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Authors	Tuan, Lydia
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Bad Mothers and Female Agency: The 76th Venice International Film Festival

Lydia Tuan

The Venice International Film Festival held its 76th edition at Lido di Venezia from 28 August to 7 September 2019. The programme in this year's edition had a total of twenty-one films in competition for the Golden Lion for Best Film, ultimately awarded to Todd Philip's *Joker* (2019), as well as an Orizzonti (Horizons) section, which introduces feature-length and short films that showcase novel aesthetic developments in international cinema; the section Le giornate degli autori (Venice Days), a subsection of the festival that aims to spotlight original and upcoming trends in independent filmmaking; a Venice Classics section, which screens classical films that premiered in previous editions of the festival, selected by a jury of film students from Italian universities who were nominated by their professors to participate in the jury; the "Lion of the Future" section that awards the Luigi de Laurentiis Award for the best film to debut at Venice and, finally, the Venice Virtual Reality section, which featured twenty-seven virtual reality projects in competition in the recent edition. Not intending to comprehensively cover all of the festival screenings and virtual reality offerings at Venice, this festival report shall solely focus on the films and the thematic intricacies that linked them together. Interestingly, the cinematic offerings for the seventy-sixth edition featured an array of female characters that primarily explored the difficulties of motherhood and the difficulty of being a woman in a patriarchal society. As the Venice Film Festival holds the reputation as the oldest film festival in the world since its inception in 1932, and as it is also considered one of the higher-profile festivals where Academy Awards and award contenders often premiere, the diversity of female characters in films that screened and debuted at Venice this year showed a promising leap forward for female diversity and representation in cinema.

The opening film for the festival's Horizons section, *Pelican Blood* (*Pelikanblut*, 2019) from German director Katrin Gebbe, appropriately set the tone and maternal theme that would also recur in the films to be premiered later on with the introduction of a struggling mother figure and the overarching question of what makes a good mother. Through the use of predominantly sombre and muted colour schemes, Gebbe's film focused on the maternal demands of self-sacrifice, both emotional and physical, that comes to define the nurturing role of women who strive to become perfect mothers. In the plot, Wiebke (played by Nina Hoss), a horse trainer and keeper for the local police force who also has a nine-year-old adopted daughter, Nicolina (Adelia-Constance Ocleppo), adopts psychologically troubled and emotionally stunted five-year-old Raya (Katerina Lipovska), who slowly drives the family apart with her violent and aggressive behaviour. Desperate to heal Raya of the trauma caused by the abandonment of her birth mother and of her past foster families, Wiebke goes to great lengths to be a mother for Raya, even breastfeeding the five-year-old and carrying her to work like a toddler, in the hopes of establishing an authentic maternal bond with her new daughter. The significance of film's title is explicitly explained early on in the film: when Wiebke and Nicolina go to retrieve Raya from the adoption centre, Wiebke asks one of the staff members

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about the painting hung on the wall of a pelican mother that nurtures her dead offspring with her own blood to revive them (a Christian image that reflects, as the director herself has remarked, the patience and self-sacrifice demanded of motherhood). *Pelican Blood*'s elements of voodoo, flanked by the frequent presence of smoke and intentional blurriness of images used to indicate the unknown, carry this narrative of motherhood into a supernatural dimension. The form of the film interestingly resonates with the theme, demonstrated by how the blurred limits of what makes a good mother are brought to the fore in this film, both in plot and form.

