

“REMAIN CALM AND ELEGANT”: DARK GAMES, VULNERABILITY, AND THE FEMALE BODY AS A PLAYTHING IN *MOST BEAUTIFUL ISLAND*

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“WE ALL WISH YOU GOOD LUCK”: INTRODUCTION

Two girls, Luciana and Olga, will alternate. The guests have already made their bets. Two rounds, one for each girl. Two minutes each round. Ladies, what will be fun and different for us tonight is that while one of you is in the coffin, the other will be standing by, also sharing the risk. The guests and I already agreed earlier that the spider on the girl in the coffin must maintain skin contact for the full round. If it wanders off the skin it will be the second girl's task to be brave enough to guide it back with the help of a stick. But your presence might affect the spider's reactions. You must work well together. We all wish you good luck. At least some of us do. Walk to the coffin and remove your clothes. Remain calm and elegant as you lay inside face down. Our guests are here to look at you.

Most Beautiful Island (Ana Asensio, 2017) narrates the story of Luciana, an illegal immigrant

from Spain, and a small group of other illegal female immigrants in New York. The film portrays their struggle as undocumented women, their acceptance of menial jobs and ultimately of a well-paid and more dangerous job: accepting to work at a mysterious party, they become the objects of a dark game and put their lives at risk. Some of these women accept the offer aware of the potential consequences, others (like Luciana) are tricked by Olga, one of the immigrants and Luciana's only friend, with the promise of a generous wage for an easy and innocent job. At the party, located in a hidden basement of an industrial area, these women are numbered and guests place bets on them. It is only with Luciana's and Olga's turn to go into the game room that the game is revealed: they are placed naked in open glass coffins where they must keep skin contact for two full minutes with two venomous spiders. The hostess, Vanessa, does not specify what would happen should they lose, but the outcomes are limited: perform as ex-

pected and get paid, break under the pressure and possibly be replaced (as happens to Olga), or die (as happens to Alina, who goes into the game room before Luciana and Olga).

This article analyses how *Most Beautiful Island* uses the conventions of horror films, and in particular of “death games” and dark play fictions, to expose the vulnerability of these migrant women, their (in)visibility, and how easily disposable they are. For this purpose, the article will draw from theories of vulnerability, seeing and looking, and play theory, in particular the tropes of “the most dangerous game”, a type of narrative that plays with the polysemy of the word “game”, as an activity related to fun and as wild animals to be hunted, to present a scenario where powerful people prey on others for sport and fun. Through these theoretical frameworks and detailed filmic analysis, this article argues that *Most Beautiful Island* is filled with nuances and ambiguities in the implication of some of these women in the game and their sense of agency, and thus plays with the aesthetics and narratives of denunciation and enunciation: it shows how contemporary societies use and abuse illegal immigrants, the paradoxes of the latter’s invisibility and hypervisibility, and the ways in which these women may take action within their limited chances. For this purpose, this article starts with the exploration of vulnerability and exposure of illegal immigrants in a cosmopolitan setting, to then move on to the study of the power dynamics in the acts of looking and playing, and lastly study the theoretical aspects of dark play and their discourses in the film.

“SOMETIMES I THINK I COULD END UP HOMELESS ON THE STREET”: VULNERABILITY AND PRECARIY IN THE BIG APPLE

The opening sequence of *Most Beautiful Island* follows seven women, the last of whom is Luciana, its protagonist. Some of these women will appear



Failed cosmopolitan dreams.
Most Beautiful Island (Ana Asensio, 2017)

at the party, others will not. Asensio explains that she shot this scene at the end, as “an introduction to the city and these invisible women” (Zorrilla, 2018). Indeed, these women appear in transit alongside other inhabitants of New York, but the diegetic sound of the daily rhythms and voices of the city merges with a non-diegetic disturbing noise: these women are drowned by the multitude and anonymity that the city provides. Yet, the film provides an uncanny visibilisation: the close-ups are almost invasive and seem to replicate a monitoring process, thus unveiling how these subjects are simultaneously invisibilised and subjected to persecution.

