

## **'Woman' in the Gothic Film: *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940).**

*Hitchcock, let's not forget, is, more than anyone else, the filmmaker of couples.*

Jean-Luc Godard<sup>1</sup>

### **The Gothic Film**

The production of *Rebecca*, the film that won an Oscar for "best film" in 1940, can be set in the framework of the industrial politics of the Studios, which promoted 'women's films', that is, films constructed from the *subjective* point of view of a woman protagonist and that were specially addressed to women's audiences.

The independent producer David O. Selznick, having released *Gone with the wind* (Victor Fleming) in 1939, a film based on the *bestseller* by North American writer and Pulitzer Prize (1937) Margaret Mitchell, bought the copy rights of *Rebecca* (1938), a novel by the English writer Daphne du Maurier. Hitchcock, having shot the movie that would be his last British film, *Jamaica inn* (1939), a film based on the first successful novel by this last writer (1936), moves to Hollywood to shoot *Titanic*. But, when he arrives there Selznick asks him to change project and shoot *Rebecca*, screenplayed by Robert E. Sherwood and Joan Harrison. En 1963 Hitchcock would also adapt for the screen another short novel by Daphne du Maurier: *The birds* (1963).

*Rebecca*, "a kind of fairy tale",<sup>2</sup> is considered to be the film that inaugurates "the Female Gothic". This genre, developed during the 1940s, is characterized not so much by a narrative outline shared by the films but by a number of motifs and iconographic elements borrowed from Gothic novels of the late eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> These include a large house

or castle, the sinister servants, motifs associated with the forces of Nature (storms, rough seas, fog), the phantasmatic presence of a woman from the past or her portrait, the investigation of a forbidden room or the narrative motif of being poisoned.

*Rebecca* is also considered to be the film that inaugurates the subcategory or cycle of films known as "the Gothic romance".<sup>4</sup> These films share the same narrative structure (whirlwind romance – wedding – trip to the Gothic house – research of the forbidden [room] – symbolic death – confrontation with the Law and recognition of the Other – happy ending) and can be considered to constitute a distinctive textual system.<sup>5</sup> Along with *Rebecca*, films included in

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Jean-Luc Godard, "El cine y su doble (*Falso culpable*, de Alfred Hitchcock)", in Antoine de Baecque (comp.), *La política de los autores. Manifiestos de una generación de cinéfilos* (Barcelona, Buenos Aires, México: Paidós. Comunicación. 145 Cine, 2003), pp. 44-54, p. 51.

2 Alfred Hitchcock in François Truffaut, *El cine según Hitchcock* (1966) (Madrid: Alianza editorial, 1990), p. 107.

3 For instance, *The castle of Otranto* (Horace Walpole, 1765), *The mysteries of Udolpho* (Ann Radcliffe, 1794), *The Italian* (Ann Radcliffe, 1796), *The monk* (Matthew Gregory Lewis, 1798), *The fall of the house of Usher* (Eggar Allan Poe, 1839), *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë, 1847), or *Wuthering Heights* (Emily Brontë, 1847). Films included within this genre are: *Jane Eyre* (Robert Stevenson, 1943), *The spiral staircase* (Robert Siodmak, 1945), *My name is Julia Ross* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1945), *Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946), or *Sleep, my love* (Douglas Sirk, 1948).

4 I borrow this definition from Diane Waldman, "At last I can tell it to someone! Feminine point of view and subjectivity in the Gothic Romance Film of the 1940s", *Cinema Journal* 23, 2 (1983), pp. 29-40.

5 A textual system is a logic, a principle of coherence that makes a single text comprehensible. Janet Bergstrom, "Enunciation and Sexual Difference", in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (NY and London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 159-85, p. 161.

this category are: *Suspicion* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1941), *Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944), *When strangers marry/Betrayed* (William Castle, 1944), *Dragonwyck* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1946), *Undercurrent* (Vincente Minnelli, 1946), *The two Mrs. Carrolls* (Peter Godfrey, 1947), *Love from a stranger* (Richard Whorf, 1947), *Secret beyond the door* (Fritz Lang, 1948), and *Caught* (Max Ophuls, 1949).

All Gothic romance films begin with a scenario of romantic passion loaded with fatality. In an 'unreal place' (a cliff in *Rebecca*, a bleak peak in *Suspicion*, a dark and menacing harbour in *Caught*) and/or in a foreign country (France in *Rebecca*, Italy in *Gaslight*, Mexico in *Secret beyond the door*, Scotland in *The two Mrs. Carrolls*), the protagonist meets 'the man of her dreams' and, in a short time (typically two weeks), marries him *in spite of/because of* he is "a stranger". The male characters' attractive/threatening difference is emphasized by the generic convention that either the character is a foreigner (Sergius Bauer in *Gaslight*, Manuel Cortez in *Love from a stranger*) or is played by an English actor (Laurence Olivier in *Rebecca*, Vincent Price in *Dragonwyck*, Michael Redgrave in *Secret beyond the door*). After 'the honeymoon', the couple moves to a castle, mansion or big house where the protagonist lives isolated. Here she begins to *suspect* that her husband is about to leave her, wishes to drive her mad or wants to kill her. After carrying out a research related to the topography of the house and/or to a 'traumatic past', the protagonist, who ends up *knowing too much*, is confronted with the limit of the symbolic Law (embodied by a judge, a detective, a lawyer, or a doctor). This confrontation causes a narrative shift from the scenario of drives (the initial erotic/exotic scenario from which the female characters *are driven* towards their own real/symbolic death) towards a

scenario of desire, in which the happy ending becomes possible.

