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Death Becomes Her. Implicit Religion, Relics, Myth-Making and the Witch Complex in Visual Representations of Women in Film Noir. A Case Study

Abstract: While cinema and especially the Hollywood Golden Age has constructed a mythology of its own, cinematic storytelling has also recycled heavily on classic mythologies and cultural stereotypes. The female figures have represented during the Hollywood Golden Age and in film noir in particular a special category from this perspective, being both deified and demonized, depicted as goddesses, vampires, fascinating ghosts and, above all, *femmes fatales*. Classic feminist studies have argued that both this depiction/representation, verbal or visual, and the intended spectator, are male. Based on a comparative case-study, the current paper discusses the manner in which what I call a cinematic witch complex is constructed through either hiding or revealing in order to conclude which is more efficient in the process of gendered myth-making.

Keywords: Film Noir; Myth-Making; Representation; Gender; Alfred Hitchcock; Rebecca (1940); Laura (1944).

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Introduction. Film Noir and Gender Representations

Film noir is, perhaps, one of the cinematic environments in which the gender narrative is most clearly constructed as binary. Cinematic storytelling, one of the great recycling environments for all successful narrative patterns, and using heavily yet with its own media, mythology, religion, literature and visual arts, has employed, in the case of classic American film noir, the most traditional gender opposition paradigm (depicted as patriarchal by feminist studies). Based on a long series of angelic/diabolic female mythological and religious patterns (Luciano Mariani¹, 2019, speaks of Eve, Circe, Salomé and, what also interests this article, the medieval witches), the female representation in classic Hollywood film noir heavily constructs and employs clichés, oversimplifying the message while, paradoxically, depicting sophisticated female characters (minutely constructed by the Golden Age aesthetics), whose fascination is strong

enough to survive these characters when they become extinct. This final argument leads us to the starting point of this work: the morbid attraction of some characters in these films for dead women, whose absence and intangibility renders them more fascinating, especially if surrounded by a mysterious or even dark aura. While present in many films, this fascination and aura of sophisticated, mysterious (and in some cases absent, deceased) female characters calls our attention in particularly two classics of the genre, *Rebecca* (1940, directed by Alfred Hitchcock) and *Laura* (1944, produced and directed by Otto Preminger). The option for these two particular cases was based on their similarities (the story develops mainly around the fascination for and the absence of a deceased woman) but also on the manner in which they differ in the choice for representing visually and verbally the absent protagonist. More specifically I was interested in the choice for revealing, exposing, exhibiting the absent protagonist in one story (*Laura*), while hiding, letting the fascinating absent woman unseen and only allured at, gradually, by the revelation of the objects she had touched (i.e. book, desk, notes etc.), her initial and, later, by personal objects (i.e. dresses, night gowns, hairbrush etc.) and the mark left on the space (such as the mansion itself, her bedroom, and beach house) in *Rebecca*. The former is enforcing the fascination of the viewer through the superposition of the visual and verbal representation (the portrait, almost converted in a character itself and whose magnetism is increased by Waldo Lydecker's descriptions and particularly by the aura of the character's death and therefore absence). However, the latter is more subtle and builds the character's aura (dark

aura to be later revealed) precisely through omission and letting her unseen yet indirectly and obsessively present, drawing from a clearly religious tradition of the preservation and worship of sacred relics in the Christian church.

Implicit Religion and Cinema. Cinematic Myth-Making.

This approximation between cinema and religion deserves special attention as it represents the focus of extensive research in the past few decades. Religion and myth have persisted and flourished in a disguised manner, implicit religion and recycled mythology at the very core of a seemingly non-religious form of entertainment, which may appear in some of its forms even overtly mundane, through the exhibition of the body, intimacy, violence and so on. However, this form of modern storytelling has benefited extensively from the use of implicit religious and mythological patterns, to which the audiences respond in many cases unconsciously. "The concept of 'implicit religion' replaced that of 'secular religion' which Bailey initially used, discussing the idea of practices (and beliefs) that can be seen as comparable with traditional religious frameworks, re-enacted into the secular environments and thus offering (supplementary) meaning when decoding reality. Naturally, 'religious' defines here not a specific (Christian, Islamic or so on and so forth) practice or belief but rather a 'coherent set of (magical) beliefs, teachings, (sacred) objects, (spiritual) experiences and practices that can function as sources of meaning'. In what cinema is concerned, perhaps more than any other form of contemporary popular culture, we

can safely say that it is a privileged environment for recycling and reinterpreting religious patterns, symbols and behaviours (based on this implicit religion formula), because as a modern storyteller it inherits the functions of previous major narrative-providers as mythologies, fairy tales or literature and also benefits from multiple means to convey such narratives.”²

