

## **'Take this Waltz'. The Representation of Sexuality in 1940s Hollywood Cinema.**

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The aim of this paper is to show that in 1940s Hollywood cinema romantic music or lyrical rhythms are not asexual. Contrary to what has been traditionally argued, they play a crucial role in the portrayal of passionate sexuality. I will firstly look at the way romantic film noir films use romantic music in order to convey excessive sexual desire or a transgressive type of passion in relation to both male and female characters. Secondly, I will focus on two Gothic romance films, *Suspicion* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1942) and *Dragonwyck* (Manckiewicz, 1947), in order to argue that romantic music (waltz) 'speaks' the female characters' excessive and transgressive position of desire in relation to the seductive male characters. By focusing on the function romantic music fulfils in romantic film noir films and Gothic romance films, I am going to argue that they both display the same fantasy scenario.

I take the label 'romantic film noir films' from Frank Krutnik to refer to those crime films from the 1940s in which the difficult relationships between men and women are dealt in a story which links eroticism and death. Films such as *Double Indemnity*, *Laura*, *Gilda*, *Criss Cross*, *The Postman always rings twice* or *Out of the Past*. On the other hand, the Gothic romance film is a cycle of films from the *Female Gothic*. These films depart from the romantic scenario of 'marrying the man of one's dreams/a stranger' and they move into a threatening scenario in which the protagonist begins to suspect that her husband does not love her (as in *Dragonwyck*, *Gaslight*, *When Strangers Marry*, *Caught*, *Rebecca*) or even that her husband wants to kill her (as in *The Two Mrs Carrolls*, *Suspicion*, *Secret Beyond the Door*, *Undercurrent*, *Love from a Stranger*).

One can argue that Gothic romance films, by linking eroticism and death in relation to the sexual other, display the same initial fantasy scenario as romantic film noir films. This scenario can be understood in terms of the psychoanalytic concept of the erotic-death drives. In psychoanalytic theory it is argued that there are two possible positions in relation to the sexual other. The subject can relate to the other either according to the logic of desire or the (non)logic of the erotic-death drives. Whereas within the symbolic realm of desire the subject seeks to love and be loved by the Other, within the realm of the drives the subject is in the excessive position of *jouissance* and, therefore, seeks to reach an impossible plenitude through the other, a plenitude that leads to destruction. That is to say the subject experiences an intense and all-consuming passion that pushes him/her to death.

Film noir films construct a scenario that has been understood in terms of the drives. Given that these films portray a male character who seeks to fulfil his erotic and ambitious wishes through a female character, the *femme fatale*, it can be argued that the films portray the noir protagonist as a character who is in the excessive and dangerous position of *jouissance*. This position is partly constructed through the use of music. Romantic music or lyrical rhythms often announce and charge erotically the *femme fatale*'s glamorous entry into scene, as can be exemplified with this clip from *Criss Cross*. Clip from *Criss Cross*.

However, romantic types of music not only convey the male character's passionate and dangerous attraction towards the *femme fatale* but also the *femme fatale*'s own position of *jouissance*, that is, her own excessive and transgressive attraction towards a male character. The *femme fatale* is depicted as wildly sexual not only through the use of jazz, frantic or exotic types of music, as has been argued, but also

through romantic music. For instance, in *Born to Kill* Helen's destructive and 'forbidden' sexual attraction to Sam is depicted in a scene in which she looks at a picture of Sam- her step-sister's husband- while an increasingly romantic music can be heard in the soundtrack. Clip from *Born to Kill*.

In 1940s Hollywood cinema the femme fatale is not the only female character who is portrayed in explicitly dangerous or deadly sexual terms. I am going to focus on Gothic romance films in order to argue that these films also rely on romantic music to convey excess in relation to the narrative position occupied by a female character. Contrary to the traditional reading of the Gothic protagonist as an innocent, young and sexually incompetent female character, I want to point out that this character is not so different from the male protagonist of romantic film noir films. Similarly to the noir male character, the female protagonist of Gothic romance films, who impulsively marries the male character after a brief and passionate romance, is portrayed as a character who is in the excessive and dangerous position of *jouissance* in relation to an erotic/threatening male other. My point is, then, that the fantasy scenario that is displayed in Gothic romance films can also be understood in terms of the erotic-death drives.

Firstly, the Gothic protagonist is portrayed as being driven by a strong sexual attraction towards a male character, an exotic stranger, who is seductive and glamorous. Secondly, the romance is constructed as excessive not only because it is socially transgressive within the context of the films but also because it is linked to violence, death and murder. Romantic music plays a crucial role in conveying this idea of excess in relation to the female characters of Gothic romance films, as I aim to demonstrate by focusing on the use of waltz music in *Suspicion* and *Dragonwyck*. I am going to argue that waltz music functions to link the protagonist's excessive erotic wishes to social transgression. In *Suspicion* the waltz that Johnny and Lina dance at the hunt ball initiates their romance. This scene is connoted as transgressive not only by the fact that Johnny shows up in the ball without having been invited but also by the fact that they run away from it together in Lina's car. Their running away is constructed as transgressive by the film because as they leave Lina exclaims "But we can't do this!".