The film does not explicitly comment on illegal migration and it does not include immigrants from Central and South America. Similarly, it does not inform viewers of the reasons why these women are staying illegally in the US, except for brief excerpts of Luciana’s and Olga’s stories. Luciana has run away from her traumatic memories: a phone call with her mother back in Spain implies the accidental death of Luciana’s daughter and she belatedly displays symptoms of trauma such as nightmares, shortness of breath, and panic attacks. Unable to cope with such loss, Luciana stays away. Olga came from Russia to fulfil her aspirations of a modelling career. Stranded without families and connections, these women form a strange transnational community that deals with loss, both in terms of Luciana’s grief for her



Invasive gaze and power. *Most Beautiful Island* (Ana Asensio, 2017)

daughter and of the overall tragic displacement that their migratory status implies. The latter is recurrently portrayed in transnational cinema (Ezra and Rowden, 2006: 7), alongside other key aspects of cosmopolitan cinema, namely questions of dignity and displacement (Rovisco, 2012: 154).

Most Beautiful Island plays with cosmopolitan aspirations but does not focus on the journey or backstory of the characters, which is common in stories of migrancy and refuge and instead addresses survival through dark play and constructs a narrative around chance that is opposed to the nefarious discourse of endless opportunities and building one's own luck in New York. At one point in the film, Luciana claims to be, in fact, "tired of the possibilities" and her precariousness. It is then that Olga offers Luciana to cover for her working at a party, for which she will be paid \$2,000—although as we soon discover this is a ruse to force women to play in the game at the party, with Olga most likely earning more for her role as supplier.

Luciana and Olga, alongside the other women that knowingly or unknowingly accept to work at the party, are depicted as subjects with nothing to lose: they accept the risk of losing their lives in order to survive within the circuits of precarity and invisibility and make themselves easily disposable and untraceable. The film directly deals then with

vulnerability, precarity, and grievability as theorised by Butler (2004, 2009): these women, these *others*, are not acknowledged by the society they inhabit and it does not matter whether they live or die. The film's denunciatory discourse on illegal migration is thus constructed around precariousness and how "one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other" (Butler, 2009: 14), and discloses it in a rather literal form by depicting how privileged subjects play with destitute others and how precarity becomes a spectacle, an entertainment of the rich. Therefore,

the following sections study how the film plays with looking, being looked at and recognition, and with dark games, laying bare the reification and dehumanisation of immigrants.

"OUR GUESTS ARE HERE TO LOOK AT YOU": THE POWER TO LOOK AND DENIED RECOGNITION

Asensio states that her authorial intention in *Most Beautiful Island* was to widen the way people look at—and think about—migration in the US (Zorrilla, 2018) to move beyond systemic and stereotyped assumptions. She acknowledges the shared dislocation and isolation of immigrants, who she sees as lacking familial and cultural referents to navigate a hostile environment (Zorrilla, 2018), and through specific genre conventions and poignant use of framing, close-ups, and extreme close-ups, the film (re)directs the gaze inside and outside the screen.

The beginning of the film shows unfocused, almost indistinguishable body parts to then reveal, in different levels of proximity, seven women who seem to be monitored. The first half of the film then focuses on Luciana and Olga, who at this time maintain conversations in close up, with a hand-held camera and eyeline matching

THE GAME ROOM IN *MOST BEAUTIFUL ISLAND* IS A SPACE FOR TORTURE. CAN TORTURE AND GAMES COEXIST?

that parallel their attempt and sometimes resistance at revealing their stories and vulnerabilities. This use of camera work and emphasis on looking and being looked at is emphasised once at the party, where the women are placed in fixed spots in a semicircle. At first, these women do not seem to meet each other's gaze, which could be interpreted as the mutual recognition of being in a vulnerable situation. In addition, the other women cannot stand Luciana's inquisitive gaze and discourse, which heightens an increasing anxiety about being looked at.

When the guests arrive, the look turns voyeuristic. Men and women move into the room where they are asked to choose and bet on the women and their survival or demise. The film places these women as objects to be looked at and played with, who must remain silent and thus are not able to enunciate their selves. They must follow a dress code and maintain a normative appearance, turning themselves "into an object of vision: a sight", as Berger (1972: 47) would put it. Looking is an act of intimacy, meeting, and power, and Asensio conveys this by showing how privileged subjects play with the vulnerability and precariousness of *others* and bring to the fore questions of morality.