The reasons between the persistence and constant recycling of myth and religious patterns in popular culture (cinema, as stated above, being one of the most seminal environments for such a phenomenon as a privileged modern storyteller with huge audiences) are to be found in constant concern of all narratives and interpretations for meaning and coherence. Gender roles too gain more coherence when approached through the lenses of a familiar paradigm and, therefore, the message is conveyed in a more comfortable manner for the cinema audiences, as they recognise the archetypes and *topoi*: it all makes sense. The “ubiquitous persistence of the sacred into the secular world (refusing the sharp dissociation secular/religious) was interpreted by researchers not solely as a dynamic self-reproduction of religious pattern (somehow naturally based on some ‘prototypical human gestures’, but as a source of meaning and coherence (“the camouflage of the sacred in the structures of daily life and in those of the professional life is an indicator of the need for meaning, mythologization and ritualization felt by man in modern society’”³.

By being one of the major religious, philosophical but also artistic themes, death is, naturally, an essential *topos* in cinema as part of this complex related to the search for meaning and coherence.

Understanding, accepting, domesticating death are all part of this process which gains, in cinema, aesthetic valences. Thus, also following 19th century traditions related to death relics and memorabilia, Golden Age cinema and film noir in particular uses death in a beautified form, using visual representations of the deceased in which glamour, aesthetics and myth-making are combined, as well as a sort of cult of the dead – portraits that can be categorised as implicitly religious icons and relics. As Walter Benjamin argued, “the cult of remembrance of the loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty.”⁴

Film Noir and Portraits. Icons, Witches and the Mediated Presence

As stated above, gender roles are clearly defined in film noir, with the so-called hard-boiled masculinity, which manifests openly and the mysterious female counterpart that reproduces the medieval paradigm in which the women, representatives of a dangerous form of otherness, are to be feared and, perhaps, destructed as potential enemies. Film noir is, therefore, recycling “the dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction is among the oldest themes of art, literature, mythology and religion in Western culture ... She and her sister (or alter ego), the virgin, the mother, the innocent, the redeemer, form the two poles of female archetypes (Pidduck, 1993). In other words, ‘All human societies have a

conception of the monstrous feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject' (Creed, 1986)⁵. Danger and fascination are deeply intertwined and, therefore, guilt can be erased if such a source of potential threat dies or is murdered in the story. "This could well be the visual presentation of the *femme fatale*, a woman displaying an irresistible erotic charm which a man cannot escape, ensnaring him and leading him to his death ... This image of an *alluring, seductive and at the same time destructive woman* has been rooted in the collective imagery since the most ancient literary sources: one could even start from Eve seducing Adam, thus causing the original sin and all its evil and fatal consequences. And in classical mythology, just think of Circe the sorceress, who changes Ulysses' men into pigs, or the mermaids, who try to seduce those same men with their alluring song ... Or think of Salomé, who dances for Herod so that she can get John the Baptist's head ... or of the *medieval witches*, whose purity and chastity could be seen as a disguise of their true evil nature - only to be condemned to the stake if they departed from the accepted norms"⁶.

This medieval imagery has proved most persistent in film noir, while angelic female characters, living in dark, gloomy places, perhaps threatened themselves by the "dark ladies" have been associated by scholars with Gothic literature. I decided for the formula "the witch complex" to characterise such representations of women in film noir, a complex that manifest less in a visual and more in verbal depictions of these women (narrator's voice, usually a male, but also through the voice of different characters, such as in *Rebecca*). "Sarah Kozloff points out that a narrator whose

voice-over opens a film is often taken by the viewers to occupy a position usually inhabited by the larger narrating agency of the film as a whole - what Kozloff refers to as the 'image-maker'. Kozloff notes that the image-maker is often taken as a powerful and controlling narrative presence because s/he remains 'unseen, unearthly'.... Michel Chion finds traces of a long tradition of storytelling in voice-overs: 'Since the very dawn of time, voices have presented images, made order of things in the world, brought things to life and named them.... In every master of ceremonies and storyteller as well as every movie voiceover, an aspect of this original function remains.'⁷

Returning to the witch complex, we must add that while fear is usually more subtly induced through the tone of voice, suggested actions and features, music but also light and shadows (which are so typical to film noir), the visual representations are by no means absent. On the contrary, cinema makes use heavily by its visual means and potential and the film noir female iconography is rich and in itself myth-making. "The magical power of the portrait (as well as its relation to the dead noted by Benjamin) is also at stake at many Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s, in which painted portraits play an important role in the plot or draw a lot of attention in the *mise-en-scène*. The fascination for portraits can be found in several genres but it is particularly striking in noir thrillers and gothic melodramas. The plot of these films often revolve around the supposedly mysterious and threatening qualities of these paintings which are ... mostly portraits of women"⁸.

