

***Poor Things* and Yorgos Lanthimos: A Film Review Intersecting Various Feminist Debates**

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Poor Things (2023), the ninth film by Greek auteur filmmaker Yorgos Lanthimos, continues to present the director's off-kilter vision of humanity, allowing people to view themselves in defamiliarized ways. The works of Lanthimos exude an artistic contemplativeness and often convey an artificial realism where normalcy is presented as both benign and insidious. These cinematic traits are evident in his breakout film, *Dogtooth* (2009). This austere work deconstructs a bizarre suburban family as an autocratic state, showing how easily children can be manipulated to believe in a worldview, but also how people inevitably rebel. Intersecting with *Dogtooth*, Lanthimos's other films, *The Lobster* (2015) and *The Favourite* (2018), explore social microcosms in cloistered, controlled environments, satirizing power dynamics within larger social structures.

In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), sex scenes are not warm and charming; they are naked and psychological. This film follows an alcoholic surgeon who errs during a procedure, causing the death of another father. That man's son exacts a powerful revenge of existential, karmic justice. In the film's final scene of impending violence, the elements of chance combined with the guaranteed killing of an innocent family member are inexorable. In all of Lanthimos's films, camera angles are constantly unsettling, and color schemes are muted. The lighting feels natural, and most of the sound is diegetic, fostering an uncanny realism. In *Poor Things*, the director continues to explore dark themes regarding human nature and social behavior, while also playing with color schemes, making the cinematography an integral narrative element.

In this review, the decision to abbreviate the film title to *Things* (as opposed to *Poor*) involves the film's concept in following a male doctor, Godwin (Willem Dafoe)—who does have a God complex—taking the living fetus from the body of a pregnant woman, Victoria Blessington (Emma Stone), who committed suicide. When Godwin transplants the unborn child's brain into the mother, this dead woman's rebirth as "Bella" becomes an extended allegory on the social, physical, and sexual abuse of and rebellion by the female. The film offers dark comedy through Bella's ego-driven navigations of the intellectual, physical, and financial avenues of this neo-Victorian imaginary.

The set design reminds one of a creative iteration of the late 1890s and early 1900s film world, featuring painted photography plates. In Lanthimos's film, they serve as the backdrop to a psychosexual steampunk journey across Europe, indicating movements across time and space. Chronological location changes are conveyed in quaint black-and-white interpanels while flashbacks of Bella's suicide are coded in bilious blue storms. The film fluidly moves between England, Portugal, and France, and back to England, introducing an array of characters who influence Bella's journey of personal awakening. Godwin's English home is visually associated with cold white, blues, and grays, reflecting the surgical world of the doctor's megalomania. In the vibrant pastels of Lisbon, the intensely sexual female Frankenstein explores her pleasure drives with the playboy Duncan (Mark Ruffalo), only to move on to life as a sex worker surrounded by the garish tones of a Parisian brothel.

In this *fin de siècle* nursery world, everything is on the cusp of tradition and modernity. Everything is an experimental hybrid, including Godwin's pig-chickens and Bella, who is her own child-mother. The costume designer Holly Waddington—known for her work on the lustful, murderous neo-Victorian film *Lady Macbeth* (2016) and the retro-modern series *The Great* (2020-

2023)—presents Bella in *Things* as a hybrid being, wearing corseted tops with sheer skirts designed in the silhouette of a Victorian bustle. Bella’s mini-lens sunglasses feel perennially in the now. Lanthimos films scenes with a disorienting fisheye lens, enhancing the preternaturally maturing Bella’s perspective as an uncoordinated toddler. Yet, she is not innocent. Bella quickly transitions from speaking in disjointed fragments to expressing herself in complete sentences. She becomes a free spirit, a biologically mature woman, demanding more baked treats while cavorting through her sexual awakening.

In *Things*, many points of dramatic irony keep the audience engaged with the quick jokes, often where the male characters and the film audience are aware that Bella is being deceived sexually or financially. Many film reviews praise this work—which won Stone her second Best Actress Oscar—for its bold sexuality, stylized set designs, and innovative cinematography. Other reviewers disliked the overt nudity and the narrative of multiple men taking advantage of the “sexy, born yesterday” character. The *YouTube* video essay from the feminist channel *The Take* asks the question, “Is this film empowering or exploitative?” The film received a “Squashed Tomato” review from Lucía Tebaldi (*EscribiendoCine*), who alleges that the film indulges in every male gaze trope.

Collin Garbarino (*World*) also complains that “Hollywood elites are fawning over this reprehensible film claiming it’s about female empowerment, but that supposed empowerment actually disguises the worst sort of exploitation.” A verified audience goer, Joshua H., reflects that “The movie is about a bunch of people having sex with a child in the body of a woman. I can’t get past that conceit.” On the flip side, *Screen Rant*’s Greg MacArthur considers the work a feminist masterpiece, asserting the graphic nudity circumvents the male gaze and that the narrative demonstrates Bella’s agency.

At the 2025 Oscars, Bella found a new sister in director Sean Baker's *Anora* (2024), where Stone passed the torch to Mikey Madsen as the year's Best Actress for portraying another "complex sex worker." Bella and *Anora*, Stone and Madsen, follow a long line of films that portray light-skinned women in these roles, from Donna Reed in *From Here to Eternity* (1953) to Jane Fonda in *Klute* (1971) and Charlize Theron in *Monster* (2003). *Anora*'s writer-director Baker is noted for his staged ethnographic film style where he presents realistic narrative films that offer compassionate views on downtrodden survivors, such as the young, homeless mother who resorts to sex work in *The Florida Project* (2017) and the wonderful friends in *Tangerine* (2015), who can be classified by another sub-trope of "complex Black transgender sex workers."

The bleak, realistic ending of *Anora* asks the questions that were notoriously omitted from the initial tragic script for *Pretty Woman* (1990), which ends with Edward returning to his world of privilege, while Vivienne returns to her precarious life of street sex work. Instead, the bubblegum-produced script became a box office behemoth and Julia Roberts's vehicle relying on the "hooker with a heart of gold" trope. This series of White women winning praise for portraying complex sex workers reminds me of a Black Film studies class conversation regarding *Training Day* (2001) and *Monster's Ball* (2001). The class debates centered on what it meant for Denzel Washington and Halle Berry to be lauded and awarded for portraying those types of Black characters—a corrupt, violent cop and the impoverished wife of an executed man, respectively. What kinds of roles are minoritized persons allowed to play, and what types of roles do minorities get praised for portraying? Even though White women might be considered second in the current racialized and gendered global social hegemonies, they are still not White men at the top. They are not liberated through feminism—they are still essentially sex workers.

Consider Bella in *Poor Things* as she humorously usurps male positions, inherits Godwin's estate, and becomes a medical student. Does *Things* satirize patriarchy or feminism? Is *Things* a situation of "yes, no, and, but also . . ." Who is this composite woman, this Frankenstein? According to various movie posters, Bella is a doll positioned on a travel trunk. She is a Daliesque dream with white surf crashing out of her Victorian-ruffled chest, sweeping up all the men in her wake. Regardless of where decisions fall on *Things* as feminist or anti-feminist, rebellious or exploitative, Lanthimos's engaging film does not disappoint. This blunt allegory fosters nuanced questions on gender dynamics, as Bella's violent first husband ultimately becomes mentally incapacitated, transformed into a pet, and mindlessly roams her estate gardens.

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