The moral implications of looking have been explored in fiction films like *Tesis* (Alejandro Amenábar, 1996) or *Funny Games* (Michael Haneke, 1997) and in documentaries like the duology *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012) / *The Look of Silence* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2014). Discussing his own remake of *Funny Games*, director

Michael Haneke argued: "A film can do nothing, but in the best case it can provoke so that some viewer makes his own thoughts about his own part in this international game of consuming violence, because it's a big business" (Ebiri, 2019). But is consuming violence (particularly in fiction) the same as producing violence? François Truffaut famously argued that "violence is very ambiguous in movies" and that "[e]very film about war ends up being pro-war" (Siskel, 1973). Yet, portrayal is not approval. Enunciation and focalisation strategies are key to the act of watching a film, as well as the abstract delineation of an intended audience and the framing of genre.

The genre conventions of horror and thrillers, which *Most Beautiful Island* builds on, demand that the protagonists are put through an ordeal before fighting back. The trope of the "final girl" is a heroine and a responding aggressor (Staiger, 2015: 225) that finally defeats evil. But slashers also usually end with a rebuke of closure, which Staiger sees as an interplay between masochism and sadism: "It may be a *mise-en-scène* of desire, but it also must be defended against. [...] Closure provides sadistic gratification, but it also implies aggression and the end of the pleasures of masochism" (Staiger, 2015: 225-226). Asensio's film keeps us close to Luciana and make us feel her pain, caused



Women as playthings? *Most Beautiful Island* (Ana Asensio, 2017)

by the weight of the sight of the powerful that see her as a plaything, which contrasts with how she has been virtually invisible to everyone in the city before arriving at the party.

Most Beautiful Island portrays women as playthings and, therefore, draws attention to the correlation of toys and acts of looking. Meredith Bak (2020) studies the uses of optical toys in the 18th and 19th centuries and how these were used to train the sight in relation to a developing “right to look”, heavily based on class and race dynamics. Asensio’s film illustrates how those economically and socially in power buy their “right to look” at unprivileged subjects. The ideologies of capitalism are inevitably tied to colonialism and migration and with today’s large scale displacements, Western discourses train the sight to look at migrant others as subjects of pity, abuse, and hate within the schizophrenic narratives of “hospitality and hostility” (Behdad, 2016: 294).

One of the most uncomfortable scenes in the film occurs when the guests at the party assess the women: first, because the camera is situated behind Luciana thus showing the consuming, invasive gaze of the guests and Luciana’s inability to sustain their look; second, because neither spectators nor some of the women know what is about to happen; lastly, because this moment connects through sound to the introductory scene of the film in which the women are being monitored, as well as with a previous scene in which Luciana is having a bath and she lifts some duct tape on the wall and an intrusion of cockroaches comes out into the water—the vermin alluding to a common trope used to describe immigrants (Anderson, 2017). This scene merges together those indicators in the film that signal the dehumanisation, animalisation, and objectification of immigrants.

Moreover, the gaze of the guests, as contextualised in the game at the party and in opposition to the women looking away, confirm that looking always has an undercurrent of power, as Cousins observes when discussing the 19th century

human zoos, where “the unequal power relationship between looker and looked at was most obvious” and “questions of the right, privilege, advantage or misconduct of searching have been in play” thus “highlighting the relationship between looking and advantage” (Cousins, 2017: 465). *Most Beautiful Island* establishes a simile between the female immigrants at the party and that of the human zoo: the women have been gathered in a place from which they cannot escape if they do not go through with the games privileged people play and where “the looker ha[s] the right to look [and] the looker ha[s] no right to deny the look” (Cousins, 2017: 473). Centuries after the creation of human zoos, contemporary discourses replay the colonisation and containment of the bodies of those considered as *others*.

