
The Goddess of Love in Sadomasochistic Costume: Roman Polanski's *Venus in Fur*

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Abstract: Throughout his career as a filmmaker, Roman Polanski has circled the subject of sex, its aberrations, its delights, and its risks. His twenty feature films are remarkably varied, yet characteristically probe the compelling, contradictory, and enchanting nature of human sexual behavior. He develops a cluster of images or tropes that appear across his films—from knives to claustrophobic settings—that advance his enquiry. *Venus in Fur* is Polanski's most comprehensive portrayal of the intricacies of sexual conduct, employing a theatrical setting (rehearsing an adaptation of a notorious classic novel), amplified with cultural allusions and exploring the limits of role-playing. Normality and contentment, in his world, lack intensity and excitement, but erotic abandon, for all its allure, exacts extraordinary costs.

Alan BARR

The Goddess of Love in Sadomasochistic Costume: Roman Polanski's *Venus in Fur*

Venus in Fur (2013) is Roman Polanski's most comprehensive exploration of troubled sexuality to date, bringing together elements previously scattered across his films. He had often presented a tense, dangerous picture of human sexuality. His fascination with violence and sadomasochism, like his insinuating irony—including self-deprecating references—characterize even his earliest works. Specific images, like knives and threateningly constricted spaces, occur repeatedly. His wife, Emmanuelle Seigner, stars frequently enough to be identified as a destabilizing force in his world of putatively perverse relationships. What distinguishes *Venus in Fur* is how Polanski cannily extends his exploration of the murky and uncomfortable margins surrounding sex, with its taint of unhealthiness. He here ventures to mix theatrical performance with filmic "reality," to embellish his drama with classical allusions, and to lace it with discussions of psychology. More than ever, he blurs the boundaries between the real and the imagined, the achievable healthy and the inescapably morbid. Glancing back to his previous films and acknowledging the poignancy of his references enhances our appreciation of *Venus in Fur* as an imaginative addition to Polanski's pondering the intractable nature of human sexuality.

Polanski is a provocative and challenging film artist. His first feature, *Knife in the Water* (1962), with almost political brazenness, side-stepped the Polish government's expectation that art be edifying and constructive. Movies as different as *Repulsion* (1965), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and *Tess* (1979) subverted the idea of sexual comfort or normality. *Bitter Moon* (1992) offers a full-blown, anxious, but undeniably engaging tale of sex gone pathological. In *Venus in Fur*, Polanski develops the theme of sadomasochism within the confines of a theatrical production of a play based on Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's 1870 novel, *Venus in Furs*.

The stage setting and the source novel allow Polanski to draw together dramatically his preoccupations with sex, pain, power, and violence—all, for him, interrelated. He does this dazzlingly, building on the psychological framework that Sacher-Masoch's novel provides, and then deftly extending his references across periods and cultures. His fascination with the imagery of blades, his near obsession with claustrophobia, and his impulse to include allusions to himself in his art are all braided together in *Venus in Fur*, within the context of auditioning for a play. It is an audition marked by ambiguity: is it too late to happen? And who is being auditioned? And for what role? The drama being rehearsed is similarly problematical: it is not clear at which point it occurs on the tenuous line separating play and reality.

Few filmmakers have achieved the notoriety along with the esteem that Polanski has. His half-century career established him as a major international director. His films may be as varied as his life—either as ghetto survivor, celebrated artist, or fugitive—consistently reflecting a restless, venturesome sensibility. If in his life he (dubiously) sought to transplant what he took to be a more open, liberated European sexual ethos to the comparatively puritanical, legalistic U. S., in his art, he—more interestingly and enduringly—created clearly individual (auteur) films—films that were commercially successful, as they increasingly scrutinized our sexual attitudes and behaviors.

Although his twenty feature films are remarkably diverse—from *Knife in the Water* to *Chinatown* (1974) to *The Pianist* (2002) to *Carnage* (2011)—certain themes or concerns or patterns and images or props reoccur. As many critics have observed, closed, confining situations seem to haunt him (*Knife in the Water*, *Cul-de-Sac*, *Bitter Moon*, *The Tenant*). Knives and razors appear with unnerving frequency; he begins *Macbeth* (1971) with the (sexualized) witches' burying of an impressive bodkin. The proximity of love and sex and pain and the inclination to cross-dress are never far from the screen. These trademarks, like his self-references, locate us in the world of a very particular auteur—though one inclined to disdain auteurism.