Questioning the traditional reading of the Gothic heroine as a frigid or sexually unexperienced young woman, as a victim, or as a passive player in the gloomy romantic scenarios and criminal events that take place in the marital house,<sup>6</sup> this paper puts forward the argument that the Gothic romance displays the association between sexual passion and death from the point of view of 'woman', instead of doing it from the point of view of 'man', as is the case in 'romantic noir films'.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Gothic Romance**

As happens in *When strangers marry* and *Secret beyond the door*, *Rebecca* employs the narrative strategy of the 'confessional flashback', which is introduced by the protagonist's voice-over narration. The film also shares this strategy, along with a claustrophobic visual style (low-key lighting, noticeable camera angles, and unbalanced compositions), with some 'romantic noir films' such as *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944),

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<sup>6</sup> Diane Waldman, op.cit., p. 35; Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of sound and fury. Observations on the family melodrama" (1972), in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is where the heart is. Studies in melodrama and the woman's film* (London: BFI, 1987), pp. 43-69, p. 58; Mary Ann Doane, *The desire to desire: The woman's film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 136.

<sup>7</sup> I borrow this definition from Frank Krutnik, *In a lonely street. Film noir, genre, masculinity* (London and NY: Routledge, 1991), p. 86. For the connection between the two genres, see Mary Ann Doane, op.cit., p. 125; Murray Smith, "Film noir, the Female Gothic and *Deception*", *Wide Angle* 10, 1 (1988), pp. 62-75, p. 65; Marc Vernet, "Film noir on the edge of doom", in Joan Copjec (ed.), *Shades of noir* (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 1-32, p. 12; and Stephen Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London and NY: Routledge, 2000), p. 164.

*Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), *The postman always rings twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946), *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), or *Out of the past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947).

Conventionally, the 'confessional flashback' fulfills the function of establishing an association, a link, between loving passion and death, between Eros and Thanatos. This narrative strategy is used to designate that "internal enemy" (Freud's metaphorical expression for the drive) that, pushing us beyond pleasure and 'reality', produces a *passive* experience of inevitability, of evil destiny or of destruction.<sup>8</sup> It also announces a trajectory of transgression through which the main character either learns something or else dies.<sup>9</sup>

The voice-over, along with the *subjective* camera movement that drives us towards the ruins of Manderley, emphasize the narrative action of the protagonist: Joan Fontaine's voice-over introduces us into the flashback that constitutes the rest of the film.<sup>10</sup> However, in a similar way to the male protagonist of romantic noir films, the Gothic protagonist confesses, through her voice-over, to behave in an unwilling transgressive way: "Last night I dreamt I

<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud, "An Outline of Psychoanalysis" (1940 [1938]), in *Historical and Expository Works on Psychoanalysis*, vol. 15. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 371-443, p. 433; and "Beyond the pleasure principle" (1919-1920 [1920]), *Papers on metapsychology*, vol. 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 269-368.

<sup>9</sup> Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in film: memory and history* (NY and London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 172-75 y p. 143. See also Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible storytellers. Voice-over narration in American fiction film* (Berkeley, LA and London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 54.

<sup>10</sup> "In the case of the flashback, the film insists on its 'self-construction'. It designates a narrator, a character to whom it delegates the power to speak, and displays this individual's actions insofar as the narrator directly addresses a viewer following the intrigue". Francesco Casetti, *Inside the gaze: the fiction film and its spectator* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 93.

went to Manderley again. It seemed to me I stood by the iron gate leading to the drive, and for a while I could not enter. For the way was barred to me. Then, like all dreamers, I was possessed of a sudden with supernatural powers and passed like a spirit through the barrier before me". Besides, as happens in *Double Indemnity*, "the destiny of the voice-over seems not to be exhausted by its function as message. An excess of pleasure, a private enjoyment, seems to adhere in the act of speaking as such".<sup>11</sup> The protagonist's voice-over indeed conveys the untameable wild passion that governs her narration: "the drive wound away in front of me, twisting and turning as it had always done, but as I advanced I was aware that a change had come upon it. Nature had come into her own again and, little by little, had encroached upon the drive with long, tenacious fingers. On and on wound the poor thread that had once been our drive".