The themes of motherhood seen in *Pelican Blood* find a different approach in Billie Piper's directorial debut, *Rare Beasts* (2019), a romantic comedy that presents itself as an anti-romantic comedy. The film follows the life of Mandy (Billie Piper), a thirty-something protagonist with an unsteady career path and directionless personal life, in a post-MeToo world. Screened as part of the 34th annual Venice International Film Critics Week and featuring a female majority cast, Piper's film unforgivingly thrusts open dialogue about abortion (at one point, when asked about her son, the protagonist jokes about her frequent past abortions and that, eventually, she had to stop getting them) and the difficulties of wanting to be in a relationship while keeping up appearances as a "strong independent woman" in a society where single women who do not depend on men for their own happiness are strongly praised. The final scene of the film conveys this message most vividly: Mandy is surrounded by female passers-by standing in a musical-like arrangement as she admits to them and herself she does want a man and a stable relationship in her life. With a frequent employment of fast editing and portrait-inspired framing, Piper's *Rare Beasts* refreshingly adds diversity to the depictions of female characters, and what remains particularly significant is Mandy's response at work, in which her boss tells her that she cannot continue pitching stories about sad, depressed women, interestingly reflecting the actual state of female-based narratives today, wherein some diverse female representation remains a work in progress, with the saturation of strong female leads seen in recent trends.

Films that more realistically tackled the subject of motherhood included Tibetan director Pema Tseden's *Balloon* (*Qiqiu*, 2019), which focused on the topic of women's role in Tibetan society at the intersection between progress and tradition, rurality and urbanity. The mother in the film discovers that she is pregnant and must choose between an abortion or keeping her child. Representing the progressive values in this film, the protagonist's female doctor tells her that it is not a woman's role to have children and that women in society are valued more than their roles as mothers and caregivers. Abortion is also a theme that links the three female narratives in *Hava, Maryam, Ayesha* (2019) by Iranian director Sahraa Karimi. Set in Kabul and shot on location, the film separately follows three women who are in either abusive relationships of varying levels with their significant others or seeking a fresh start that would liberate them from the sins of their past taboo relationships. During the Q&A that followed one of the screenings, Karimi explained that she made the film because Afghan women could not speak loudly about themselves and that the Afghan media presents only clichés that do not accurately represent the realities of Afghan women today. Having studied film directing as a refugee in Europe, Karimi wanted to return to Kabul to tell stories that would go "against those clichés", and in the course of the four years in which she worked on her film (which was submitted as the Afghan entry for Best International Feature at the 92nd Academy Awards but ultimately not nominated), Karimi travelled to many villages and cities in Afghanistan to learn about the women's problems from patriarchy and to more vividly portray the anti-women sentiment that, according to Karimi, more accurately reflects the realities of women in Afghanistan's patriarchal society. The topic of abortion, Karimi explained, remains a fixed taboo in Afghanistan, and seeking to spark change and debate on this topic, Karimi wanted her

film to freely express, through freedom of speech and thought, the realities of certain Afghan women through their own perspectives.

Contributing to the theme of difficult motherhood comes Pablo Larraín's *Ema* (2019), which competed for the Leone d'oro and shed light on the difficulty of motherhood through an unconventional protagonist, Ema (Mariana Di Girolamo). The film perversely explores variations of the mother identity: Ema, a twenty-something mother and reggaetón dance instructor, gives up custody of her adopted son when he burns down the family's house and her sister's face, as she struggles to deal with the label of being a bad mother. Against the backdrop of a character-focused narrative, the film liberally explores themes of sexual fluidity and polyamory through a saturation of long shot and long take combinations and a form that seemingly attempts to hybridise the arthouse drama film and the music video. Larraín's film is scattered with dance scenes where Ema and her friends are dancing on rooftops and in the streets, centrally framed while occasionally gazing directly into the camera. Similar to the film's lack of structural clarity, Ema's own identity is not coherently conveyed: she is racked with the guilt of having given up custody of her adopted son and constantly seeks reconciliation with him. Smoke and fire, the latter which comes to symbolise the possibility of the protagonist rising from her own ashes and starting anew, become important recurring motifs in Larraín's film.

