



The Guts of Noir

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Few filmmakers could rightfully claim both vomit and film noir among their recurring directorial signatures—much less combined in the same film—but Nikos Nikolaidis (1939–2007) clearly stood by himself. Across eight features in three decades, he became one of Greek cinema's brashest voices during the nation's post-1974 transition from a military dictatorship to a democracy, but he earned far less international renown than contemporaries like Costa-Gavras or Theo Angelopoulos. Although his early features share some of New Greek Cinema's distinctive traits—from innovative retellings of Hellenistic myths (**Euridice BA 2037** [1975]) to downbeat dramas reflecting the younger generation's disillusionment with contemporary Greek life (**The Wretches are Still Singing** [1979] and **Sweet Bunch** [1983])—Nikolaidis's deep investment in genre and shock value arguably complicated his arthouse credentials.

From dark comedy to horror to dystopian fiction, genre elements abound in his work, but none more consistently than the influence of film noir. In the post-apocalyptic **Morning Patrol** (1987), for instance, a young woman treks across a ruined city where 1940s-50s American noir films flicker constantly across the remaining television and theater screens, as if classical noir's shadowy visual palettes and world-weary protagonists are the only fitting ambience for a decimated society. But in his follow-up feature, **Singapore Sling: The Man Who Loved a Corpse** (1990), Nikolaidis makes such a

decadent—even pungent—meal of film noir that the genre's own semi-digested remains seem destined to spew forth from his imagination. Rather than projecting his preoccupations outward across a devastated landscape, **Singapore Sling** marked an inward turn—not only back toward the horrifically claustrophobic interiors of his **Repulsion**-esque (1965) debut **Euridice BA 2037**, but also into a deeper terrain of psychosexual perversity.

Singapore Sling won awards for Best Film Direction, Best Cinematography, Best Actress (Meredyth Herold), Best Art Direction, and Best Film Editing at the 1990 Thessaloniki Film Festival. Receiving a limited international release, it became the lone Nikolaidis film to find a notable cult audience outside Greece (surely helped by its predominantly English-language dialogue). In the United

States, the film screened at the tail end of the midnight movie phenomenon, alongside several other retro-styled genre exercises that combine dark humor and sexual perversity: **Tales from the Gimli Hospital** (1988) and **Dr. Caligari** (1989). Meanwhile, it ran for over two years at London's Scala Cinema, its cult credentials bolstered by the British Board of Film Classification's refusal to grant the film a rating. As Nikolaidis recalled, "When I was shooting **Singapore Sling**, I was under the impression that I was making a comedy with elements taken from ancient Greek tragedy...Later, when some European and American critics characterized it as 'one of the most disturbing films of all time,' I started to feel that something was wrong with me. Then, when British censors banned its release in England, I finally realized that something is wrong with all of us."





In his study *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (2008), James Naremore argues that noir is less a pure genre than an idea projected onto the past: “[D]epending on how it is used, it can describe a dead period, a nostalgia for something that never quite existed, or perhaps even a vital tradition.” The term “noir” might equally name a genre, an aesthetic, a sensibility, and so on—though **Singapore Sling** demonstrates how noir might also become a fetish in its own right. Of course, Nikolaidis is hardly alone in reworking classical noir’s gloomy look/feel and its rich vein of amour fou into an overtly sexualized context, from generic descendants like 1980s-90s erotic thrillers to even more niche forms like Maria Beatty’s lesbian BDSM films. But amid the endless proliferation of neo-noir tropes across various media, what makes **Singapore Sling** so penetrating (and sorely underseen) is its unexpectedly deep dive into the bowels of film noir. By transposing noir’s archetypal detective protagonist into a Sadeian milieu of lust-murder, Nikolaidis extracts classical noir’s sadomasochistic subtext and crystallizes the genre’s darkest, most perverse impulses.