When finally they stop at the house of Lina's parents, Johnny warns her against himself. Given that Lina insists that she loves him, Johnny asks her hand in marriage to her father's portrait and they kiss passionately. Waltz music begins on the soundtrack. First it works as nondiegetic music conveying the romantic or sexual quality of the scene, but suddenly its status changes to internal diegetic music for Johnny says to Lina: "You hear the music?" to which she replies "very clearly". The romantic music works, then, not only to qualify the scene in terms of romance but also to express the characters' interiority or emotions. And these emotions do not lack transgressive sexual connotations. clip:dance in house.

In *Dragonwyck* waltz music is not only linked to the female protagonist's ambitious erotic wishes but also to her involvement in a murderous scenario. The film tells the story of Miranda, an ambitious country girl, who daydreams about meeting a "rich patron" and being part of a noble family. She is offered a job as a nanny in the castle of *Dragonwyck*. From the beginning of the film the protagonist is portrayed as being keen on getting romantically involved with Nicholas in spite of the fact he is married to Johana. She allows Nicholas to court her in their trip to *Dragonwyck*, in their first evening in the castle and finally in a ballroom sequence. After the ballroom scene, Johana dies

mysteriously and Nicholas marries the protagonist. From then on the typical Gothic scenario takes place.

From the beginning the film associates waltz music to both Miranda's socially transgressive ambitions and to Miranda's excessive or transgressive erotic wishes. In the opening sequence of the film nondiegetic waltz music sounds as she says: "well I've tried to be like everyone else and want what I am supposed to want. But then I start thinking about people I've never known, places I've never been". In the second sequence, when Miranda and her father meet Nicholas in NY 'dancing the waltz' is constructed as an 'improper' activity, as a sexual dance. clip.

It is, however, in the ballroom sequence at the castle that 'dancing the waltz' is most fully used as a motif to convey not only the social transgression involved in the protagonist's excessive romantic wishes, as in *Suspicion*, but also the fact that this position is a murderous one. The sequence begins by presenting Miranda's difficulties in understanding and adjusting to that "different world" of the upper classes. Miranda goes out of the ballroom to the balustrade where she meets Nicholas who has been following her. It is in the balustrade that the definitive transgressive 'seduction scene' takes place. The climax of the scene is reached when Nicholas asks her to dance with him. Despite the social transgression that this dance represents within the context of the film, Miranda accepts to dance.

In *Dragonwyck* Miranda's and Nicholas's waltz dance in the castle is not only portrayed as socially transgressive- as they enter the ballroom dancing together, other characters look at them disapprovingly- but also as murderous inasmuch as the dance is related to Johana's necessary death. Once the 'forbidden' romance between Nicholas and Miranda has been initiated by the couple's dancing the waltz, not only is there a MS of Johana looking at them but also the 'death drive' (the storm) explodes and invades the surface of the text. clip.

It is in this scene when Johana is murdered by Nicholas, as will be revealed later in the film. The way the film links the dance scene with the 'murder' scene establishes a cause-effect logic between the fulfilment of Miranda's transgressive romantic wishes and murder. In the same way as the noir hero's involvement with the dangerous femme fatale is the result of the hero's own transgressive erotic and ambitious wishes- and not so much the result of the femme fatale's seduction, it can be argued that Johana's sickness and murder cannot be merely explained by Nicholas's madness. Johana's murder is also the 'logical' consequence of the fulfilment of Miranda's initial transgressive romantic wishes.

In conclusion, the function that romantic music fulfils in Gothic romance films allows us to relate the romantic scenario that is displayed in these films to the one that is set out in romantic film noir films. In both groups of films romantic music works to define these scenarios as sexually passionate, socially transgressive and even murderous. Although film noir films are focalized through a male character and Gothic romance films through a female one, they both deal with the same erotic/threatening fantasy in relation to the sexual other.

Frank Krutnik: In a Lonely Street

Diane Waldman: At last I can tell it to someone!

Jacques Lacan:

See Frank Krutnik, Elizabeth Cowie, Joan Copjec, Slavoj Žižek.

Kathryn Kalinak: "The Fallen woman and the virtuous wife: musical stereotypes in *The Informer*, *Gone With the Wind* and *Laura*" in *Film Reader*, n°5, pp. 76-87.

Waldman, Doane, Cowie, Krutnik

In *Kinematograph Weekly*, n°2035, (28th of March, 1946) there is a poster of *Dragonwyck* with a glamorous CU of the actress and the line: "Stepped in the spell of emotions that were never meant to be unleashed".

This is what Claudia Gorbman has called metadiegetic music. Claudia Gorbman: *Unheard Melodies. Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

Krutnik 141-6, Cowie shades of noir.148

The female character's transgression cannot be reduced to adultery because adultery in itself does not account for the transgressiveness of the erotic wish. Krutnik 137-8.