Polanski had no hesitations valuing or appreciating sex, its revelations and its complexities, often entwining it in his films with sadomasochism. *Knife in the Water* places two men and a woman on a sailboat, and we watch the men vie for domination and the woman wield sex as a weapon. His next film, *Repulsion*, shows Carol (Catherine Deneuve) terrified of sex, hysterically imagining the apartment walls splitting apart. A straight razor becomes her appropriated (homicidal) defensive phallus. Twenty years after toying irreverently with kinky sex in *What?* (1972), Polanski placed it at the center of *Bitter Moon*. His teasing, ironic humor is in evidence (Oscar's second-rate, purple prose makes it credible that he never sold a manuscript), but the narration and display of love turned hideously destructive is serious and potent. Polanski had indicated in a 1977 interview with Janusz Glowacki, "normal love isn't interesting... I assure you that it's incredibly boring. And, as I told you, I love spectacles" (qtd. in Leaming 163). Sex and love are of course distinct, but neither assumes a "normal" shape in his films.

Both literally and figuratively, Polanski's attraction to the thriller genre (whether involving a razor's edge or a storm at sea) incorporated its frisson—embodied in the threatening figures Emmanuelle Seigner plays in *Frantic* (1988), *The Ninth Gate* (1999), in the hazardous games of *Bitter Moon*, and then in *Venus in Fur*.

If Polanski has portrayed difficult loves in his films—tense and chafing in *Knife*, incestuous and homicidal in *Chinatown*, egotistically destructive in *Tess*—it was not until *Venus in Fur* that he presents love's complexities within a theatrical setting, one enriched by literary, artistic, and even religious or mythological allusions. The film, filtered through the 2010 play by David Ives (who co-wrote the screenplay with Polanski), is awash in literary references and in paintings of the goddess of love. Given that the play being rehearsed—in the film—is an adaptation of Sacher-Masoch's novel, the "game" (a key term in the play and in the film) becomes an exposure of sadomasochism—the seemingly pervasive human struggle to dominate or submit. The theater stage and the references to art and mythology intensify this exploration.

As the movie opens, the camera travels along a tree-lined, misty Paris street to an isolated theater. It traverses three sets of doors, passing posters advertising the cancelled performance (*spectacle annulée*) of a musical version of *Stagecoach* (*La chevauchée fantastique*) and a sign announcing an audition. Inside of this separated off world is a frenzied director, fuming, telling his fiancée on a phone call that he can't find his ideal Vanda; all of the actresses he's auditioned look either like "hookers" or "dykes." A rainstorm blows in the seemingly disheveled, low-class, unsophisticated, gum-chewing Vanda Jourdain (Emmanuelle Seigner), late for the audition and harried. Thomas Novachek (Matthieu Almaric), the writer-adaptor and now director, neither recognizes the arrival of his ideal actress for the role nor the implications of that ideal.

Polanski proceeds to use his camera to do theatrical things that are (notably) beyond the ordinary capacity of a theater. He does not open up Ives's play in the way Sidney Lumet took O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* or Mike Nichols took Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* outdoors. (Once the camera enters the theater, it remains there until the closing shots.) He does, though, ever so smoothly, change angles and perspectives, sporadically pushing and even discussing the techniques of theater—from lighting to costuming to rehearsing to role playing to the power dynamics that operate between actor and director. He executes transformations in Vanda and Thomas that flesh out his examination of sadomasochism and, *en passant*, the theories and the literary and pictorial art that portray it.

Herbert Eagle, writing in 2006, of the "Power and Visual Semantics of Polanski's Films," identifies "[p]ower, and the violence used to sustain it" as the "central elements in Polanski's cinema" (38). There is no gainsaying the place of violence and power struggles in his films. As Julia Ain-Krupa notes, "His first film was one minute long and entitled *A Murder* (1957). It is a tense scene in which a man is stabbed to death, and the knife repeats the action over and over, while the camera remains steady so that one is granted no relief" (13). The violence and the knives remained long after he had left Lodz film school, whether on an island in *Cul-de-Sac* (1966), in his film noir *Chinatown*, among residents in *The Tenant* (1976), or in films like *Macbeth* or *The Pianist*. Knives are, for Polanski, a potent image of the violence inherent in sex and the associated struggle for power. Reviewing *Venus in Fur*, Michael Oleszczyk finds, "the great chemistry between [the] two performers really turns the whole film into a dreamy, funny and scary meditation on how sex and power make the ultimate bedfellows." Here, as in so many of Polanski's films, violence and sex overlap, complementing observations that his world is claustrophobic or that his focus is often voyeuristic. (Barbara Leaming's early biography of him is subtitled *The Filmmaker as Voyeur*.)