THIS DARK PLAY IS NOT CRUEL BECAUSE IT DECEIVES, BUT BECAUSE IT DEMANDS VICTIMS. THE WOMEN’S CONTRIBUTION IS THEIR SUFFERING. THE FILM CONFRONTS US WITH A MANIFESTATION OF THE IMPULSE FOR THE CRUELTY OF THOSE WITH POWER THROUGH A SPECIFIC DARK GAME

The lookers at the party remain voyeurs that draw pleasure from the bodies and the suffering of the female immigrants. The morality of looking in *Most Beautiful Island* arises from the failed acts of witnessing. Witnessing conveys responsibility (Felman, 1992: 3) but the extent of our responsibility towards others is difficult to delineate (Butler, 2009: 35) and, for Margalit, moral witnesses should “be at personal risk” and share the suffering they witness (Margalit, 2004: 150). Asensio’s film may not put us at such a risk but it draws the viewers’ attention to how little we see or know of the lives of illegal immigrants and the darkest undercurrents of power that play with those who

are practically invisible and easily disposable. These subjects may be seen, but not recognised, to use Butler's arguments on vulnerability and precarity and how "certain lives are perceived as lives while others, though apparently living, fail to assume perceptual form as such" (2009: 24). The women in the film are denied recognition and are only perceived by those looking at them as objects to be played with. The following section explores how *Most Beautiful Island* further constructs this criticism through dark play and games and how play may offer some potential for resistance.

"REMAIN CALM AND ELEGANT": DARK PLAY AND TORTURE

In *Most Beautiful Island*, we see vulnerable women being put through torture and the enablers of that torture enjoying it as a game. To unpack the implications of that scenario, we must look precisely at its structure as a game. First of all, we must keep in mind that *Most Beautiful Island* presents us with a "fictional game", that is, a game not meant to be played but to be put within the story to stoke conflict. Stefano Gualeni defines fictional games as "playful activities and ludic artefacts that were conceptualised to be part of fictional worlds". These games "were created as part of fictional worlds and that are not possible—or at least were not originally possible—to play in the actual world" (Gualeni, 2021: 188). Quidditch in Harry Potter, Holochess in Star Wars, or the game in *Quintet* (Robert Altman, 1979) are examples of this. Fictional games do not require a complete ruleset but need to be clear and interesting enough to structure a story that presents conflict and hard choices. In this, they are akin to philosophical thought experiments. At the same time, they are still portrayed as games, and as such, they have to fit within the nature of play and games. We might not want to play them, but we need to understand how they work to invest in the drama they articulate. Analysing them requires, then, a combina-

tion of methodologies from both film studies and play and game studies, as well as the philosophy of play.

Bernard Suits, perhaps the first philosopher to tackle the issue, described the act of playing a game as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (Suits, 1978: 10), which he called the "lusory attitude". If we are forced to play then play is not play anymore, games are not games anymore. Sicart describes play as a wider phenomenon, "a mode of being human" (Sicart, 2014: 1). Bateman (2011) also links games and play with mental modes and writes about *imaginary games*. Following this, we can see games and play as ways of reframing and reimagining our modes of thinking, of isolating and reinterpreting our predicaments. In *Most Beautiful Island*, Luciana goes to the party and is forced to play while others return voluntarily, but they do so out of desperation and knowing that their lives might be at stake. They are socially and economically forced to take part in the game, which would stop it from being a game and make it be its opposite, work.

The traditional conceptualisations of play leave out forms of the phenomenon like gambling, which has consequences outside of itself, and "dark play", which can be played against one or more players' will. The bets placed on the women in *Most Beautiful Island* can be read through this idea of dark play, intimately connected to questions of power. Aaron Trammell affirms that "play itself is a power relationship" and "games are not always safe and consensual" (Trammell, 2020: n.p.), which is an important nuance that is often left out of game and play studies, perhaps to set play and games apart from more dangerous practices such as gambling. Trammell remarks how "Huizinga [a founding reference in the study of games] neglects gambling in the entirety of *Homo Ludens* because of its associations with the amoral connotations that were associated with the activity at the time" and "how Caillois [another key author in the field] uses the term 'corruption' to discuss forms of play



Luciana tortured by nightmares and Luciana tortured as object and plaything. *Most Beautiful Island* (Ana Asensio, 2017)

that he finds troubling or unpalatable" (Tramell, 2020: n.p.). *Most Beautiful Island* outlines these darker aspects of play by establishing narratively and aesthetically clear power relations and portraying the game in the film as undoubtedly troubling and indeed corrupted.