The oneiric flashback, throughout which the woman narrator tells us about her *walk with love and death* ("sometimes, in my dreams, I do go back to the strange days of my life which began for me in the south of France"), begins with a dissolve from a shot of Manderley to a long shot of a rough sea (a conventional metaphor to designate Nature's uncontrollable forces). Then, a prototypical scene of *love at first sight* follows. From the sea the camera pans up to show a long shot of Maxim about to commit suicide throwing himself off the cliff (figure 1). The protagonist, off screen, shouts at him: "No! Stop!". Then, a long shot of the two of them on the country path is shown, while we hear soft music (figure 2). Cut to a medium shot of Joan Fontaine looking at Maxim, off screen (figure 3). Her instantaneous falling in love with this man, noticeably

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<sup>11</sup> Joan Copjec, "The phenomenal nonphenomenal: private space in *film noir*", in Joan Copjec (ed.), op.cit., pp. 167-97, p. 186.

older than she is, is signified through a series of elements: her failed attempt to say something, the breeze that, in a sensual fashion, tears at her hair, and the way in which she stares at Maxim (“What are you staring at?”, he reproaches her). But, at the same time, Maxim moves left, approaching her (figure 4). Then, a short medium shot of her shows her approaching him as well (figure 5). After this, ‘a violent meeting’ between the two protagonists is produced because in the next shot – which, according to the logic of classical narrative, is an establishing long shot – they are suddenly much more closer of what we would have expected according to their distance in the initial establishing shot (figure 6).

It should be noted that this *magnetized* meeting is ‘causally motivated’. It is the woman’s gaze what causes Maxim’s abrupt approach towards her. This type of desiring scenario is reproduced in their second meeting, when Mrs. Van Hopper (the protagonist’s employer) sees Maxim entering the Princesse Hotel and calls her companion’s attention (figure 7). After an American countershot of Maxim returning his look back at the *feminine* couple (figure 8), a short medium shot of the protagonist shows her gazing at Maxim (off screen), while a romantic music, which will be the main couple’s musical theme during the rest of the film, can be heard on the soundtrack (figure 9). The countershot (from the protagonist’s *subjective* point of view) is a short medium shot of a *desirable* Maxim - Maxim is formally dressed, hair smarmed down, his look is seductive (figure 10) – who appears again to be *too close* (figure 11).

The series of motifs that define the romance in Monte Carlo – ‘violent death’ (Maxim is about to committ suicide), ‘triangular structure’ (Maxim has not overcome the death of his first wife, Rebecca), and ‘interclass marriage’ (Maxim

is an aristocrat) – picture the Gothic heroine as a woman who is too passionate, who is touched “by a desire to transgress the law”<sup>12</sup> (she gets involved in a socially transgressive romance with “a broken man”) and who is also dangerously ambitious. All this clearly relates her to the stereotype of the *femme fatale*.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that the Gothic protagonist is depicted as ambitious does not necessarily mean that she is portrayed as moved by a desire such as ‘to marry a millionaire’ (in *Secret beyond the door*, *Gaslight*, *Love from a stranger*, and *The two Mrs. Carrolls*, the female protagonist is the one who is rich). More exactly, the Gothic protagonist is portrayed as ambitious because she is portrayed as a woman who is carried away by a powerful wish of the erotic type, such as ‘to marry a great lover’.<sup>14</sup> This wish is what motivates her “disavowal” of the *dark side* of the romance into which she actively throws herself in. Disavowal (I know ... but all the same ...), the mechanism that characterizes the narrative logic of the Gothic romance and, therefore, the mechanism that constitutes the core of the portrayal of the heroine, is conveyed by the films via a splitting between between ‘the enounced’ and ‘the enunciation’.<sup>15</sup> For instance, while Mrs. de Winter insists that the flowers that Maxim buys for her

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<sup>12</sup> See Elizabeth Cowie’s analysis of *Secret beyond the door* in “Film noir and women”, in Joan Copjec (ed.), op.cit., pp. 121-166, p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> As has been pointed out by Marc Vernet, spectators always relate stars, whose image is carefully constructed by the Studios, with a character type. Therefore, the fact that both groups of films share stars - Barbara Stanwyck (*The two Mrs. Carrolls/Double Indemnity*), Joan Bennett (Fritz Lang’s *Secret beyond the door*, *The woman in the window* [1944] and *Scarlet Street*, [1945]), or Gene Tierney (*Dragonwyck*, *Laura*, or *Leave her to heaven* [John M. Stahl, 1945]) – also justifies this identification between the two types of female characters. Marc Vernet, op.cit., pp. 23-4.



after their sudden wedding are “lovely”, the bunch is represented as asphyxiating (figure 12).

The fact that the protagonist is moved by transgression is apparent once we notice that her romantic interest in Maxim increases after a ‘nightmare’ (figure 13) throughout which Mrs. Van Hopper’s voice-over keeps repeating that Maxim is *the broken man of [by] the beautiful and adored Rebecca Hildreth*. This nightmare, this desiring representation of Maxim as Rebecca’s man, that is, as a man who is ‘forbidden’,<sup>16</sup> precedes three explicit transgressive romantic actions that are undertaken by the unnamed character played by Joan Fontaine. Instead of attending tennis lessons, she goes for a ride with Maxim in his convertible (figure 14). Later that evening, she dances a waltz with him. In

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<sup>14</sup> Note that star Charles Boyer (*Gaslight*) was described as “the screen’s ‘great lover’” by MGM.