Inspired and facilitated by Ives's *Venus in Fur*, Polanski's sense of a confined world, his fascination with theater, and what he perceives to be the inevitably fraught struggle inherent in sexual expression merge. It is as if he builds on all of the intense, ecstatically engulfing and then hideously destructive sexuality—fatal, as it turns out in *Bitter Moon*—and transfers it from a cruise ship to a theater, where he is able to couch the sadomasochistic currents within a theoretical and literary context. This is the fourth play (after *Macbeth*, *Death and the Maiden*, and *Carnage*) he has reconceived as a film, but the only time he has actually situated his story in a theater.

Psychiatrists apparently responded to *Repulsion* as if it were an astute textbook presentation of schizophrenia, and *Bitter Moon* dissects a consumingly sadomasochistic relationship. But there is no discussion of pathology or theory in either film. *Venus in Fur* is quite different. In the guise of dramatizing a "classic of world literature," whose author gives its name to masochism, Polanski's film both displays and annotates the pathology. From initially whining about failing to find his ideal, a classically trained and intelligent actress, Novachek discovers with poignancy and some surprise the reality of his ideal, complete with classical accoutrements and background. His voluptuous aunt had taught him that "the

most precious thing... [is] that nothing is more sensuous than pain. Nothing more pleasurable than degradation." As Vanda observes approvingly, "The Countess did her work well."

Venus in Fur is the fourth Polanski film in which Emmanuelle Seigner has appeared, and it is her most demanding, extraordinary performance. Her transformations from disorderly vamp to cultivated aristocrat to accomplished, knowledgeable actress and then to controlling goddess are smooth, breathtaking, and threatening. Matthieu Almaric, who had previously starred with her in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), is comparably superb as the distraught, haughty playwright-adapter-director, who becomes his character, the dapper, masochistic Severin von Kushemski. Polanski described in an interview the challenge of staying "in a single location with only two characters" (qtd. in Sarde 5). Within the confines of a stage, with his inspired cast, his "two-hander" succeeds and provides a tour of (pathological) love and sex, performing the evolving roles. Seigner and Almaric act out a human psychological analog to the physically claustrophobic settings he often favors.

The portrait of a woman psychotically fearful of sex in *Repulsion*, the sexualization of the plot and murder in *Macbeth*, the incest at the heart of *Chinatown*, and—most intensely—Oscar's extravagant, erotic narrative in *Bitter Moon* all reflect Polanski's insistent probing of what it means to love and, more centrally, to be driven by sex, what the relationship of love is to sex and of pain to pleasure. Denis Meikle thinks *Bitter Moon* "a provocation—a rabid exploration of the destructive power of love; an antithetical assault on the ideals of romance; an antidote to happy endings" (267). Polanski, gravitating toward uncertain, ambiguous endings, would not, I think, quibble with this assessment. In *Venus in Fur*, he brings these ruminations and obsessions (and provocations) together, and, building on a base of high cultural references, postulates a script for human relations that is both passionate and unsavory, alluring and assaultive.

The film begins (like Sacher-Masoch's novel) and also ends with a quote from the apocryphal *Book of Judith*: "And the Lord hath smitten him and delivered him into a woman's hands." Throughout, there are numerous paintings of Venus, most notably of Titian's *Venus with Mirror* (Novachek's favorite); the final credits list the eighteen different paintings of the goddess shown in the film. The unmistakably phallic column left on stage from the cancelled musical version of *Stagecoach* becomes the cross to which Thomas is bound. Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* may be the immediate literary and psychological source for Novachek's play, but other allusions abound, establishing the classical foundations of the film. Not only does Vanda Dunayev return Severin's copy of *Faust*—along with his "faithful" copy of Titian's painting,—she soon mocks him for selling his soul, as a writer, for the alliteration "professed principles." Almost as a gratuitous lurch, the filmscript has Thomas correct Vanda: "it's Kushemski not Kowalski" (lest we imagine we are dealing with the brutally macho protagonist of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*).

But it is Euripides's *Bacchae* that is at least as determining as Sacher-Masoch's shocker novel. In jest and in dramatic reality, the viewers will witness and, as voyeurs, be implicated in the high-stakes world of Dionysius and Aphrodite (for millennia societies have been imbibing his power and admiring images of her). Vanda's final incarnation is as a combination goddess (Aphrodite) and Bacchante. Her transformations are reflected in her hairdos: following the initially disarrayed coif, she, as Vanda Dunayev knocking at Severin's door, is tastefully and carefully styled; then, rejecting the play as an affront, Vanda Jourdain (how fitting, as she early noticed, that she and the character share the same name), turned Bacchante, dances, sporting an exaggerated bouffant style. Vanda, as actress, muses: "She is Venus, come in human form to bust his balls." The "adapter" is jostled and protests what he takes to be her ignorance: "It's the same story as *The Bacchae*." He informs her that Venus and Aphrodite are the same; the subject is both universal and consequential.

