

GENDER CONSTRUCT IN *LA FEMME NIKITA* AND *POINT OF NO RETURN*: A COMPARISON

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Society as it is known today is in part the result of the debate on gender and gender roles. With women feeling oppressed by the traditional division of gender roles and fighting for equality, it is now more or less accepted that both sexes can share similar occupations and responsibilities, even though prejudices die hard and still associate some behaviors with men and other behaviors with women. Action movies featuring women who take on the role of the violent hero traditionally held by men very often contribute in this debate on gender. Luc Besson's 1990 film *La Femme Nikita* referred to as *Nikita* throughout the paper, and its Hollywood remake, *Point of No Return* by John Badham (1993), released in the United Kingdom as *The Assassin*, are a case in point. Giving his point of view on remakes, Sylvain Vincendeau asserts: "what constitutes a story, how stars are framed and how gender is constructed all undergo considerable change as they cross the Atlantic."¹ Using *La Femme Nikita*, and *Point of No Return* as its topics, this paper will discuss the changes that occurred when the European film, in this instance, *La Femme Nikita*, became a Hollywood production. The paper will specifically compare the way gender is constructed in both the original and the remake. It will analyze the beginnings of both films where the main characters are introduced and the stage is set for the action. Then, it will focus on the female instructors who teach Nikita in *La Femme Nikita* and Maggie in *Point of No Return* how to use their femininity and on the result of their work. It will finally discuss the ends of both films, which establish a clear difference between the French original and the American remake.

First, it must be said that *Nikita* and *Point of No Return* are an extremely well-known pair. This is mostly due to the huge box office success achieved by Besson's film. It is reported that it was seen by over 3.7 million spectators in France and around 3 million in the USA². The film's success can be measured not just in the number of spectators and the Hollywood remake but also in a 1991 Hong Kong version entitled *Black Cat* directed by Stephen Shin and a television serial also called *La Femme Nikita* directed by Reza Badiyi and George Bloomfield.³

¹ Sylvain Vincendeau, see www.sylvain-vincendeau, April 20, 2007.

² Laura Grindstaff, "A Pygmalion Tale Retold: Remaking *La Femme Nikita*," www.lfnforever.tripod.com/id141.htm, 25 April 2007.

³ *Ibid.*

As far as plot is concerned, the story line of *La Femme Nikita*, the original film, and *Point of No Return* remains much the same in the original and the remake. A gang of drug addicts raid a pharmacy and kill the owner, even though he is the father of one gang member. However, they are trapped by the police and all of them are shot to death except a girl. Instead of surrendering, she kills one of the policemen. These first scenes appear especially cold and violent as they are filmed with long tracking shots, and bathed under a cold blue light that greatly contrasts with the heat and rapidity of the action. The girl is then sentenced to life imprisonment (in the French version) and to death (in the American version), but is spared and offered to train as a government covert agent or die as she was supposed to. The choice is easy to make and the film then shows how she is trained by Bob and Amande (in *Nikita*) or Amanda (in *Point of No Return*). After successfully completing her first assignment, she is released with a new identity. Next, she meets a young man and falling in love, she starts living with him as man and wife. Besson's film ends with the disappearance of Nikita while Badham closes on a more positive note, with the suggestion that Maggie escapes her life as government agent and assassin to become a free person.

At first sight, only the endings seem to be different. However, despite these similarities, different patterns begin to emerge from the very beginning. In the original, the spectator has no idea who the hero will be, as the camera does not show the faces or focus on any character in particular. Furthermore, no streets are named or monuments seen, nevertheless, a kind of dark, gloomy world is portrayed. In a word, the town remains anonymous. This setting had to be translated for the American remake in order to keep in with the cold and blunt introductory atmosphere. However, even though the streets are not named, the first thing that can be seen in the American version is the dome of the White House, which immediately places the action in an easily recognizable place, Washington, D.C., and reveals that it will be linked with the Government. In addition, because the shots of the people walking toward the pharmacy are intercut with close-ups of their faces, the audience can immediately identify the heroine as Bridget Fonda, already famous for starring in *Aria* (1987) *Shag Scandal* (1989), and this adds further expectations to the film, especially as the shots focus mainly on her.