<sup>15</sup> I consider “disavowal” to be a structural and structuring mechanism in the Gothic romance film, instead of ambiguity between two possible interpretations of events (as argued by Thomas Elsaesser and Murray Smith) or paranoia (as argued by Tania Modleski and Mary Ann Doane). Thomas Elsaesser, op.cit., p. 58; Tania Modleski, “The female uncanny: Gothic novels for women”, in *Loving with a vengeance. Mass-produced fantasies for women* (NY and London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 59-84, p. 60-2; Mary Ann Doane, op.cit., p. 155; and Murray Smith, *Engaging characters. Fiction, emotion, and the cinema* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 145.

<sup>16</sup> Similarly to the *femme fatale*, who is a ‘forbidden woman’ because the hero is married (*The woman in the window*) and/or because she is engaged to or married to another man (*The woman in the window*, *Double Indemnity*, *Out of the past*, *The postman always rings twice*, *Gilda*), the *Gothic lover* is a ‘forbidden man’ because he is married or still tied to another woman (*Rebecca*, *Secret beyond the door*, *The two Mrs. Carrolls*, *Dragonwyck*, and *Gaslight*) and/or because the woman protagonist is married to or engaged to another man (*Secret beyond the door*, *Caught*, *Love from a Stranger*, *The two Mrs. Carrolls*).

the Gothic romance, 'the waltz' represents a narcissistic-fusional dance (in *Rebecca* the dance begins with the couple reflected in a pond) and 'dancing the waltz' not only represents a 'scenario of sexual ecstasy' (figure 15)<sup>17</sup> but also represents a scenario that is causally linked to a 'criminal scenario' (see also *Suspicion* and, moreover, *Dragonwyck*). Finally, in an anti-*Cinderella* style (after 12 in the afternoon), the protagonist enters Maxim's hotel bedroom to say goodbye to him and, in passing, she declares her excessive loving passion: "I love you most dreadfully".

The fact that the meeting between the protagonists is placed in the same spot of Monte Carlo where Rebecca told Maxim "everything about her, everything" four days after their wedding (that is, during their honeymoon) and, therefore, in the same spot where the young Maxim realized that his marriage was a "rotten fraud" (as we find out later, in the sequence at the 'boat house'), also retroactively defines *Rebecca* as a romantic story that begins with a scenario that is both perverse (the protagonist is attracted by the suffocating character of a father-daughter type of relationship)<sup>18</sup> and bisexual: the protagonist is portrayed as a young woman moved by a polymorphic desire which has two objects: (1) Maxim, the *ill-treated man who knows too much* about Rebecca; and (2) Rebecca, the *femme fatale*, the beautiful and glamorous woman with a boundless ambition, and with a wild and incestuous sexuality, whose place the protagonist openly declares she wishes to occupy: "Oh, I wish I were a woman

<sup>17</sup> It can be said that the waltz "functions as the phantasmatic screen obfuscating the Real of the sexual act". Slavoj Žižek, *The plague of fantasies* (London and NY: Verso, 1997), p. 182.

<sup>18</sup> In a shaded scene by the sea, the young woman, who declares having been impressed when she saw a picture of Manderley on a postcard while she was on a trip in Cornwall with her father, tells Maxim that, despite undercurrents, she is not afraid of drowning - way in which Rebecca died, as she finds out in the next sequence via Mrs. Van Hopper.

of 36 dressed in black satin with a string of pearls”.

### **In the Gothic house**

In most works dedicated to the female Gothic, it has been interpreted that once the protagonists arrive at the Gothic house, the heroine begins to be portrayed as a wife who is afraid of her husband or as a woman who feels insecure regarding her loving feelings.<sup>19</sup>

It is true that the *mise-en-scène* in the Gothic house (the big hall, or the huge doors and fireplaces [figure 16]) emphasizes the smallness, the nervousness, and, moreover, the ignorance of the recently married woman. The protagonist of *Rebecca* does not know anything about her everyday life in Manderley: she is to have breakfast alone, in the morning she has to go to ‘the morning room’ and not to ‘the library’ (where the fire place is out), and in ‘the morning room’ she has to take care of her mail and to approve the daily menu. But most crucially, what the protagonist *does not know* is that *she is Mrs. de Winter*: “Mrs. de Winter has been dead for a year”, she says when answering the internal telephone of the mansion. However, there is nothing in the film that indicates that in Manderley the out-of-place wife is afraid of her husband (although she does recognize that is afraid of the housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers). Neither are there signs that in Manderley the protagonist begins to doubt about her love towards Maxim. This is why I find to be more accurate the reading that

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<sup>19</sup> Diane Waldman, *op.cit.*, p. 29; Mary Ann Doane, *op.cit.*, p. 123; Murray Smith, *op.cit.*, p. 64; Tania Modleski, *The women who knew too much. Hitchcock and feminist theory* (NY and London: Methuen, 1988), p. 57. It cannot be disregarded that Gothic female characters are portrayed as strong, courageous, and brave women from the beginning of the films.