Most Beautiful Island is part of the long tradition of dark play in cinema. Dark play is a common narrative device in films based around games and play activities, chiefly because it adds stakes to the story. If games can be abandoned at any moment there is no conflict. Fictional games such as *Jumanji*, *Zathura*, or the VHS game in *Beyond the Gates* (Jackson Stewart, 2016) force their players to keep on playing. Other movies present a more extreme strategy with the trope of "death games", where participants are forced to play to save their own lives. These gladiatorial imaginary games were popularized by *Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasaku, 2000) and are at the centre of *The Hunger Games* saga (*The Hunger Games* [Gary Ross, 2012], *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* [Francis Lawrence, 2013], *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Part 1* [Francis Lawrence, 2014], and *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Part 2* [Francis Lawrence, 2015]), *Gamer* (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2009), *Gantz* (Shinsuke Sato, 2010), or *Guns Akimbo* (Jason Howden, 2019), to name a few. Howev-

er, they date back to the early 20th century: the aforementioned "The Most Dangerous Game", a short story published by Richard Connell in 1924, deals with an aristocrat hunting humans for sport. It has been adapted more or less flexibly numerous times, from *The Most Dangerous Game* (Irving Pichel and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1932) to *The Running Man* (Paul Michael Glaser, 1987). Lastly, a more direct approach to dark play and torture is pictured in movies where characters are kidnapped and made to play macabre games for the pleasure of others who might or might not have a stake, financial or otherwise, in their result. It is the case of *Funny Games*, the game-prisons of *Saw* (James Wan, 2004), or *Escape Room* (Adam Robitel, 2019).

If, as Shamir (2016) defends, cinema can do philosophy not by illustrating philosophical thought but by manifesting philosophical problems as experiences, we can argue that dark play fictions are comparable to lived experiences of abstract thought experiments. In this way, fictional games are a perfect vehicle to explore dark play in and beyond its structures. First, dark play requires an imbalance in communication and information. Linderoth and Mortensen summarize the discussion of dark play through Richard Schechner's theories about performance studies, for whom dark

play is “a concept for situations in which not all players are aware of the fact they are taking part in an activity that for others is playful—in other words, actions and utterances are not literal or true” (Linderroth and Mortensen, 2015: 108). These authors continue to discuss Schechner alongside “Bateson’s (1972) concept of metacommunicative cues [...] to understand something is play” to end with Schechner’s definition of dark play as “the subversion of these meta-cues that tell us actions and utterances are supposed to be understood as playful” (Linderroth and Mortensen, 2015: 108). Dark play is, thus, “a form of deception closely related to what Sutton-Smith labelled as “cruel play” (Sutton-Smith, 1997: 108). Until Luciana enters the game room, she is kept in the dark, and even then the rules are explained to the gamblers, and not for her sake.

The game room in *Most Beautiful Island* is a space for torture. Can torture and games coexist? Vertigo and suffering are constitutive elements of play (Mortensen and Navarro-Remesal, 2018), and dark variants of play should not be excluded for the sake of defending our object. Trammell goes even further and adds that “even in the most innocent and pleasurable acts of play, we subtly discipline those around us to engage in unspoken rules” (2020). In fact, Trammell argues that “torture is play, and it reveals a good deal about how play works to subjugate and discipline people” (Trammell, 2020: n.p.). To illustrate his argument, he focuses on BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and

People of Colour) experiences and torture-based games such as *Hide the Switch* and criticizes the focus on voluntariness as a “White European tradition”. Trammell thus claims that “by defining play only through its pleasurable connotations, the term holds an epistemic bias towards people with access to the conditions of leisure. Indeed, torture helps to paint a more complete picture where the most heinous potentials of play are addressed alongside the most pleasant, yet in so doing the trauma of slavery is remembered”. Therefore, Trammell concludes, it is necessary to analyse “the more insidious ways that play functions as a tool of subjugation”. This subjugation is visible in the fictional game of *Most Beautiful Island*: the women being used might not be granted recognition and be used as objects, but their suffering is key to the gamblers’ enjoyment. There would be no game without their subjugation.