Photo 1: One of the first images revealing Nikita (right), bathed under a cold blue light, as a girl.

Furthermore, in Besson's film, it is difficult to make out the sex of the characters who break into the chemistry shop. They are all dressed in various clothes that seem like uniforms for drug addicts. Nikita, played by Anne Parillaud, is wearing a pair of light blue jeans and black boots, a white T-shirt and a black leather jacket. At this point, it is difficult to distinguish the difference between her and her companions. She is carefree, a bit frail and walks the same way as the other members of the group. It is only in the following scenes that the camera reveals that she is a girl. It can be said that the first images of the French version purposefully makes Nikita androgynous, neither male nor female, even though her ruthless killing of the policeman can be associated more with masculinity than femininity. This vague gender status is very well expressed by Nikita's beauty instructor when she says to her pupil: "if we work hard together and if fortune smiles on us... we'll be able to make you into a human being, an intermediary but a necessary step before becoming man's perfect complement...a woman."⁴

The quotation above echoes Lucy Mazdon's suggestion that *Nikita* is a liminal film⁵ in the sense that it has both French and American features, or that it is in-between, neither one nor the other. The word liminal brings to mind Van Gennep's very well known formula for the structure of what he called rites of passage. The essential idea is rituals mark the transition from one status to another and they comprise three distinct phases: rites of separation, rites of the "limen" or of transition, and rites of incorporation. Van Gennep notes that stripping ritual participants of their previous structural identity during the separation phase results in structural ambiguity in the transition phase. During that transitional phase, the participants no

⁴ Luc Besson, *La Femme Nikita*, 1990.

⁵ Lucy Mazdon (2000) *Encore Hollywood: Remaking French Cinema* London, BFI (British Film Institute) Publishing, p. 111.

longer have their former identities and have not yet acquired the next one. The validity of Van Gennep's findings to describe rites of passage has been acknowledged by Victor Turner, also well known for his work on rituals.

Turner's work on the ritual process focuses on the second phase of the rites of passage, the transitional one, which is the sine qua non of ritual, and which he calls "liminality," deriving from Van Gennep's word "limen." But Turner goes beyond Van Gennep in his observation that liminality is "not only transition, but also potentiality," not only "going to be," but also "what may be."⁶ It is this ambiguous, in-between state, containing the negation of both the former and the new states and the power to transform the one into the other that the audience can perceive in Nikita's androgynous character. However, her instructor does not see her as a human being. For that instructor, turning Nikita into a human being, the intermediary being between man and woman, will constitute the transitional step. The instructor's opinion about Nikita's progress echoes the common idea implicit in Van Gennep's, and Turner's views of ritual as a developmental and constructive process. The idea of development is also contained in the words of the instructor in *Nikita*.

Unlike Nikita, Maggie's gender in *Point of No Return* is established at the outset. The audience clearly perceives that one of the four young people on their way to the pharmacy is a girl. Her hair is a bit longer than that of the other gang members'. Maggie is not as slender as Nikita and her face, voice, gait, shape, and general physical appearance are unmistakably feminine. It is no wonder the female instructor feels that she already has an asset for the training: "you have the gift of youth, that is what we will build on."⁷ While Nikita has an ambiguous status and is hardly considered as a human being by her mentor, Maggie has something to build on right from the start. The beginning of the two films can be said to raise the problem of gender, but while the original starts with a character that comes across as male at best, the remake presents a protagonist with an already established gender, though in a still equally atypical gender role.