Polanski is unflinching in his perceptions. Like countless artists across the centuries, from Euripides to Shakespeare to Racine to Sacher-Masoch to (in our era) Albee, Sam Shepard, and Yasunari Kawabata, he recognized the painful aspects of love and the allure of extraordinary (insatiable) sex, the kind that ravishes and destroys Oscar and Mimi. In what is an extreme in Polanski's films, in the middle of *Bitter Moon*, Oscar describes a passion so overwhelming that nothing can be obscene in it; Mimi's urinating on the television screen and his incomparably orgiastic reaction to placing his head under her legs and wallowing in the "cascade" was their "sexual Rubicon" (never mind, for the moment, how their orgy ends on the far bank of the river). Polanski is often disdainful of temperate, controlled sex. Vanda consoles Thomas about how there's "Nothing like a "nice quiet copulation to help you relax"—until, she adds tauntingly, "a voice rumbles in the back of your mind, calling for something else. . . . Boom . . . Boom . . . Boom." This is a jibe at his engagement to Marie-Cécile, who evidently does not whip him, but it also aptly describes Nigel and Fiona, the staid couple in *Bitter Moon* or the Walkers in *Frantic*, who all look to resuscitate their tepid marriages. Robert Browning's monologist, Cleon, over a century and a half earlier, lamented, "life's inadequate to joy" ("Cleon" line 249). The unsettling argument of Freud's

Civilization and Its Discontents (1929) is that the price we pay for civilization (niceness) is discontent (that "Boom"). Polanski refocuses that dilemma, specifically on sex.

It is common and seems natural to talk about love and sex together, recognizing not only their connectedness but also—in their own distinct ways—that both can be founts of pleasure and vaults of pain, sources of reassurance and of anxiety, that each invites a great deal of psychological and physical risk. Polanski's comment that sexual attraction wanes with time, but that love can actually deepen is an atypically positive observation for him (qtd. by Meikle 265). Characteristically aware of this seeming paradox, he has chosen in *Bitter Moon* and again in a more comprehensive and discursive way in *Venus in Fur* to depict the exhaustive and enervating pursuit of sexual abandon.

Deriving pleasure from pain is a long-recognized, if confounding, human quirk ("Hit me," said the masochist to the sadist. "No"). Examples are legion—whether they be mildly hurting a loved one physically or being sadistically passive-aggressive (again, hopefully mildly). Oscar's destructive degrading of Mimi is but an artistic exaggeration of an all-too-common behavior between lovers. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* George and Martha no doubt do love each other—their ferocious and unerring barbs, notwithstanding. This paradoxical behavior, what Oscar Wilde described as each man's killing the thing he loves, continues to intrigue and to puzzle.

When Polanski was still in mid-career, Virginia Wexman identified his pervasive interest in sex with his portrayal of the struggle for power: "For Polanski, sexuality has become the primary mode by which the rituals of power, which have obsessed him from the beginning of his career, are enacted" (19). This dimension has persisted. But his films simultaneously recognize that for most people sex and/or love also involve the compelling if risky search for an ideal. Oscar begins his lurid narration to Nigel relating the vision of an "idea of heaven" (Mimi) he glimpsed on a Paris bus. Thomas may at first rail about the inadequate actresses he's auditioned and his inability to find his "ideal" (Polanski places the two terms—idea and ideal—in conjunction in these films), but gradually, sliding into his character Severin von Kushemski, he becomes disastrously enamored of the goddess of love who has materialized.

In the middle of the film, Vanda reminds him that Sacher-Masoch's novel begins with Venus's appearing before the fireplace, and she wants him to restore that scene. He is ironically unaware that in the guise of a flustered actress, late for an audition, Venus (like the Fourth Tempter in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, who was not expected) has entered the theater. Without his comprehending it, they will proceed to audition each other—he to play the role of the masochistic lover and she to be the exacting, punishing divinity.