Torture and discipline are potential parts of play, but thinking of them as constitutive elements of it shifts the analysis from potential to ontology. Play and games should not be seen as a single phenomenon or object, but a set of interconnected phenomena, activities, and conceptual objects. Mary Midgley argues against Wittgenstein’s use of “family resemblance” to tie all games together: “to form a family is quite a different thing from having a family resemblance. [...] A family is a functional group with a concentric structure, a centre, and well understood rules governing the claims of outlying member” (Midgley, 1974: 232). For Midgley, there’s an “underlying unity” in games linked to motivations: “Until we understand the reasons for playing, I do not think we understand the bindingness of the rules” (Midgley, 1974: 236). Understanding play and games is a matter of understanding the needs at play. Bateman follows from Midgley: “It is because games meet human needs [...] that we can identify what constitutes a game. Those needs that a game meets are precisely what is in-

THE WHOLE DISCOURSE OF THE MOVIE HINGES ON THIS AMBIGUOUS ACT OF BRAVERY: BY TOYING WITH THE RULES AND “GAMING THE GAME”, LUCIANA BECOMES MORE THAN A PLAYTHING. SHE IS STILL A FORCED PLAYER AND A VICTIM OF TORTURE, BUT NOW SHE IS ALSO AN ACTIVE AGENT

volved in understanding what the concept ‘game’ must mean” (2011: 19).

If we take this back to Trammell’s arguments, it follows that play, or at least dark play, aims to fulfil a human impulse for cruelty. Trammell writes that “[p]lay reduces humans to objects because play is violent” (2020). We do not need to fully agree with his premises to see the latent darkness at the heart of play and its potential for transgressive experiences and aesthetics (Mortensen and Jørgensen, 2020). Not that these power plays have been completely ignored historically: even before Schechner, Sutton-Smith, and Goffman (1974), who wrote about “fabrications”, or activities where not all participants are aware of what is going on, Plutarch referenced in his *Moralia* (100 AD) an aphorism of philosopher Bion of Borysthenes: “Though boys throw stones at frogs in sport, the frogs do not die in sport but in earnest” (Plutarch, 1898). Play can and *does* turn people into objects, into playthings. The fact that the women in *Most Beautiful Island* must remain naked and still emphasizes their social transformation into playthings, more specifically of their bodies. The film presents the female body as a plaything for the rich and powerful. It is not as much about deceiving participants, as in traditional definitions of dark play. Some forms of dark play, as the one imagined in this film, do not even consider participants to be agents. This dark play is not cruel because it deceives, but because it demands victims. The women’s contribution is their suffering. The film confronts us with a manifestation of the impulse for the cruelty of those with power through a specific dark game.

“THE GUESTS HAVE ALREADY MADE THEIR BETS”: GAMBLING ON VULNERABLE LIVES

Like many dark fictional games, *Most Beautiful Island* presents spectators betting on the result of the game. A conceptual separation has been traditionally established between games and gambling,

perhaps to protect games from questionable social phenomena. In his “game diagram”, Juul (2003) proposes an inner circle of “games”, an outer circle of “borderline cases”, and an outside part of both circles of “not games”. It is in the second one where we can find “skill-based gambling”, “chance-based gambling”, and “games of pure chance”. We argue that the distinctions are not as clear-cut as they are normally presented to be. The study of games, as the study of any complex object or field, has demanded conceptual clarity, sometimes sacrificing the ambiguity and nuances that a philosophical analysis always reveals. Moreover, the distinction is also problematic from a legal point of view, as the debates on the regulation of in-game loot boxes have shown. Derevensky and Griffiths (2019: 634) argue that there “has been concern that the structural boundaries between gaming and gambling have in some cases become blurred”, citing lottery products, social casino games, loot boxes, and esports are examples of convergence. They compare gaming and gambling like this:

The terms “gambling” and “gaming” are frequently used synonymously—particularly by those working in the gambling industry—. *Gambling* involves wagering money or something of value on an event with an uncertain outcome. Gambling typically comprises three elements: consideration (an amount of money or something of financial value wagered), risk (in the form of chance events), and a prize (typically money but may simply be something of financial value). [...] In the context of gambling games, *agon* [competition] and *alea* [chance] are crucial in that they offer a combination of skill, chance, and luck (Derevensky and Griffiths, 2019: 633).