Regarding gender roles in general, John M. Coggeshall remarks:

Women choose to be housewives more often than men choose to be 'househusbands'. It has been suggested by scientists that biology plays a role in this, and it has been suggested by feminists that it is the result of socially constructed gender roles (as well as economic pressures)⁸.

⁶ Victor and Edith L. B. Turner (1978) *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. New York, Columbia University Press, p. 3.

⁷ John Badham, *Point of No Return*, 1993.

⁸ See www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_role#Talcott_Parsons.27_views_of_gender_roles, April 25, 2007.

Margaret Mead supports the latter point of view, the feminist position, and contends that

Gender is one of the universal dimensions on which status differences are based. Unlike sex, which is a biological concept, gender is a social construct specifying the socially and culturally prescribed roles that men and women are to follow.”⁹

Clearly, biology and socially constructed gender roles foster gender behavioral differences. Thus, it is people’s sex which determines their behaviors and the way they are expected to behave.

These behaviors and what people expect from either gender may vary from country to country and culture to culture and according to time, but there are generally accepted ideas. Men are supposed to behave a certain way and women in another way, just as there are men’s dresses and women’s dresses, and men’s hairdo and women’s hairdo. For instance, in many parts of the world, wearing a skirt may be unacceptable as part of a male gender role, but in Scotland, men have traditionally worn a kilt, which is not unlike a woman’s skirt. People unaware of that Scottish tradition may be thrown off by the sight of a man wearing a skirt.

Men are thought to be good at solving problems. In addition, they are expected to be reasonable, tough, aggressive, and independent. Traditionally, they have been the ones who work outside the home to earn what the family needs to live on. In a couple, the man is the leader. In Côte d’Ivoire, the official performing the wedding ceremony reads a piece of law stating that the husband is the head of the family and has the responsibility of choosing where the family will live. The woman will only take over this role if the husband, for one reason or another, cannot play his or she can oppose his decision regarding their dwelling place only if the environment he has chosen is dangerous for the family.

Gender roles for women are often different (save for such facts as male attraction to females and vice versa) and sometimes completely opposed to that of men. People expect women to be generally dependent, emotional, childish, unreasonable, romantic, sensitive, compassionate, affectionate and submissive. While men work outside the home, housekeeping and child care are women’s primary functions. This particularly has led feminists to argue that traditional gender roles are oppressive for women. Additionally, women are not supposed to be intelligent and they are also known to pay too much attention to their external appearance and consider their physical beauty as an advantage over other women. It has been reported

⁹ Margaret Mead, “Gender and Society,” www.trinity.edu/~mkearl/gender.html, April 22, 2007.

that in one of her programs, Oprah Winfrey, the well-know,US talk show host, asked young women which of being attractive or intelligent they would prefer, and a great percentage answered being attractive.¹⁰ The female instructors in both *Nikita* and *Point of No Return* come across as not only attractive but also intelligent.

Amande, played by Jeanne Moreau, and Amanda, played by Anne Bancroft, in *La Femme Nikita* and *Point of No Return* respectively, are the female instructors assigned with teaching Nikita and Maggie to be feminine and enjoy the advantages relating to it. Jeanne Moreau and Anne Bancroft, the actresses chosen to play the part of the female instructors, are so stunning that they can be qualified as beauty queens. Both of them are mature; they dress well and are extremely elegant and feminine from head to toe. Their role as mentors brings to mind the function or role of mother and educator, as they teach, guide, scold, show pride and congratulate their pupils for making progress. Clearly the director of the remake took great care to remain close to the original, not only in borrowing the name, but also in paralleling the very elegance and femininity of the instructor.



Photo 2: Amanda (Anne Bancroft) can be considered as a beauty queen who embodies femininity.

¹⁰ See www.mentalhelp.net/psyhelp/chap9/chap9p.htm, 17 April 2006.



Photo 3: Amande (Jeanne Moreau), another beauty queen.