considers that the woman in the Gothic house, more than being an insecure or frightened wife, is an “anxious wife”.<sup>20</sup>

The third narrative segment of the film begins with a long shot of Manderley. This shot rhymes with the shot of the mansion from the *overwhelmed* point of view of the protagonist when Maxim drives her there. The protagonists' arrival at Manderley by car is represented from her *subjective* point of view as the fatal version of the two previous romantic drives: low-key lighting, dramatic music, stormy weather (figure 17). This third narrative segment is characterized by the constant presence of “the shadow of Rebecca” as well as by the protagonist's demoniacal realization of Mrs. Van Hopper's pre-marital premonition: “you certainly have your work cut out for you as mistress of Manderley. To be perfectly frank with you, my dear, I can't see you doing it. You haven't the experience, you haven't the *faintest* idea of what it means to be a great lady”. The realization of this fatal destiny, the impossibility of taking Rebecca's place (“every day I realize the things that she had and that I lack: beauty and wit and intelligence and all the things that are so important in a woman”), is fully represented during the sequence in which the married couple attempts to see the super-8 film of their elided ‘honeymoon’ in one of the rooms of the castle. This is the sequence that condenses the portrayal of the protagonist as ‘an anxious wife’, that is, as a woman who embodies the “terrible certainty”<sup>21</sup> (figure

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<sup>20</sup> Diane Waldman, op.cit., p. 30; and John Fletcher, “Primal scenes and the Female Gothic: *Rebecca* and *Gaslight*”, in *Screen* 36, 4 (1995), pp. 341-71, p. 341. Whereas fear is a self-preserving emotion that pushes the subject to flee from a dangerous external object, anxiety is a feeling of “unsatisfaction” that warns the subject about an internal “state of *danger*” related to the forthcoming loss of a love object. See, Sigmund Freud, “Inhibición, síntoma y angustia” (1925 [1926]), en *Obras completas*, tomo VIII, Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 1974, pp. 2833-2883, p. 2860, p. 2863 y p. 2866.

18) that the unhappy and difficult man she loves, not only does love her but is also about to leave her.<sup>22</sup>

In this sequence, in which Maxim is completely indifferent to his wife's change of *look* - her skirt, cardigan, and loose hair are substituted by a black evening gown (copied from a fashion magazine called 'Beauty'), a string of pearls, and a hair-do - the impossibility of reaching a complete romantic satisfaction with Maxim is displayed.<sup>23</sup> Firstly, her desiring speech - "Oh, I wish our honeymoon could have lasted for ever, Maxim!" - *causes* the honeymoon film literally *to get burnt*. Secondly, the protagonist confesses being guilty of having broken a valuable china cupid into pieces. And thirdly, after having not recognized herself as an object of desire in Maxim's look at her ("Don't look at me like that!", she implores him),<sup>24</sup> she declares in distress: "Our marriage is a success, isn't it?. A great success? We're happy, aren't we?. Terribly happy! [Maxim moves away from her]. If you don't think we are happy, it would be much better if you didn't pretend. I'll go away. Why don't you answer me?".

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<sup>21</sup> Jacques Lacan, *El seminario 10. La angustia* (1962-1963) (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2006), p. 88.

<sup>22</sup> In *Suspicion* (the scene in which Lina is cutting the hedge in the garden) and in *Secret beyond the door* (the scene in which Celia has a nightmare in La Hacienda Dos Encantos during her honeymoon), the Gothic husband also becomes an explicit cause of anxiety for the protagonist in the exact moment in which she is certain that he does love her.

<sup>23</sup> Romance based on the narcissistic belief that a complete union with the other is possible is one of the elements that relate Gothic romances with those of the *noir* genre in which the *femme fatale* promises 'paradise' (*Double Indemnity*, *The postman always rings twice*, *Out of the past*).

<sup>24</sup> According to Jacques Lacan, anxiety is a "signal" that warns the subject the "the Other's desire" interrogates her/him "not as an object" but "as the cause of such desire". Jacques Lacan, op.cit., p. 167.

And, precisely, the fourth narrative segment of the film begins with Maxim's departure: a detailed shot of Maxim's hand-written note informs us that he has gone to London on a business trip. This departure, which illustrates the Gothic husband's typical disappearance, especially at night,<sup>25</sup> could be understood as a metonymical motif for a scenario of masculine impotence.<sup>26</sup> However, in order to read the narrative function of Maxim's action we need to bear in mind the context in which this action takes place. On the one hand, as has been noted, Maxim's trip follows the sequence that condenses the protagonist's portrayal as 'an anxious wife': she is terribly certain that Maxim loves her/is about to leave her. On the other hand, Maxim's trip comes before-motivates the sequence in which the protagonist, who *wishes to know* everything about Rebecca ("What was Rebecca really like?"), enters, secretly followed by Mrs. Danvers, 'the forbidden bedroom' of the West wing. It can be argued, then, that the narrative motif of 'the man's departure/disappearance' from the marital house is related not to the portrayal of the man's sexuality but to the portrayal of the women's. In fact, when Mrs. de Winter and the housekeeper enter Rebecca's bedroom, they *recreate the missing soft body* of Maxim's first wife (figure 19) and they do so in a mode that is passionate (as indicated by the music), narcissistic (as indicated by the mirrors that flood Rebecca's bedroom), and paranoid: Mrs. Danvers

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<sup>25</sup> Once the couple settles in the marital house, the husband goes on a trip (*Rebecca*, *Secret beyond the door*, *When strangers marry*, *Undercurrent*), works until very late (*Gaslight*, *Caught*) or else closes himself up in a room of the house (*The two Mrs. Carrolls*, *Dragonwyck*, and *Love from a stranger*).