The game played in *Most Beautiful Island* involves consideration and prizes, therefore it is gambling, but who exactly is in control and what is the risk exactly? This is not a game of pure chance, since the women in the coffin need to perform a task—in this case, to remain motionless, to *not do* anything—. Vanessa seems to frame the game as a

struggle with fate: “we make our own luck”. Controlling one’s panic and flight mechanisms may be the main skill at play. This is a dark and extreme variant of sports betting, where gamblers predict the results of a game and wager money on them. Following this scenario, the girls would be *performers*. Even more, *paid* performers. Gamblers are betting on their outcomes and could be argued to have a base on which to place their bets (i. e., the girl’s perceived emotional state). However, the actions of the spider remain outside of the control of both the gamblers and the girls, and even the type of spider is kept a secret until the girls’ purses are open. It is a game of great uncertainty and great risk, and thus of great spectator vertigo. As the gamemaster tells her audience, “our lives hang by a delicate thread and sometimes we can pull on that thread. It is so exciting, isn’t it?”

The women are being forced to play by their captors, with whom they established an agreement based on incomplete information and thus, deception, but we can consider them players of a dark game nonetheless. We have a gamemaster, a set of gamblers that are at the same time vertigo-seeking spectators, and a perverse version of players. The girls do not meet the basic requirement of voluntariness, but would the activity’s consideration as a game be any different if they did? And what, then, of the repeaters and the enablers, as Olga? Given that they are paid for their performance, and that at least Luciana badly needs the money, there is a clear reflection on class and financial power in this game. As in other variants of *The Most Dangerous Game*, those in control of society play with the dispossessed as their own toys. What those in power play for the thrills is risky labour for the poor.

Up to this point, the film lays bare the complexities and nuances of play and games in situations of extreme inequality, which are further muddled by Luciana’s performance in the game room. After she survives her round and sees Olga struggling in hers, Luciana steps in and takes Ol-

ga’s spider in her hand, keeping skin contact. The whole discourse of the movie hinges on this ambiguous act of bravery: by toying with the rules and “gaming the game”, Luciana becomes more than a plaything. She is still a forced player and a victim of torture, but now she is also an active agent. She goes beyond what the rules demand of her and *wins* the game. Does she do it to rebel against the game organisers and gamblers? Does she do it out of compassion for Olga? Is she motivated by money? The movie remains ambiguous, but the result is clear: the gamemaster announces that they have found a replacement for Olga and gives Luciana her contact. The final scene is also ambiguous, but it shows Luciana perhaps enjoying her first moment of control in the whole movie: she orders ice cream from an ice cream cart and eats it slowly, to walk off moments later into the city, with a sign in the frame showing an apple that reads “Big Big Dreams”. New York has strangely become a land of dark and cruel possibilities.

“IT IS SO EXCITING, ISN’T IT?”: CONCLUSION

Our mediatic and mediated world continuously brings to the fore images of precarity and migrancy, often to a point of exhaustion that leaves no room for reflection. Films such as *Most Beautiful Island*, in its carefully crafted use of dark play and conventions of masochistic horror and its metaphorical readings of the use and abuse of others, may prompt a more complex consideration of the frightful situations that illegal migrants face. Placing us as uncomfortable spectators, Asensio’s film does not make us complicit but rather compels us to evaluate the lack of recognition of otherness within the tortuous circuits of precarity and invisibility. As spectators, we watch the whole process that brings Luciana to the game room in excruciating detail, almost in real time. Our knowledge is limited to what she knows since hers is the only

point of view available to us. During the game, the gamblers/spectators remain mysterious and out of our reach, nameless faces enjoying the women's suffering. But it could be argued that we are as invested in the outcome as much, or even more. Thus, the film's centrality on the interrelatedness of dark games and looking highlights how, in Cousins' words, "[t]he response to the power of looking should not be to reject it. The alternative to rejection is evaluation" (Cousins, 2017: 393).