In his initial phone rant about the woeful string of auditioning actresses, Thomas complains that they cannot pronounce "inextricable" (in Ives's play the troublesome locution is "degradation"). This quickly reappears in the verbal jousting between Thomas and Vanda over that term versus "inexplicable." Novachek lectures: "We're all easily explicable, yet remain inextricable," elaborating, "Life makes us what we are, in an unforeseen instant." We can explain and explain, but as quickly as a storm can gather—and storms do flash after page 3 of their script reading—you can be confronted by a core nature from which you cannot extricate yourself. Thomas will discover, as Vanda tells him, he's good at the role and he should play Severin. This sounds like an innocent enough professional compliment, until we recall the director had early mentioned, "There's a lot of me in [Kushemski]." He has yet to recognize just how much.

After toying with "inextricable," Thomas and the increasingly shrewd and cultured actress exchange perceptions of the dramatic situation. She feels it to be "ambivalent," he "ambiguous." They are both correct. Vanda is alert to the ambivalence of their positions—morally and psychologically—of whom they are and the parts they are playing; is she Venus incarnate? is the whole construct a vile sexist extension of Sacher-Masoch's misogyny? He, for as long as is tenable, insists on the ambiguousness of the situation: we love and hurt, experience pleasure and pain, without the lines between them being distinct. But the adjectives pertain. People are ambiguous in the way they express themselves sexually, and they are ambivalent about how they feel and act sexually. What seems like an appealing if questionable indulgence, turns frighteningly serious by the end; the play has receded as the audience exits the theater. As with so many of Polanski's enigmatic endings, it closes with anything but a secure, resolved feeling. Helen Goscilo cautions: "For audiences benumbed by Hollywood's addiction to happy endings solemnizing heterosexual love and the tattered triteness of 'family values', Polanski offers a refreshing if disquieting antidote; virtually all of his films end with incertitude, despair, catatonia, or death, with the notable logic-defying exception of *The Pianist*" (23).

At the heart of this film, as is true of so many of Polanski's films, is a familiar struggle for control: civilly if tensely portrayed in *Knife in the Water*, absurdly in *Cul-de-Sac*, bleakly in *Macbeth* and *Chinatown*, horrifically in *Death and the Maiden* and *The Pianist*, and with sadomasochistic zeal in *Bitter Moon*. In *Venus in Fur*, Thomas Novachek begins as the theater man in charge and Vanda as the

flustered, beseeching actress. From the moment she hijacks his "yes" (said into his cell phone), as meant for her, the power begins to shift. She deftly moves to the control board to adjust the lighting, impressing Thomas, who volunteers that he would not know which button to push. Once she is in costume, or, rather, changed from her leather trappings to a vintage 1870 Viennese dress (and accent and comportment and sophisticated hairdo), they wander in and out of the script they are ostensibly rehearsing. Vanda often takes over the directing. She will not let him skip speeches, tells him to repeat lines with more passion, to get into it. She reminds him to follow the stage directions and to stare at the fur. Like a good theatrical provider, Vanda pulls out of her capacious bag a genuine 1869 smoking jacket that fits perfectly. Thomas may indicate that he wants to test if she can take direction, but increasingly it is he who is ordered about, both on the stage and in their sexual interactions, especially once he agrees to her contract. The tussle for control or dominance and the inclination to be submissive, focal issues for Polanski, pervade this film.

In an interview after the release of *Venus in Fur*, Polanski commented: "There is something in sado-masochism which is not dissimilar to theater: you become a director in your fantasies, you play a part, you get someone else to play a part. . . . That theatricality is something this film plays with, that play within a play: a place where domination and submission, theater and real life, characters, reality and fantasy all meet, switch places and blur boundaries." (qtd in Sarde 5) Pointedly, Vanda proclaims, "I know my sado-masochism. I'm in theatre." Obeszcyk suggests that *Venus in Fur*, like previous Polanski films, "involves characters struggling for domination in a confined space. This time, though, it's mainly sex, not class or status, that serves as the battlefield." The theatrical setting, that he can shift so quickly, allows Polanski to focus on the complexities (the ambiguities and the ambivalences) of sex, something that as an artist (and as a person) he is sensitive to and unsqueamish about.

In the same undefensive and placid tone in which he can declare normal love to be boring, or that he, like every man, likes beautiful young women, he can pursue in *Bitter Moon* the extremes of sexual pathologies and then make them the subject of discussion and analysis in *Venus in Fur*. Are the desires to dominate and give pain and the complementary desires to be submissive and spanked inextricable from sex and consequently from love? Over a dozen years ago, Mark Cousins found a "central theme" in Polanski to be "human claustrophobia and unease" (3). At the same time (in the same 2006 collection of essays), Herbert Eagle wrote: "Power, and the violence used to sustain it, emerged as central elements in Polanski's cinema" (38). These are unarguable assertions, but it is perhaps more illuminating and effective also to remark how often and forcefully they assume a sexual expression. (Eagle (50) does add that Polanski, in struggling against disempowerment, is very aware of "the power dynamics of gender and sexuality"). *Venus in Fur* both dramatizes and attempts to contextualize within its cultural history a pervasive malaise accompanying sexuality.