Singapore Sling opens with its eponymous detective’s (Panos Thanassoulis) hard-boiled, foreboding voiceover as he rests outside an isolated villa in search of Laura, a mysterious woman at the heart of the case that cost him everything. Now, several years after her disappearance, he has no home, no job, no friends, not even a proper name; alcoholism and an unexplained bullet wound in his shoulder are apparently his only things gained in the pursuit. Compromised by the unresolved legacy of a past crime/lost love, whatever is left of the detective’s identity has become inseparable from his despondent quest to resolve the mystery of the femme fatale. Meanwhile, Aris Stavrou’s lush cinematography beautifully evokes the high-

contrast lighting, sharp angles, and rain-drenched exteriors synonymous with the genre's thematic focus on dark secrets and existential ennui. So far, so noir.

In particular, Nikolaidis pays blatant homage to Otto Preminger's canonical noir **Laura** (1944), borrowing much more than its central premise of a detective who has fallen in love with a supposedly dead woman who reappears amid the investigation of her apparent murder. From various scraps of verbatim dialogue to the use of David Raskin's "Laura" theme as a musical leitmotif, **Singapore Sling** clearly wears its noir pedigree on its sleeve, rewarding viewers familiar with the Preminger classic. At the same time, though, **Singapore Sling**'s "old dark house" setting, expressionistic visual style, and underlying themes of uncanny doubles, doomed love, and psychological terror serve as a potent reminder of film noir's generic proximity to Gothic horror. Small wonder, then, that some critics compared Nikolaidis's film to



the campy, pansexual madness of Curt McDowell's underground horror/porn comedy **Thundercrack!** (1975), another gleefully perverse tale about an isolated house filled with kinky sex and monstrous secrets.

Film noir typically figures the femme fatale's sexuality and ulterior motives as intertwined threats to the male protagonist's authority and his ability to solve the central mystery. And yet, despite its title and opening voiceover, **Singapore Sling** is hardly the film's true protagonist here, and the mystery that motivates him is little more than a canard. As we learn in the opening scenes, Laura has already been dead and buried for three years—just one in a succession of household servants murdered at the whims of an incestuous trio of libertines. Although the family's Father is now deceased, Mother (Michele Valley) and Daughter (Meredyth Harold) have continued the killings in his memory, planting the corpses in their garden. The women tell us all this up front, establishing a pattern of breaking the fourth wall via narrational

asides that set up disorienting shifts between actual flashbacks and sexual-roleplay reenactments. Collapsing on the villa's doorstep—mute, delirious, and wounded—**Singapore Sling** soon becomes little more than a toy in their kittenish games of torture and degradation, his voiceover narration bookending the film but not dominating it.

Despite its obvious indebtedness to film noir, then, viewing **Singapore Sling** through a different generic lens reveals far closer affinities to sadomasochistic erotica, from sexploitation “kinkies” like **The Maidens of Fetish Street** (1966) to the “Euro-sleaze” films of Jess Franco and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Rather than the urban jungles of film noir, the villa is figured as a decadent pleasure palace, overstuffed with opulent comforts as a hermetic but rule-bound world of untrammelled hedonism. (Nikolaïdis often used his home for these interior sets, inviting his main cast members to live with him during filming.) Like the utterly amoral libertines in the Marquis de Sade’s *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785), Mother and Daughter orchestrate acts of incest, rape, mutilation, necrophilia, and other crimes whose reenactment as BDSM scenes motivates much of the film’s action. Indeed, they have once again reenacted Laura’s rape/murder just before **Singapore Sling** seemingly wanders in from a rather different movie (Preminger’s film, specifically) and knocks on the wrong generic door, so to speak.

As the film proceeds, Mother and Daughter glean enough clues from the detective’s notebook to incorporate his doomed quest into their existing roleplay with remarkably little disruption. Much like **Blade Runner’s** (1982) evocative blend of film noir and science fiction, **Singapore Sling’s** hybrid of noir and erotica reveals unexpectedly close connections between the two genres. Like the storytelling





courtesans in Sade's *120 Days*, Mother and Daughter routinely narrate their debauched acts directly to us, and Nikolaidis encourages us to share their sadistic enjoyment of the detective's torture. As Angela Carter argues in her 1978 study *The Sadeian Woman*, it may be rather difficult to see such commanding female characters as "feminist" figures per se, but the Sadeian milieu at least offers tremendous power to those few women who fully embrace the Divine Marquis's valorization of vice.