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Stanley Cavell's analysis of *Gaslight*, in "Naughty orators: negation of voice in *Gaslight*", in *Contesting tears. The Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 47-78, p. 56.

effectively harasses the protagonist with the delirious idea that the dead Rebecca comes back and “watches you and Mr. de Winter together” (figure 20). The narrative motif of ‘the man’s departure/disappearance’ from the marital house, therefore, more than being a motif that signifies a scenario of male impotence is a motif that gives way to the *mise-en-scène* of the intense homosexual tied between the three female characters (figure 21).<sup>27</sup> This reading (‘Maxim’s trip’ signifies the displacement of a heterosexual scenario by a homosexual scenario) is further sustained by the narrative fact that Maxim returns to Manderley at the exact moment in which Joan Fontaine’s character terminates her *desiring* intrigue with the past Mrs. de Winter: after the visit to Rebecca’s bedroom, she tells Mrs. Danvers to get rid of all the things from Rebecca’s desk because, she states bluntly, “I am Mrs. de Winter now”.<sup>28</sup>

It is after entering ‘the forbidden place’ within the topography of the house, that the protagonist assumes that *she is in Rebecca’s place* not only on the cliff of Monte Carlo (where she saw Maxim for the first time) but also in Manderley.<sup>29</sup> This narrative shift – the protagonist recognizes she is occupying the Other woman’s place - moves the heroine’s research action forward from the question of the Other woman/‘the father’<sup>30</sup> both to *the problem* of ‘femininity as a masquerade’ and to *the problem* of ‘man’. Having difficulties drawing a *feminine* fancy dress for the ball she insists on organizing (she draws a medieval knight), we see the protagonist following Mrs. Danvers’s advice to copy *the image* from the portrait of Caroline de Winter, Maxim’s ancestor (figure 22).<sup>31</sup> This motif of “the portrait of a woman from the past” (also present in *Gaslight* and *Dragonwyck*) represents, in a disguised way, the protagonist’s sexual interest both in a dead woman and in a violent man.<sup>32</sup> By wearing Caroline de Winter’s

evening gown, as Rebecca also did, the protagonist is depicted (from the point of view of the intradiegetic spectators: Maxim and his sister Beatrice) as a woman who, more than simply occupying the Other woman's place, is possessed by the phantom of the sophisticated first wife. By wearing Caroline de Winter's evening gown, Mrs. de Winter is also depicted (from our point of view, extradiegetic spectators) as a woman who is going to keep suffering Maxim's blind violence, insofar as she seems to be damned to unwillingly repeat the mournful and fatal story of the woman from the past.<sup>33</sup>

However, contrary to what we could expect, Maxim's violent response (he covers his eyes while shouts at her: "What the devil you think you are doing? ... What are you standing there for? Didn't you hear what I said?") [that she change

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<sup>27</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Un caso de paranoia contrario a la teoría psicoanalítica" (1915), en *Obras completas*, tomo VI, Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 1972, pp. 2010-2016, p. 2012. Whereas Teresa de Lauretis only considers the homosexual connotations of the relationship between Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers, Patricia White defines the relationship between the protagonist and Rebecca as "homoerotic". This is in line with the most puritan-repressive tradition of *queer* theory, which is characterized by the reduction of homosexual desire to sexual relations between gays or lesbians. Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice doesn't. Feminism, semiotics, cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 152; Patricia White, "Female spectator, lesbian specter: *The haunting*" (1992), in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in film noir. New edition* (London: BFI, 1998), pp. 130-150; and Richard Dyer, "Resistance through charisma: Rita Hayworth and *Gilda*" (1978), in *Idem*, pp. 115-122, p. 115.

<sup>28</sup> According to Freud, it is heterosexuality (and not homosexuality) that constitutes "a problem" because the originary tie to one's sex (psychoanalytic research has confirmed that every individual has made a homosexual choice of object in his/her unconscious) offers great opposition to adopt as love object an individual of the opposite sex. Sigmund Freud, *op.cit.* (1915), p. 2013; and "Tres ensayos para una teoría sexual" (1905), en *Obras completas*, tomo IV, Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 1972, pp. 1169-1237, note n. 637 (ad. 1915), p. 1178.



