renders visible the non-visible, with a gesture that contains it pasts, reckons its present, and reflects its future. And this is the reason for any young filmmaker to get the bit between the teeth.

Note: All translations from Greek are by the author.

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