On one level, the film ponders what it means to worship an ideal love (or the idea of love), the obverse of Pentheus's ill-considered rejection of Dionysius in *The Bacchae*. This is a concern that has been building in Polanski's films. In *Repulsion*, the claustrophobia Carol experiences in her sister's apartment and her extreme anxiety convey her fear of sex. In *Bitter Moon*, their very different quest for an unlimited sexuality at first (paradoxically) confines Oscar and Mimi to his apartment and him, subsequently, to an emasculating wheelchair, before concluding with a violent, destructive outburst. In character, Vanda von Dunayev, haply echoing Thomas's lament about the lack of ideal actresses, warns Severin his "ideal woman may be crueler than you care for." Whereas Thomas guesses, "the play says beware what you wish for," she, more tartly, thinks it says, "Don't fuck with a goddess." In short order, he has found more than just a beguiling self-declared pagan; he has found a commanding goddess, a Venus. When he acquiesces to Vanda's request that he include the novel's initial visit by the goddess, Thomas quickly recognizes and greets Aphrodite—his dearest and oldest enemy. He is well on his way to becoming his character. At the film's conclusion Venus/Aphrodite, now with a full hair-do and an older, more cosmetically made-up face, becomes a dancing, challenging Maenad, and, as legends like those of Orpheus and Pentheus illustrate, Maenads wreak havoc in their ecstasies.

Cunningly, almost as an after-thought, Polanski has interspersed his pagan depictions of the rites and exactions of love with Judeo-Christian references; the religion of love is woven into this complex, compromised tapestry. Not only is it framed with a reminder of the (pre-Christian) prowess of Judith and the woeful fate of Holofernes (named in the novel but not in the film), but the sexual sufferings of Thomas are unobtrusively likened to the story and pangs of Christ. Vanda threatens, "I might tie you to the fig tree in the garden," conjuring the one tree that Christ cursed and even the Garden of Gethsemane. The images of barbed wire and the hint of the bleeding heart of Jesus (alongside a Medusa head) on the tattoo circling Vanda's arm anticipate the final shot of Thomas, bound upon the column, arms spread, and head thrust forward, a crucified figure (one that recalls the hitch-hiker atop the mast of the sailboat in *Knife in the Water*). The cult of love and its rituals have appropriated the icons of more

established sects. The story they tell is of our tortuously divided sexual nature—and, considering the series of images of Venus we have seen, its absurdity. Tangentially, Polanski is re-examining the (medieval) Christian rejection of pleasure in favor of self-abnegation and renunciation—images captured by the flagellation scene in Bergman's *Seventh Seal*—and awkwardly discovering they are not entirely different from the pleasures in sadomasochism.

There are initially two distinct worlds: that of Vanda Jourdain and Thomas Novachek, who are involved in the business of mounting a play, and that of the dramatic figures, Vanda von Dunayev and Severin von Kushemski. The boundaries between these worlds and between the individual characters collapse. When Vanda slips ("oops!") and calls the character Kushemski "Thomas," she wonders if perhaps he's Venus and whether the director-actor and character are one. "So it is you. He's you," she blurts out, almost exasperated: "Kushemski-Novachek, Novachek-Kushemski." Thomas feebly protests, "No." But he had already conceded that there was a lot of Severin in him. She muses that perhaps he is Vanda as well. This recalls the phone call in the beginning of the play, where, disgruntled with his auditions, he snapped: "I'd make a better Vanda." The roles, genders, periods, and costumes become increasingly fluid. The step from telling Thomas he is great and "should play Vanda... You know her inside out" to cross-dressing him as Vanda, from lipstick to shoes, is brief. By the conclusion of the film, the play is put aside and a triumphant, taunting Aphrodite observes how Thomas effectively absorbs Severin. The actress turned goddess has rejected the novel and play as vile, retrograde. Tied up, with his stockings, Thomas—now subsuming both the figures of Severin and Vanda—begs to be subjugated.

Vanda, rejecting the performance, is scornful: "That's good, Tom. Really good. Know what the problem is? Whatever you do, whatever you say, this play is degrading. An insult to women. Pornography." She points to him on his cross: "Just look at you. A damsel in distress. A helpless, submissive cunt." The playacting, the comedy or charade is over, as she accuses him of thinking he "could dupe some idiot actress" to satisfy his own needs, create his "own female Frankenstein monster."