her clothes]) does not lead the protagonist to choose acting in “her own good” (supposedly going to her guest bedroom and change her clothes, “an illusory freedom, since the good determines the choice, not the other way around”) but leads her ‘to choose’ determining herself as ‘a subject of desire’ “acting contrary to its own good - even to the point of bringing about its own death”.<sup>34</sup> The protagonist, still dressed as Caroline de Winter, follows the woman who “simply adored” Rebecca (Mrs. Danvers) to the bedroom of the West wing. There she *lets herself fall over* Rebecca’s empty bed, *listens to the voice of her murderous shadow*, Mrs. Danvers (figure 23), and, finally, confronts the Real, that “impenetrable dark spot” that functions as an “internal limit” to her *excessive* epistemological action:<sup>35</sup> “Why don’t you go? Why don’t you leave Manderley? He doesn’t need you. He’s got his memories. He doesn’t love you. He wants to be alone again with her. You’ve nothing to stay for. You’ve nothing to live for

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<sup>29</sup> The heroine breaks up her homosexual relationship via a “regression” to narcissism, through which the homosexual choice of love object is substituted by an identification with this object. Idem, op.cit. (1915), p. 2014.

<sup>30</sup> The plot, the conflict, that displays *Rebecca*, then goes beyond the Oedipus Complex and, therefore, it goes beyond the protagonist’s “overidentification” with the Other woman (the mother). Sigmund Freud, “Varios tipos de carácter descubiertos en la labor analítica” (1916), en op.cit., tomo VII, pp. 2413-2428, p. 2426; Tania Modleski, op.cit. (1988), p. 44.

<sup>31</sup> A problematic relationship with ‘the masquerade of femininity’ also defines the protagonists of *Suspicion* (see Joan Fontaine’s outfit in the first sequence of the film), *Caught* (at the beginning of the film, Leonora attends a School to learn how to behave like a woman), and *Undercurrent* (this film relies on the sexually ambiguous image of Katherine Hepburn to convey the protagonist’s insecurity regarding her femininity).

<sup>32</sup> See Tzvetan Todorov, *The fantastic. A structural approach to a literary genre* (1939), (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 136.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Ann Doane, op.cit., p. 142.

really, have you? Look down there [figure 24]. It's easy, isn't it?, Why don't you? Why don't you? [figure 25]<sup>36</sup> Go on! Go on! Don't be afraid!".

After discovering that *the secret beyond the door* of Rebecca's bedroom "leads, in the end, to nothing other than the original *void*",<sup>37</sup> Rebecca's body returns, as indicated by the sound *off* (the flares, the ships' hooters). This sound, which rhymes with the horn that, after the first visit to Rebecca's bedroom, announces Maxim's return from his trip to London, 'wakes the protagonist up' from her spell. After looking at Mrs. Danvers reproachfully, the protagonist moves out of frame. Then, a close-up of the housekeeper dissolves into a shot of a clock pointing the time. This shot, associated with Maxim's 'farewell' in Monte Carlo and with Mrs. Danver's 'welcome' in Manderley, designates a new change of object (from Mrs. Danvers/Rebecca back to Maxim) and a one-day ellipsis.

Between "the return of Rebecca's boat from the bottom of the sea" and the protagonist's going through the fog towards 'the boat house' while the sea beats on the rocks, a '*bittermoon*' goes by. This traumatic-elided time, which designates "a certain encounter with the real", a certain structural and structuring emptiness that cannot be *integrated* by the symbolic reality (the causal logic) created by the narrative, is a violent sign of textual rupture from where meaning originates.<sup>38</sup> After a "suicidal moment", the protagonist abandons a 'false position' (spellbound by Rebecca "like everybody else") to

<sup>34</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read my desire. Lacan against the historicists* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1995), p. 96.

<sup>35</sup> Slavoj Žižek, op.cit., p. 161.

<sup>36</sup> The Real "cannot be positively *signified*; it can only be *shown*, in a negative gesture, as the inherent failure of symbolization", Slavoj Žižek, op.cit., p. 217.

<sup>37</sup> Thierry Kuntzel, "The Film-Work, 2", *Camera obscura. A journal of feminism and film theory*, 5 (1980), pp. 6-69, p. 10.

assume an 'authentic position'.<sup>39</sup> At the boat house, she recognizes her desire for a *Bluebeard* (apart from 'murdering' Rebecca,<sup>40</sup> Maxim buried the body of "an unknown woman"/*another unnamed woman*, in the family crypt) as well as her own involvement in Rebecca's 'murdering'. This is explicit in the novel: "I had listened to his story, and part of me went with him like a shadow in his tracks. I too had killed Rebecca, I too had sunk the boat there in the bay ...".<sup>41</sup>

It is after this scenario in which the death drive is recognized that the truthful happy end, in opposition to 'the wedding' (false happy ending; it takes place *too soon*), becomes possible. When during 'the trial' for Rebecca's death, Maxim is interrogated ("Were relations between you and the late Mrs. de Winter perfectly happy?"), the present Mrs. de Winter does not wait until Maxim "loses his temper" and self-accuses himself with a violent reaction but embraces the death drive.<sup>42</sup> Assuming her fatal destiny (that she will never have "the *faintest* idea of what it means to be a great lady"), she *faints* and, with her fainting, she 'rescues' Maxim from being put into prison, "Rebecca loses" and 'true love' wins. This truthful love is a *love at second sight* ("Oh, it's gone for ever! That funny, young, lost look I loved. It will never come back. I killed that when I told you about Rebecca. It's gone! In a few hours you've grown so much older ...!"),

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<sup>38</sup> Jesús González Requena, *Clásico, manierista, postclásico. Los modos del relato en el cine de Hollywood* (Valladolid: Castilla ediciones, 2006), pp. 263-4; Joan Copjec, op.cit. (1995), pp. 125-6; Thierry Kuntzel, op.cit., p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Slavoj Žižek, op.cit., p. 148 and p. 161.