Evaluating looking, then, may help us explore questions of privilege, power, and morality. The film denounces unequal relationships of power in contemporary times and the fictional game allows for the inquiry into the possibilities for action and enunciation, with Luciana turning herself from object into subject. Luciana's behaviour in the game room, her implication and defiance in her act of survival and ambiguous solidarity with Olga, makes her an active subject that seems ready to accept the fiendish rules that would allow her to continue to take her chances and exhaust the limited possibilities of a truncated American dream. As is the case with slashers, *Most Beautiful Island* lacks clear closure: Luciana does not destroy the system that operates the game room, but wins power within it, enough to keep on surviving. As "cinematic philosophy" (Shamir, 2016), *Most Beautiful Island* makes us experience inequality, powerlessness, subjugation, and appropriation of the game rules. The script, camerawork, and editing of *Most Beautiful Island* makes strong use of focalisation to make us feel the power of look while keeping us close to those with no right to exert it. Its fictional dark game is not only an abstract commentary on the way the rich and powerful play with vulnerable lives, but also an exercise of cinematic philosophy on being put through a cruel and disorienting transformation into a plaything that fights back for the control of their very existence.

Asensio, as a Spanish creator operating in the US, exhibits the potential of a transnational cine-

ma of the immigrant that tackles the difficulties of female subjectivity and illegal migrants in dangerous cosmopolitan settings. It makes us watch the ordeal of its protagonist to invite us to reflect on the right of these subjects to look and to be seen. The owners of the world might look at their pain in sport, but we experience their suffering in earnest. ■

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“REMAIN CALM AND ELEGANT”: DARK GAMES, VULNERABILITY, AND THE FEMALE BODY AS A PLAYTHING IN *MOST BEAUTIFUL ISLAND*

Abstract

Most Beautiful Island (Ana Asensio, 2017) portrays the struggle of Luciana, a Spanish illegal immigrant in New York. The film centres on Luciana's acceptance of a suspicious yet well-paid job working at a party in place of her friend Olga, another illegal immigrant. At the party, she will become the object of bets and the plaything of a dark game. This article explores how *Most Beautiful Island*, a film made by a Spanish filmmaker in the US, uses narrative and aesthetic devices and discourses to explain the migratory experience of a particular group of women whose lives end up rather literally in the hands of the powerful. For this purpose, the article first studies vulnerability and precarity and the power of looking and the failures of witnessing, to then examine the discourses and conventions of dark play, particularly in fictional dark games in film, and how the film lays bare the torture and sadism of power relations. Thus, the aim is to lay bare the strategies of denunciation, enunciation, and resistance that *Most Beautiful Island* constructs around the invisibility and powerlessness of precarious subjects.

Key words

Dark games; Illegal immigrants; Vulnerability; Looking.

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«PERMANECED TRANQUILAS Y ELEGANTES»: JUEGOS OSCUROS, VULNERABILIDAD Y EL CUERPO FEMENINO COMO OBJETO DE JUEGO EN *MOST BEAUTIFUL ISLAND*

Resumen

Most Beautiful Island (Ana Asensio, 2017) muestra las dificultades a las que se enfrenta Luciana, un inmigrante ilegal de origen español en Nueva York. La película se centra en cómo Luciana acepta una oferta de un trabajo bien pagado, aunque un tanto sospechoso, para una fiesta sustituyendo a su amiga Olga, otra inmigrante ilegal. En dicha fiesta, Luciana se convertirá en el objeto de apuestas y en el juguete de un juego oscuro. Este artículo explora cómo *Most Beautiful Island*, el filme de una directora española residente en Estados Unidos, utiliza recursos y discursos narrativos y estéticos para explicar la experiencia migratoria de un grupo específico de mujeres cuyas vidas acaban estando, de manera casi literal, en las manos de personas con poder. Para ello, este artículo estudia primero los conceptos de vulnerabilidad y precariedad, el poder de la mirada y cómo ser testigos de ciertos actos resulta insuficiente para continuar con el análisis de los discursos y convenciones de el juego oscuro, en especial los juegos oscuros ficcionales en el cine, y cómo la película hace evidentes la tortura y el sadismo implícitos en las relaciones de poder. Así pues, el propósito es demostrar las estrategias de denuncia, enunciación y resistencia que *Most Beautiful Island* construye en torno a la invisibilidad e indefensión de aquellos sujetos precarios.

Palabras clave

Juegos oscuros; Inmigración ilegal; Vulnerabilidad; Mirada

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