The instruction the girls are given can again be linked to at least one of the functions that ritual performs at the social level. Indeed, according to Emile Durkheim, an anthropologist like Van Gennep and Victor Turner, ritual has an educational function. It prepares the individual for social life. And Nikita and Maggie are taught in order to be returned to society in new roles. Ritual also teaches the individual to accept constraints and controls because social existence is only possible "when a man [or woman] is trained to renouncement, to abnegation, to detachment from self, and consequently to suffering."¹¹ Training to become government agents certainly involves the renouncement and suffering that Durkheim mentions. However while Durkheim sees that rituals are reinforcing group solidarity, Maggie and Nikita are not specifically trained for that purpose, unless one considers their becoming better and certainly more useful than they were as akin to the reinforcement of group solidarity. We are also made to understand that in the specific position that the government gives them, they will contribute to bettering society. Perhaps the best proof that they have indeed changed, that the ritual has a meaning, is the fact that they not only fall in love, but actually set home with men, which shows, as the instructor in *Nikita* puts it each of them has "become man's perfect complement...a woman." However, becoming that complement also involves retaining or acquiring qualities such as ruthlessness, toughness, aggressiveness, and strength, more associated with masculinity. But then, all action heroines

¹¹ Emile Durkheim (1954) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, transl. Joseph W. Swain, third impression, Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, p. 316.

embody seemingly incompatible masculine and feminine traits. This has led Pauline Macrory to remark that “the action heroine has been seen by many as transgressing the traditional binary gender codes that equate activity with masculinity and passivity with femininity.”¹² This transgression can also be understood as a confirmation of the modern world’s tendency to obliterate the traditional division of gender roles.

Amande and Amanda have to teach Nikita and Maggie to become man's perfect complement ...” because learning to become government agents does not just involve assimilating the art of killing. The girls’ apprenticeship, which turns them into cold, tough and efficient killing machines can be said to perpetuate, as noted above, their atypical gender role. However, because the two films project achieving femininity as the other aspect of the apprenticeship, they also emphasize and reassert the protagonists’ gender. In addition to killing and being feminine, the skills they have to acquire involve the capacity to pass for somebody else. These features conjure to mind the idea of femme fatale, which Laura Grindstaff defines as “a mysterious woman with multiple and changing identities,” illustrated, she goes to say, by three different names: Nikita/Marie/Josephine in *Nikita* and Maggie/Claudia/Nina in *Point of No Return*.¹³ Despite or because of these multiple identities, the girls are transformed from disarrayed gang members into beautiful and stunning women.

The idea of femme fatale is also strengthened in *Nikita* by the theatre-like mirror used in Nikita’s training center. It suggests that everything is a masquerade and that women put on make-ups to fool people into thinking whatever they want them to think. Nikita becomes a woman before the very eyes of the audience. The symbol of her transformation is the scene in which she puts on her makeup in a front of a mirror, suggesting the difficulty of the task. Nikita’s transformation is also physical. She comes into the training center extremely skinny, and ends up quite shapely, which makes her transformation all the more believable, yet keeping a childlike dissociation and an incredible sense of a newly acquired femininity. In *Nikita*, then, gender or femininity is seen as constructed. It is acquired through clothes, make-ups, and other artifices.

On the other hand, Maggie, in the American remake, remains physically much the same, only with better manners and makeover. Her transformation lies rather in the way she can change her appearance. That process is not shown and it therefore seems to be easier and quicker. At one point, she goes upstairs and then comes down, walking majestically and

¹² Pauline Macrory, “Excusing the Violence in Hollywood Women: Music in *Nikita* and *Point of No Return*,” www.bibl.hff.potsdam.de/fileadmin/, April 25, 2007.

¹³ Laura Grindstaff, “A Pygmalion Tale Retold: Remaking *La Femme Nikita*,” op. cit.

sensually in a little black dress, and thus escapes the men who are waiting for her. The perception of femininity is different here. It all comes down to having good manners, a good attitude, and looking stunning whatever the circumstances, not stage a performance. Lucy Mazdon highlights this difference when she writes: “Unlike Nikita, Maggie does not have to learn to become a woman... Instead, she acquires the etiquette and charm which will enable her to pass in any social situation.”¹⁴ The ends of the films further stress that difference.