This conclusion is ironically subverted. Vanda is scornful about the quote from *Judith* where the Lord delivered him into the hands of a woman, citing this as blatantly sexist. But in the context of the Old Testament and Israelite tradition, Judith—as portrayed in innumerable paintings—emerges from Holofernes's tent victoriously waving his severed head. She is an Old Testament heroine, hardly an abused or diminished figure. It also opens up the tangled subject of Polanski's own depictions of women. The debate over his ostensible misogyny colors the literature about him. Ewa Mazierska pointed out (in 2007) that his "attitude to women and to the ideologies addressing women's place in society is one of the thorniest issues of his work." She examines the extreme range of critics' views, acknowledging the director's "strong fascination and identification with femininity: both in women and the feminine side of men" (129-30). She ultimately describes him as calling "into question the whole institution of patriarchy" (132), determining that his "feminism dominates over his misogyny, as it typically affects the way he presents the main heroine and is embedded in the overall message of his films" (135). This is particularly true of *Venus in Fur*, where there may be a preoccupation with sex-play, but little evidence of misogyny. Vanda, in either guise and despite her assertions, emerges as a strong, winning figure.

Polanski's notoriety, his undisguised admiration of beautiful young women, including under-age girls, makes it appealing to dismiss him as a misogynist. But they are not, I think, necessarily related. He likes sex, he likes women, he is drawn to these subjects and to their often sullied complexities. To document the pathologies associated with sexuality is not inherently sexist. He seemed genuinely to believe that what he termed nice, normal (pain-free) sex was uninteresting *and* to recognize the consequences of reaching beyond it. Oscar and Mimi, having exhausted their sexual capacities and imaginations, become almost demonic forces. Thomas is left strung-up.

It is undetermined why Thomas chose to pursue the world of sadomasochism in adapting Sacher-Masoch's novel for the stage, but the film soon enough conveys the fiction's reality for him—just as he grasps it. He wants to worship a goddess, an idea of love (which becomes his ideal), submit to her, and be humiliated—all of which he achieves. The image that emerges is not that of a prevailing patriarchal order, but of a world where humans crave passion and sex (rather than the "normal" and the humdrum), at great risk and expense. In *Bitter Moon*, Nigel is interesting as a figure who inhabits a presumably quite ordinary bourgeois life, but who brushes against the temptingly sensuous (Mimi)—and escapes back into the safely mundane—taking heed, as his wife Fiona warned, "Anything you can do I can do better." The stakes seem greater and more uncharted in *Venus in Fur*. Thomas becomes Severin, proclaiming his desire to be whipped (the voluptuous Countess in his closet!); Marie-Cécile, with take-out sushi, will not satisfy. The reality that the novel-turned-play evokes is not only the inherited story of *The Bacchae*. It revisits, the pleasure of all the interjected portraits of Venus imagined alongside the fate of Holofernes (Sacher-Masoch also mentions Agamemnon), who paid dearly for what he dearly desired. The women in Polanski's films do not come off as pallid, submissive, inconsequential figures.

Whether as psychotic as Carol or as maniacally determined as Paulina in *Death and the Maiden* or even when destroyed like Mimi or Tess; they are not weak or compromised. Vanda only seems to be the flustered, disheveled aspiring actress who erupts onto the scene. That sex is shown to be risky and linked to pain does not infer misogyny. Certainly in *Venus in Fur* the mistreatment of women is neither apparent nor condoned.

Polanski has never been reticent about insinuating himself into his films, whether playing the part of the tenant, in *The Tenant*, or the "midget" in *Chinatown*, or in adapting the story of Wladyslaw Szpilman (so closely resembling his own ghetto experience) in *The Pianist*. In *Venus in Fur*, his references to himself may be comically audacious and satisfying, but more importantly, they extend the blurring of boundaries beyond the fictional characters. They indicate a willingness to allude, with humor, and perhaps chasteningly—to himself and his world.