Essentially visual, based on the centrality of the eye and the gaze, cinema

favours the image to the expense of words, transcribing all message in its cinematic language and based on the power and magnetism of the image and cannot leave aside the painting and work of art, with all its magic mentioned above and connections to the act of remembrance and cult of the dead. The woman's portrait stands as an icon (the angelic figure), or a haunting trace of the witch, still fascinating after death, despite the attempt to capture her in a picture and possess the resulting object (in *Laura*, Mark's intention to buy the portrait when believing Laura was dead). "Whilst the framing of a woman as image may be seen as patriarchy's psychic strategy for the containment of femininity, this containment is predicated on the contradiction of disavowal. The framing is therefore constantly under threat, and the patriarchal meanings of femininity are not stable, or safe, but actually oscillate and overflow their original terms, thereby putting the patriarchal subject himself in danger."⁹

The painting or photograph, in other words the visual representation manifests as a medium for the absent, whose presence is, therefore, mediated by the image. It is a picture within a picture, a frame within a frame (the cinema shots but also the larger one, the frame of the film), while the gaze is also multiplied (characters looking at the painting and *discussing* it, while also being looked at, partly Velazquez's game in his iconic *Las Meninas*). In terms of implicit religion, the visual representation of deities has a long tradition, although some might tend to associate it automatically with Christian iconography, as being very strong in its fixation on *imago Dei*. Gods have been, however, visually depicted in

many other religious contexts, from Ancient Egypt or Ancient Greece to the modern world, unless there was an explicit prohibition towards visually representing the deity within a certain religion or denomination. Worshiping the icon or the deity through the medium of the visual representation that rendered the abstract more palpable has, therefore, a long tradition and it can be retraceable in the Hollywood Golden Age and more particularly, as already stated, in the film noir of the period, with mysterious, glamorous and unearthly female representations.

Case Study. Hidden or Revealed? Female Icons versus the Unseen (*Deus absconditus* versus *Deus revelatus*)

Such a fascinating, idealised image of a figure rendered intangible through death but also mysterious and fascinating (as Waldo suggests he was the only one to understand and *really* know her) appears in *Laura* (1944). Central for the mise-en-scène, dominating the setting, the human-scale portrait functions as mediated presence, although out of reach and ageless, immortal. "Eugene McNamara does discuss the style, and begins his study of the film by giving the portrait a classical heritage: 'The portrait of Laura is a Sargent-style study, evoking glamour and elegance as well as beauty... It is meant to function as a contemporary version of Poe's Helen, *an icon of eternal beauty which remains forever out of reach*.' Towards the end of his book he roots it more clearly in the genre of photographic studio portraits and glamour pin-ups discussed above: Knowing that the portrait of Laura is a studio glossy of

Gene Tierney, blowup and brushed over to give it the effect of paint does not spoil our (sic) appreciation of it. Keats said it in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.' *Dead perfection is superior to living passion, which is caught in time.* The portrait's final effect is romantic, idealized, derealized."¹⁰ However, I would add to this classical heritage the reference to Giovanni Boldini and his female portraits, with a specific focus on his depiction of Princess Marthe Bibesco, a Romanian writer and socialite.

Rather than a witch, Laura's depiction in the film suggests the halo, the aura of an angel, transgressing the photographic studio diva style (the portrait being actually a photograph of the actress covered with soft brush strokes to suggest a painting), which also suggests seduction and temptation and therefore sexualises the painting. "This is a view with which Kalinak concurs, for her the portrait 'reflects the double-bind of female sexuality in film noir: it attracts and threatens.' She continues: Laura is simultaneously cast as sexual temptress and passive object of male desire. She is caught in the portrait in the position of being beheld; her gaze is not directed outward, meeting the eyes of the implied spectator, but rather remains focused indiscriminately, at an oblique angle. The very picture frame around her serves to contain the power of her threatening sexuality."¹¹

Despite its suggestive sensuality, the portrait has more connotations related to intangibility (see also the position of the painting above the eye, requiring an effort in order to look at, while the character materialises and "descends of the painting" walking along with the other mortals) and the above mentioned halo, which is the effect of the light used in the painting,

emphasising the whiteness of the face in contrast with the dark garments, but also irradiating light. This halo is not accidental, as it will also appear later in the film when the character materialises and miraculously proves to be alive, irradiating the same light in the scenes when she appears in a dark room. As Richard Dyer notices, "idealised white women are bathed in and permeated by light. It streams through them and falls on to them from above. *In short, they glow.*" The soft diffuse top lighting that produces a halo effect can idealise the figure that it falls on as Dyer suggests it carries with it celestial and spiritual connotations."¹² These connotations are precisely what I called implicit religion manifesting in these cinematic visual formulas.