Perhaps the two different personalities which appear after the training account for the difference in the ends of the films. The end of the French original is in keeping with Nikita’s ambivalent attitude. When she makes loves to her boyfriend for example, her new identity of woman seems to take over. At other times however, her former anti-social character flares from time to time, showing that her wild side has not completely been tamed. She seems to have changed physically, but also seems to remain intrinsically or morally a liminal character. However, the film shows the strain that she feels from the pressure of leading a double life. She also feels remorse at killing people. Here, one may remember that in the opening scene, she killed without conscience. She also feels trapped and abused and expresses conflict between her duty to the government. Her desire to return to a normal life reveals that the change is not a superficial one. She has indeed moved from a street gang member to a refined young woman, even though she still has some way to go. After one of her missions goes wrong, Bob arrives at her apartment to discover she has disappeared. Thus, her development is arrested and all the audience can do is wonder about her future. Will she go back to her former life and roam the street with another gang? In that case, will she not be an even more dangerous character now that she has learned the art of killing and femininity? Some people may find it hard to just imagine her developing into a fuller woman who conforms to what society has devised as roles for her. On the other hand, because she ultimately rejects violence, complains about her double life and wants to appear what she is, she may well shed her multiple identities and live the modest life of a housewife. The end of Besson’s film, which lends itself to these opposite readings, raises more questions than it provides answers and thus fails to give a sense of closure.

The American remake offers quite a different ending. Maggie is first believed to have disappeared, but she is soon seen walking toward her apartment. Bob sees her, but he calls his bosses and tells them she has disappeared. He thus sets her free. This ending is not surprising. As Laura Grindstaff points out,

¹⁴ Lucy Mazden (2000) *Encore Hollywood: Remaking French Cinema*, op. cit., p. 119.

for both countries [France and America], film is at the heart of national consciousness. Both countries have also tended to serve each other as definitional ‘others,’ providing contrasting contexts in which Frenchness and Americanness can be better differentiated and understood.¹⁵

One such difference between Frenchness and Americanness is the Americans’ unabashed optimism, which is translated into Hollywood’s taste for happy endings. *Point of No Return*’s happy ending is in keeping with the American mind. Maggie’s return does not mean that like Nikita, she does not loathe her job. One has to remember that she first tries to run away when she is told about the government’s scheme to turn her into an assassin and it is only a bullet in the leg that forces her to accept her fate. In addition, when later as an agent she sees the hotel destroyed by the bomb she has planted, she reacts with horror. But because of the stability and poise Maggie has displayed despite her remorse at killing for the government, the happy ending seems justified. She has discovered another life, the life a woman. Audience members feel that she will be a good wife to her future husband and the temptation to add “and they lived happily ever after” seems just too great to resist.

To conclude, it can be said that on the surface, *La Femme Nikita* and its American remake present many similarities, especially as far as the basic story line is concerned. However, a closer look reveals that there are fundamental differences, particularly as far as gender construct is concerned. In the original, despite her training, Nikita never really fully conforms to the behavior associated to her gender. On the other hand, Maggie fully embraces her gender and easily turns from a drug addict into a stunning woman who seems to gather all the qualities and characteristics of her gender, albeit her embodying, just like Nikita and other action heroines, both masculine and feminine traits. While one may take Sylvain Vincendeau to task regarding plot, how gender is constructed does indeed undergo considerable change as *Nikita* becomes the American *Point of No Return*. This paper has by no means exhausted the topic of gender or remakes for that matter. One may wonder why are films remade at all? Why are they not just subtitled for countries with different languages?

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¹⁵ Laura Grindstaff, op. cit.

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