Additionally, the films in competition shared merging themes, such as the portrayal of troubling mother–child relationships in Kore-eda Hirokazu's *The Truth* (*La Vérité*, 2019), which portrays a daughter (portrayed by Juliette Binoche) who struggles to reconnect emotionally with her seasoned celebrity mother Fabienne (portrayed by Catherine Deneuve), as well as meeting the expectations of becoming a maternal epitome, as explored in Noah Baumbach's *Marriage Story* (2019). In *The Truth*, the blur between reality and fiction in the film interestingly finds tension in Fabienne's seeming inability to play the role of the mother to her own daughter, even as a relatively a high-profile actress. Criticising the high, if not impossibly expectations to which mothers are often held in current American society, Baumbach's film tackles the difficulties of mothers striving to meet those high standards. An important moment in *Marriage Story* comes through when Nicole (Scarlett Johansson) discusses her divorce case with lawyer Nora (Laura Dern); Nora reveals to Nicole that women have to be portrayed as a saint in court in order to win custody of their children, and this dialogue unveils the real, yet unrealistic expectations demanded of women in the eyes of the state: that women must play the role of a nurturing, attentive mother if they want to maintain the custody of their children, whereas men are not held to the same standards in court. Contrasting with the portrayal of women as mothers in Paolo Sorrentino's new series *The New Pope* (2019), of which two episodes (the second and seventh) premiered at Venice, female characters with relatively more prominent roles in Sorrentino's new series are depicted as holy and pure, stricken with conflict because of their inability to care for their children.[1]

The other films in competition at Venice that did not focus on the topic of motherhood in their portrayal of female characters tended to touch on female independence, empowerment and agency in the workplace. Haifaa Al-Mansour's *The Perfect Candidate* (2019), for example, was one of the few films at Venice where the female protagonist did not explore the theme of maternity: Al-Mansour's protagonist Maryam (portrayed by Mila Al Zahrani) is one of the only female Saudi doctors in her community who, after being unable to board her flight to Dubai for a job interview due to a bureaucratic problem, decides to run for political office (with the help of her two sisters) to prioritise the problems that have been ignored by the other male candidates in her zone. Facing bureaucratic, cultural and societal obstacles at nearly every turn during her

campaign, Al-Mansour's female protagonists offered an empowering yet realist approach in demonstrating the conservative treatment of women in Saudi Arabia, and it also portrayed hope in their desire towards breaking down conservative gender roles in order to assert one's voices in a society that excludes and discounts female voices on the basis of gender. Being the first Saudi female filmmaker, Al-Mansour returned to Venice a second time with *The Perfect Candidate*, having premiered her directorial debut *Wadjda* in 2012.

There were other films which did not spotlight female characters but did touch on the topic of traditional gender representations on screen: Antoine de Bary's *My Days of Glory* (*Mes jours de gloire*, 2019) did not feature standout female protagonists, but explored the dangers of toxic masculinity through the portrayal of protagonist Adrien (Vincent Lacoste), a former child actor who reached the peak of his career ten years ago and who, as a result, struggles to admit to and express his emotions as he grapples with the difficulty of building his own independence and finding an identity separate from his family. There was also a panel dedicated to films that portrayed women's stories within the Giornate degli autori programming, entitled "Women's Tales", which featured two short films and one feature-length film respectively: Hailey Gates' *Shako Mako* (2019) and Lynne Ramsay's *Brigitte* (2019), both commissioned by Miu Miu for the Venice Film Festival, and Jayro Bustamante's *La Llorona* (2019). The two shorts focused on women as protagonists, with Ramsay's *Brigitte* being a thirty-minute documentary on the photographer Brigitte Lacombe, whereas Bustamante's entry, which presented the Guatemalan genocide through a supernatural horror film, did not particularly emphasise or capitalise on the development of female-centric issues in female leads. Overall, the films at the 76th Venice Film Festival ambitiously presented a range of female characters, although still primarily working from the recurring trope of women as maternal figures as a starting point to explore the multitudes of their female protagonists.

Note

1 Much criticism has been written on Paolo Sorrentino's problematic depiction of female characters in his cinema and television. As an example, see Simor and Sorfa.

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Lydia Tuan is a master's candidate in cinema studies at the Università degli Studi di Padova. Her interests include the formal and stylistic development of contemporary Italian cinema, new media approaches to filmmaking and the intersection of literature and the moving image. She earned an MPhil in Film and Screen Studies from the University of Cambridge in 2017, having written a master's thesis on the films of Paolo Sorrentino that was recently published in the *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies*.