



Dickinson

<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>

g/s/i is an annual peer-reviewed journal which publishes research on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society by way of a variety of cultural productions, discourses, and practices spanning historical, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

Title: Film Review: *Nico, 1988* by Susanna Nicchiarelli

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 6 (2019)

Author: Rebecca Bauman

Publication date: August 2019

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, “Reviews”

Permalink: <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/?p=4357>

Keywords: Film Review

Copyright information

g/s/i is published online and is an open-access journal. All content, including multimedia files, is freely available without charge to the user or his/her institution and is published according to the Creative Commons License, which does not allow commercial use of published work or its manipulation in derivative forms. Content can be downloaded and cited as specified by the author/s. **However, the Editorial Board recommends providing the link to the article (not sharing the PDF) so that the author/s can receive credit for each access to his/her work, which is only published online.**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

Nico, 1988. Directed by Susanna Nicchiarelli. Italy/Belgium. Vivo Film with Rai Cinema and Tarantula, 2017. 93 minutes.

Susanna Nicchiarelli's third feature film *Nico, 1988* recounts the final years of Christa Päffgen (Trine Dyrholm), more commonly known as Nico, the German-born fashion model who became famous as a film actor, star of Andy Warhol's Factory and, briefly, singer with the rock band "The Velvet Underground." Yet the era in which Nico would become a symbol of the 1960s alternative art scene is only fleetingly referenced in Nicchiarelli's film, which instead takes place in the years between 1986 and 1988 and focuses upon Nico's solo career, her final bout with heroin addiction and eventual recovery, as well as her reunification with her troubled son Ari Boulogne (Sandor Funtek). These events are bracketed by scenes of the 49-year old Nico in Ibiza as she bids farewell to her son to leave for a bike ride, a moment that fans would know marked the day Nico suffered the brain hemorrhage that killed her. By focusing on this time period, Nicchiarelli moves her film away from the mythologizing of Nico's memory to instead present the woman on her own terms, making *Nico, 1988* a feminist restoration of female subjectivity.

The extratextual knowledge required to interpret the film reinforces the concept that Nico is a shared cultural idol who needs no introduction, a strategy that could confuse some viewers unfamiliar with her biography. The opening scene of the film depicts a few empty shots of the sea and a rustic white villa with sheets hanging in the breeze, before moving to the silhouette of Nico standing in her kitchen smoking. These moments are not accompanied by captions or any marker alluding to location or specific events. Through such techniques, the film assumes the viewer possesses full knowledge of Nico's life story. While intertitles alert viewers to the year, it is only through suggestion and context that we can fully understand the chronology or the significance of events, such as Nico's storming off the stage in Italy, the band's ill-fated attempts to hold a concert in Soviet-era Prague, or Nico's visit to her son Ari in an institution as he struggles with heroin addiction. Background information such as the paternity of her child is never clearly spelled out; when Nico asserts that Ari is "the exact copy of his father," the name of French actor Alain Delon, whose parents raised Ari, is never mentioned. Likewise, the fictional characters, such as Nico's manager and her bandmates who are her principal interlocutors in the film, are based on real people that viewers could recognize from such extradiegetic sources as the numerous books written by Nico's former musicians and lovers or the well-known documentary by Susanne Ofteringer, *Nico Icon* (1995).

Ofteringer's film is an important precedent for *Nico, 1988* as it is one of the few accounts of Nico's life and work to originate from a female author. However, since the majority of the interviews in the documentary are with men, their wistful reminiscences of the singer help to reiterate the romantic notion of Nico as a mysterious, intangible beauty who primarily served as a muse for male artists. It is here that *Nico, 1988* makes its most important contribution to the variety of projects surrounding Nico's memory. Nicchiarelli's screenplay and direction, as well as the camerawork of French cinematographer Crystel Fournier, provide a female-centered perspective of Nico that departs from the male voices that predominate in previous biographical interventions and instead envisions Nico as a woman searching to reconnect with her status as mother and as artist.

Nicchiarelli's passion for the project began soon after the release of her debut feature *Cosmonauta* (2009), but it was her later interview with Nico's son Ari that would inspire her to write the script for the film and focus the story upon the relationship between Nico and her son in her final years. The elimination of the Warhol years and the bohemian glamour encapsulated in Nico's

presence in films such as *La dolce vita*, Federico Fellini (1960) enables the film to break free of the constraints of depicting a woman whose fame originated with her physical beauty. The film's imperative to dispel the reduction of Nico to a muse becomes evident early on with a scene in a Manchester radio station. There, in a reenactment of a 1986 interview, an off-screen DJ refers to Nico as "Lou Reed's femme fatale" and Nico quickly cuts him short: "Don't call me that, I don't like it." This is the first signal that the film is emphasizing Nico's attempts to assert her own identity, which will be reiterated in the following scene when she admonishes her new manager Richard (John Gordon Sinclair) to stop calling her Nico: "Call me by my real name, Christa."

Perhaps the film's most potent departure from Nico's status as icon is the sheer physicality of the character as played by the Danish actor Trine Dyrholm. In addition to the shaggy dark hairstyle and loose-fitting black garments that are emblematic of Nico's look in her later years, Dyrholm provides Nico with an unyielding physical presence that bespeaks strength and solidity, a challenge to the kind of ethereal imagery prevalent in cultural memories of the singer. This forceful embodiment comes through in Dyrholm's singing, which avoids the breathy effects of some of Nico's performances in favor of a brutish and guttural evocation of her later sounds that demonstrates why Nico's solo work became such an important touchstone for punk and gothic rock bands. Nico's corporeality is further depicted throughout the film in images of her smoking, injecting heroin, vomiting, playing the harmonium, ferociously dancing, throwing objects in rage or, most memorably, polishing off a hearty dish of spaghetti with gusto. The latter scene is significant because it is one of the few moments in which we see Nico experience genuine pleasure, as she proclaims the enjoyment she now gets from eating opposed to the deprivation of her childhood in post-war Germany and the near-starvation she endured as a model.

Dyrholm's performance thus acts as a kind of corrective to the image of Nico as fragile, tragic beauty, a paradigm that is alluded to in the film through a persistent intercutting of flickering documentary footage featuring Warhol and young Nico. It is unclear whether the use of this footage represents Nico's own memories or if is a reminder to the viewer that their own memory retains the echo of those images even as they are viewing a very different version of the singer in the film. In contrast to the shaky archival imagery, *Nico, 1988* puts the 'real' body of Nico on display as neither an object of desire nor of scorn. In her conclusion, Nicchiarelli balances the palpable presence of the character by judiciously employing the trope of her absence. This trope becomes dramatized in the final scene, set on the last day of Nico's life, which is a rear view shot of Nico striding through the gates of her villa in Ibiza with her bicycle. Even after Nico has exited the frame the slow, continuous opening of the light blue doors suggests a sort of final transcendence for a life that consisted of continuous visibility masking a desire for escape. Nicchiarelli's gendered re-interpretation of Nico departs from the mythology and leaves us to ponder words the singer once used to assess her own life: "I have no regrets, except that I was born a woman instead of a man."

REBECCA BAUMAN

Fashion Institute of Technology, SUNY