<sup>40</sup> In the novel, Rebecca's murder is not disguised as an accident. See, Alison Light, "'Returning to Manderley'- romance fiction, female sexuality and class", in *Feminist review*, 16 (1984), pp. 7-24, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> Idem, p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> See, Slavoj Žižek, op.cit., p. 224.

it is a love opposed to the love of the 'honeymoon' (figures 26 and 27), and it is a love that makes Maxim de Winter be just in time to 'subject' his wife before the flames of their renewed passion (figure 28).<sup>43</sup>

**“Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again”.**

The core of the narrative journey of the protagonist of *Rebecca* – a movement from a passionate and anxious scenario (in which the Other is seen as an equal, as a fellow creature) to a passionate and happy one (in which the Other is recognized as singularly different) – takes place in an uncanny (*unheimlich*) topos: Manderley, a “secretive and silent” mansion made of “staring walls”, occupies the place of the familiar home that ought to have remained lost but has been found again.<sup>44</sup>

However, the narrative trajectory of the heroine inside this domestic space is not an uncanny trajectory but a symbolic one.<sup>45</sup> the narration does not “keep us in the dark for a long time about the precise nature of the presuppositions” on which the fictional world is based,<sup>46</sup> but only leaves us *in suspense* regarding *how* shall we reach the generic ‘happy ending’. This ending is not characterized by the formation of ‘a couple’ but rather by the heroine’s act of leaving the original marital house (see also *Dragonwyck* or *The two Mrs. Carrolls*). Indeed,

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<sup>43</sup> For the symbolic connection between fire and libidinal desires, see Sigmund Freud, “The acquisition and control of fire” (1931 [1932]), in *The origins of religion*, vol. 13. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 225-235, p. 232.

<sup>44</sup> See Jacques Lacan, op.cit., p. 52; and Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919), in *Art and literature*, vol. 14 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 339-376, p. 345.

<sup>45</sup> See Jesús González Requena, “Casablanca. El film clásico”, in *Archivos de la Filmoteca*, nº 14, June, 1993, pp. 89-105.

<sup>46</sup> Sigmund Freud, op.cit. (1919), p. 374.

at the end of the *regressive* walk through which the narrator of *Rebecca* introduces us into her oneiric story, the narration already foretells that the ending will not be so much about the constitution of the romantic couple as about the due loss of the ancestral family home. The narration does so via the protagonist's voice-over ("we can never go back to Manderley again. That much is certain") as well as by placing Manderley as a heterogeneous space, as "a space which exhibits itself with an explicit attention", which "appears, in a word, *expropriated*".<sup>47</sup>

This distance between the level of the narrated (the main part of the story takes place in an uncanny topography) and the level of the narration (the story is a symbolic one and, therefore, we do not experience an uncanny feeling<sup>48</sup>) has personal and political implications at the level of spectatorship. Whereas an uncanny narrative trajectory would introduce us into the circular-repetitive time of *jouissance* (this would support the victimist idea that most women's films from the 1930s and 1940s give "the impression of a ceaseless returning to a prior state"<sup>49</sup>), the symbolic trajectory of the 'Gothic romance' introduces us, on the contrary, into the anxious-pleasurable time of suspense.<sup>50</sup> The time of suspense is not the frozen-paralyzed time of anxiety but the burning time of desire, "a time that perforce we must historically situate as progressive"<sup>51</sup> because the

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<sup>47</sup> Francesco Casetti, op.cit., p. 66.

<sup>48</sup> Sigmund Freud, op.cit. (1919), pp. 375-376.

<sup>49</sup> Tania Modleski, "Time and desire in the woman's film" (1984\*), in Christine Gledhill (ed.), op.cit., pp. 326-338, p. 330.

<sup>50</sup> See Ann B. Snitow, "Mass market romance: pornography for women is different", in Ann Snitow, Ann B; Stansell, Christine and Thompson, Sharon (eds.), *Desire. The politics of sexuality* (London: Virago Press, 1984), pp. 258-275, p. 263.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Lacan, op.cit., p. 63.

narrative structure of *Rebecca* is linear and the end is significantly different from the beginning. Therefore, what the 'Gothic romance' teaches us is not the duty of assuming "an expectation destined to remain eternally unfulfilled"<sup>52</sup> but rather it teaches us the pleasure of giving out our hand to an Other from whom we have first received "the glove" of anxiety (*Gaslight*), and thanks to whom we finally have "a long way to go" (*Secret beyond the door*).

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Tania Modleski, op.cit. (1984\*), p. 331.