Matthieu Almaric is a high-profile star of French cinema; he also, as people (including Polanski) frequently commented, looks remarkably like the director forty years younger. The inability of Thomas to control the lighting panel comically contrasts with Polanski's reputation for having mastered the spectrum of cinematic technologies. The comments in the dialog about the power structure of theater echo the film's subject of sexual domination and control, but they also hint at Polanski's reputation as a director: there is only a need for one camera because there is only one right shot, just as there is only one right way of doing something—his way (Polanski, in *Sarde* 6). When Thomas says that as a director it's his job to torment actors, he could be citing Catherine Deneuve's reaction after having made *Repulsion* with Polanski. Thomas, in an old interview, had quipped, "Theatre's a great place to get laid." Vanda declares the story is about child abuse, and she later tries to provoke Thomas: "Any other director would have jumped me." These references display Polanski's willingness to chide himself. Happily, they are artistically integral to the film—suggesting an often unappealing aspect of relationships—and further making the boundaries between people and roles and how actions are perceived murky. One reviewer, A. O. Scott, has even suggested "the possibility that the movie is also about Mr. Polanski himself."

When Thomas tries to suggest that he act in the play, Vanda laughs dismissively, "You're just the adapter." But like Thomas, like Polanski, all are complicit or embroiled in the Bacchic drama of sexual control and destruction. Thomas may be an extreme distillation of the lover who yearns for suffering, but *Venus in Fur* suggests he is a distillate of a recognizably human response. The focus at the end is left uncertainly divided between Thomas hanging on a theatrical gibbet and the celebrating goddess. The parade of paintings shown documents their ongoing appeal. What people will contract for and the ease with which they will relinquish their money and passports to Venus are daunting. Is it all "S and M porn," as Vanda yells, or "a great love story," as Thomas maintains, or are the two inextricable—and consequently compelling—as Polanski implies?

It would seem disingenuous to discuss a film like *Venus in Fur* without some nod to the overcast question of morality or ethics. Its reception is inexorably colored by the discomfiting subject of sadomasochism—whether in the film, the source novel, or the writings of the Marquis de Sade. All invite a moral stance. What does it mean or imply? In 2011, reviewing the DVD of *Cul-de-Sac*, David Sterritt declared it ironic that: "the filmmaker most widely known today as a statutory rapist and fugitive from American justice is one of the most emphatically moral storytellers in modern cinema. Although his movies present themselves as thrillers, suspense stories, and descents into strange psychological underworlds, almost all are morality tales at heart." Sterritt's argument, at first glance improbable, derives from what he describes as Polanski's "agenda, which is to evoke and satirically eviscerate a contemporary world that has lost its moral and philosophical moorings" (62). This sharply anticipates the unsettling quality of *Venus in Fur*.

This agenda would place Polanski in the tradition of such satiric scourges as Molière, Swift, and Byron—whose *Don Juan* is a satire in want of a hero and, more crucially, without a postulated moral norm. Sterritt proceeds to locate the director's morality in "his radical questioning and seditious rejiggering of bourgeois society's most sacred norms" (63). His moral philosophy, if Polanski would abide such a label, is unflinchingly to discount traditional, often flabby and hypocritical moralizings, and, in the spirit of William Blake rather than John Calvin, to create a more psychologically honest system of his own. His instinct was, as David Caputo suggests, to refuse "to become a moralist film-maker, favoring stories that explore the complexities of morality over didactic tales of right and wrong (or those that try to *right wrongs*)" (15).

The interchanges between Vanda and Thomas and the entire notion of sadomasochistic impulses may be jarring or distasteful. That does not render them or their depiction immoral. Polanski's morality, following both Sterritt's usage and Caputo's seemingly opposite contention, is to make films that display the extremities of real, human behavior. The force and acumen of his art, situated in a long artistic tradition, justifies his efforts. Even if his challenge to our sensibilities is impish and arch, his ethical

thrust is in his determination to present, with little judging, what he (credibly) observes in human behavior. We continue to be caught between the ravages of the worship of love and eroticism and the cautious, socialized anxieties about yielding to them. Like Agamemnon on Aulis, we falter between the altars of Aphrodite and Artemis, not wanting our fleet becalmed, but ill-prepared to navigate the straits between divinities. Couched in theatrical fittings and literary and mythic allusions, featuring a playwright-director-character, who periodically suggests the actual director, *Venus in Fur* re-imagines the odd, contradictory tangle of passions that love embraces—distinctly failing, as Keats had lamented two centuries earlier, "to unperplex bliss from its neighbor pain."

As a film about a play being rehearsed, with principals, and characters (and texts) that intrepidly flow across boundaries, *Venus in Fur* is Polanski's most intricate and sophisticated presentation of what he sees as the bewildering quagmire of human sexuality. The boundaries that are both cloudy and dazzling now include crossing the proscenium arch—from play to reality, from fictional director and actors to the image of actual human figures. The will to love, the will to power, and the desire for contentment remain—excitingly and dauntingly—in costly contention. This permeates the cinema of Roman Polanski, most amply in *Venus in Fur*.

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