If *Laura* employs these aesthetic means to suggest the fascination of the absent yet present through her representation, using light with iconographic connotations to suggest her immateriality and intangibility, *Rebecca* counts precisely with the opposite, with the unseen and frustration of the absence of the deity, with its angel/demon ambivalence. Hitchcock's genius employs precisely the fascination for this absence, in tension with the obsession of the characters for mentioning it or handling objects in a space marked by this paradoxically absent presence. "The femme fatale is not physically present, but only as an obsession in the characters' minds. The new wife (Joan Fontaine) of a rich widower (Laurence Olivier) comes to live in his manor, but her life is immediately shaken by the constant memory of Rebecca, his first wife, who has clearly turned into an obsession in her husband's (and the housekeeper's) minds, so much so as to lead her almost to madness. The context where the

story takes place is crucial: a sort of Gothic, gloomy old manor, in which the phantoms of the past never cease to move and haunt the present. But Rebecca, although dead, and even if she never appears not even in flashback, is/was a true *femme fatale*, involved in secret meetings, sexual-erotic obsessions, murder charges¹³.

Hitchcock avoids in this film noir masterpiece what the medium of cinema offered as extremely handy, the presence of paintings or photographs of the deceased Rebecca, but, instead, remains faithful to the atmosphere of the book, saturated with Rebecca's ubiquitous prints on the space and objects in *Manderley* and yet the impossibility of her revelation. The tension is best materialised in the narrator's tormented question: "What was Rebecca *really* like?" The emphasis is same, in a way, as in *Laura*, where Waldo suggests he was the only one to have *really* known Laura: the fact that once deceased, no image can actually render their real self, they can be merely soulless icons. "In *Rebecca* there is a play around the revealing and concealing of Rebecca that is perpetuated through a tantalising trail of visual clues. The strong 'R' of her signature begins the credit sequence of the film, and it is found on every domestic item that the heroine touches. It also ends the film, the final shot featuring the camera tracking in to frame the 'R' on the embroidered nightgown case (made for Rebecca by Mrs Danvers) as it is engulfed in flames. In the scene where the heroine visits Rebecca's bedroom the dead woman. ... However despite the prevalence of Rebecca's signature, possessions and the frequency with which she is mentioned by other characters, there is no visual representation of her in the film. Modleski

attributes much of Rebecca's power to haunt *Manderley* and its inhabitants to her invisibility. ... If Rebecca is never fully present in the film, then equally she is never fully absent either."¹⁴

We could venture to create a parallel with the concept of "Deus revelatus", the perspective in which the ultimate revelation of divinity stands precisely in his hiddenness.

Hitchcock plays with this intimidating figure of a goddess that refuses to show herself (even when she makes a final appearance, lifeless, on the wrecked ship, she only appears *in body*, as she was already present *in spirit*, but even this body is not revealed). A mysterious goddess, a sort of feminine "deus absconditus", that refuses to reveal herself although is sensed as present and punishes any attempt of copying the "imago dei" (the scene of the masquerade in which the second wife's disguise, copied from a *painting*, proves to have been an imitation of an imitation, *mimesis*, as it had also been Rebecca's disguise in a previous ball).

Conclusions

Both haunted and enriched by religious and mythological *topoi* and archetypes, cinema has contributed itself to myth-making through its iconic female representations, either visual or suggestive, through its other cinematic means. Implicit religion has also penetrated classic American film noir, an iconic genre itself, in which gender is clearly delimited, often converting women in an object of the famous "male gaze". During the Hollywood Golden Age it was just a step from the glamorous portrayals of fascinating

women to an iconography of angels/demons/witches. The lights and shadows, typically played with in the film noir, materialise in these portraits in order to emphasise the game between the absence and the mediated presence of women no longer there but leaving a memorable visual or mental trace. Both threatening and angelic, and therefore deeply ambivalent, with a halo of both light and darkness, these cinematic portrayals recycle a whole range of mythological and religious patterns, from ancient goddesses to biblical angels or sinners, medieval witches or vampires, enriching the language of cinema but also telling a story of gendered artistic creation. The portrait, visible or implicit, like in the two cases analysed

above, also represents an attempt to make the female figure, threatening through her seductiveness, captive in a frame. However, the female figure proves to be disobedient of this predestined role and escapes in a form or another (Laura materialises, proving to be alive, while Rebecca's body also appears, threatening to destroy the scenario constructed by her husband). The cult of the dead and the fascination for the forever intangible image of the absent, as they appear in these films and in relation to the feminine portrayals, speaks of the mix of fear and fascination that has circulated in the history of Western imagination in relation to women (especially since medieval times), categorising them as both seductive and threatening Otherness.

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