



“One Day This Tune Will Drive Me Mad”

A Review of

The Girl, the Mother and the Demons (Flickan, Mamman Och Demonerna) (2016)

by Suzanne Osten (Director)

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Reviewed by

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The song “*Padam, Padam,*” made famous by Édith Piaf, is played as a leitmotif throughout the extraordinary new film *The Girl, the Mother and the Demons*, by the Swedish theatre and film director Suzanne Osten. The song expresses the Francophile attitude of the mother character in the film, based on Osten’s own mother, but it also reveals much in its about-to-spin-out-of-control refrain, which include the sentence “One day this tune will drive me mad,” although the song, of course, did not cause Gerd Osten’s paranoid schizophrenia. In an earlier film (*Mamma*, 1982), based on her mother’s diary, Suzanne Osten showed us the struggles of her unconventional mother in very conventional middle-of-the-century Sweden: a film critic who saw her ambition to direct an experimental film thwarted by a commercial, male-dominated film industry; a bohemian who chose her memories of a one-night stand with a French man in a train over her conventional marriage to a toolmaker; a person in emotional turmoil in the midst of a continent in bellic turmoil.

The Girl, the Mother and the Demons, a semi-fictional account based on a successful novel (and later play) by Suzanne Osten of her own childhood centers on the precocious girl Ti (7-years-old at the beginning of the film) and her relationship with her mother Siri. Although preceded by suspenseful music, the film starts with an idyllic scene in which Ti “teaches” aikido to her young aunt Tamara while the latter’s dog Ice frolicks around. Even then, though, the facial expression of Siri betrays her jealousy of anyone getting close to Ti. Soon afterwards, Siri fights with her partner, smashing china (apparently one of her favorite activities), and hurries away to an apartment in Stockholm to hide herself and Ti from everyone else. Siri begins to “remodel” her rented apartment, placing piles of colorful papers, cardboard, and objects all over, canopied by dozens of Chinese paper lamps and other miscellanea, reassembled by her from items retrieved from nearby dumpsters. Some of this had to be appealing to Ti: smashing dishes against the floor (although Ti has to stop her mother before they have nowhere to eat), painting birds on walls, recreating space and playing with reality in apparently unbounded freedom. But other aspects had to be disturbing and humiliating, including the dirt in Ti’s clothes and having to pee in flasks because Siri would not let her into the bathroom, or having to contrive a way to get food from the nearby store because her mother has nothing to feed her.

I do not want to give away much more of the plot but point out what makes this film unique psychologically and artistically. It almost goes without saying that most film portrayals of madness have been uninformed and absurd, with a few exceptions including the antipsychiatric *Family Life*, by Loach, Polanski's Gothic portrayal in *Repulsion*, the intimate hell of family relations in Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly*, and the more subtle eeriness of Cronenberg's *Spider*. And none of the worthy films on madness I can think of has depicted being raised by a psychotic caretaker.

Siri is an unstable, dangerous, but also forlorn mother, haunted by eyes that observe her from pictures or dishes, and by a number of demons, including one that happens to look exactly like her own mother. She loves Ti to (almost) death and at time has insight and cries and mourns her inadequacies as a mother, particularly as her inner demons increase in presence, awfulness (missing noses or ears at time), and demands. Ti cannot see them but is an enormously resourceful girl, trying to convince her mother that butterfly nets can be used to capture them, or that blowing at them after eating licorice candy can make them disappear. But there is only so much she can do alone, even with the help of her imagined diving father, and she will require the assistance of caring adults, as heroes in fairy tales often do (Bettelheim, 1976).

Suzanne Osten is not exactly Ti, but knowing from afar her extraordinary imagination and creativity, I can see how she is both her own person and the daughter of Gerd/Siri. She has been able to direct the films her mother could not, and has been a staunch and honest defender of children, some of whom likely underwent serious hardships while growing up. Osten has written that as a child no one, including herself, understood what she had to contend with, and that it would have been good to know that she was not alone (Osten, 2016). It is thus ironic that she had to (successfully) battle official attempts in Sweden to restrict her film to those 15 years or older because the youngsters might be "disturbed" by the realistic portrayal of a psychotic parent in the film (the film has now an 11 years or older classification). Osten also previously had problems with Swedish official restriction attempts on her film *Bengbullan* (1996, also partly biographical), on the bullying of children by a disturbed teen, who is effectively neutralized by them at the end when they join forces (bullying can have devastating effects, see Gušić, Cardeña, Bengtsson, & Søndergaard, 2016). Keeping away those who would most benefit from Osten's films under the cover of "protecting" them strikes me as a hypocritical attempt to preserve a version of the world that young people themselves know is false. Not only does censorship fail, evidently, to change the terrible circumstances in which some children grow up, but it also perpetuates those circumstances by seeking to suppress rather than confront them. Much better, I think, is what *The Girl, the Mother and the Demons* does at the onset, alerting the viewers that although they will see scary things, things turned out alright since the narrator, Ti, obviously survived them - a similar strategy to that used in fairy tales (Bettelheim, 1976).

This is a film that has much to offer to psychological and developmental psychologists, not to mention children and teens (who, I hope, will go and discuss the film with their caretakers). As Osten has declared (2016), although only few children have psychotic parents, they may themselves have, or know someone who has, caretakers who battle other types of demons, including psychological or medical problems, poverty, addictions, and unresolved traumas. And of course youngsters have their own seemingly uncontrollable and damaging inner forces that need to be recognized and integrated (see, for example, Maurice Sendak's book, later made into a film, *Where the Wild Things Are*, reviewed in Cardeña & Reijman, 2010). *The Girl, the Mother and the Demons* shows the squalor and dread of Siri

and Ti's situation, while also offering poetic images of Ti's dreams and fantasies, and the veracity of the film is helped by the flawless acting of Esther Quigley (Ti) and Maria Sundbom (Siri), who are also daughter and mother in real life.

The film suggests that Suzanne Osten had to engage in emotional and instrumental parentification (i.e., taking a parental role with her mother; cf. Hooper, Marotta, & Lanthier, 2008) in the midst of terrifying circumstances, but she proved to be resilient. Those same circumstances have been seeds for her creative fantasy, while allowing her to guard her love for a special but damaged mother. Throughout her career as filmmaker and artistic director of a theatre company geared to children and youngsters, *Unga Klara*, she has maintained a now more appropriate, nurturing role. The Swedish government recently appointed her as the first Swedish Children's Film Ambassador. Thus, she will be able to continue to use more sophisticated versions of candy breaths and butterfly nets to vanquish Demons threatening children, and prevent the lyrics of *Padam, padam* from "drowning out (her) voice."

References

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