Yet, even as their voices motivate so many of the film's scenes, **Singapore Sling's** eccentric performances highlight not only the theatricality of Mother and Daughter's sexual roleplay, but also the extent to which Nikolaidis's own playing with noir tropes becomes an extension of this performativity. After previously starring in **Morning Patrol**, Michele Valley portrays Mother as an icy domme, beset with thick, Siouxsie Sioux-style makeup and dialogue that abruptly alternates between French and English. Stranger still is Meredyth Harold's hilariously unhinged performance as the adult Daughter, her voice constantly twitching between silky seduction and childish regression. Although these bizarre tonal shifts complement the narrative's blurred temporalities, Harold's bits of verbal and physical comedy owe far more to Jerry Lewis (another of Nikolaidis's career-long influences) than to Gene Tierney.

By adopting a femme fatale persona to extract info from her delirious captive, the Daughter becomes "Laura" in **Singapore Sling's** eyes—and begins enlisting him in a plot to overthrow her Mother and somehow bring back her mummified Father. But whereas the Daughter plays into the detective's noirish fantasies to exact her ulterior motives, **Singapore Sling** slowly gains more freedom as he becomes an active participant in the women's sex games. By the film's final act, **Singapore Sling** may no longer be subject to forced electroshocks and sprays of effluvium, but as the two

women covertly pass a pistol back and forth between themselves in the midst of a threesome with their recently unchained victim, the generic convergence of film noir and Sadeian erotica has become complete.

Since so many layers of Oedipal weirdness abound in this thoroughly incestuous milieu, it might be less surprise that **Singapore Sling**'s genre revisionism still adheres to a standard psychoanalytic reading of the noir detective, masochistically wallowing in guilt or pain but lashing out in sadistic ways when pushed too far. Classical noirs typically end with him punishing the femme fatale (whether by finding her guilty or domesticating her) and reasserting his sexual/professional authority. Here, however, Nikolaidis literalizes the detective's reclamation of phallic power—violently wielded in the form of Father's "big knife"—as a sort of sick joke. The two femme fatales' fates may be sealed in a particularly grotesque, even misogynistic way, but as **Singapore Sling** buries himself in the garden, feeling himself in good company with noir's long lineage of destroyed men, he too seems to have finally embraced the generic cliché he's been playing all along. By the film's circular ending, Nikolaidis's own necrophilic fetish for noir has been laid bare, alongside the genre's own extracted guts.

His follow-up film, **I'll See You in Hell, My Darling** (1999), would feature a similar aesthetic and narrative dynamic (two sadistic lesbians vs. one dopey straight guy), showing how Nikolaidis's perverse approach to noir could be easily adapted into a **Bound**-esque (1996) erotic thriller, albeit with even more shades of slapstick. But although his later films unfortunately failed to recapture **Singapore Sling**'s cult acclaim, his work had already cast a shadow over an emerging generation of Greek filmmakers. By the release of Nikolaidis's final film,

the dystopian women-in-prison drama **The Zero Years** (2005), directors Yorgos Lanthimos and Athina Rachel Tsangari of the so-called "Greek Weird Wave" had produced their first features. They may have found greater international arthouse success than Nikolaidis, but it's difficult to watch a darkly comedic film like **Dogtooth** (2009)—featuring Michele Valley as the mother of another incestuous, claustrophobically enclosed family—without feeling his unheralded influence. For all these reasons—and despite its fountains of bodily fluids—**Singapore Sling** deserves a more prominent position in the histories of both film noir and Greek cinema, and this new restoration is an important step in its rediscovery.

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