

## Rebecca

Mary Ann Doane, from Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press/Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1987).

*Rebecca* (USA, 1940) belongs to that group of films which are infused by the Gothic and defined by a plot in which the wife fears her husband is a murderer. In films like *Rebecca*, *Dragonwyck* (USA, 1946), and *Undercurrent* (USA, 1946), the woman marries, often hastily, into the upper class; her husband has money and a social position which she cannot match. The marriage thus constitutes a type of transgression (of class barriers) which does not remain unpunished. The woman often feels dwarfed or threatened by the house itself (*Rebecca*, *Dragonwyck*). A frequent reversal of the hierarchy of mistress and servant is symptomatic of the fact that the woman is 'out of place' in her rich surroundings. Nevertheless, in films of the same genre, such as *Suspicion* (USA, 1941), *Secret beyond the Door* (USA, 1948), and *Gaslight* (USA, 1944), the economic-sexual relationship is reversed. In each of these, there is at least a hint that the man marries the woman in order to obtain her money. Hence, it is not always the case that a woman from a lower class is punished for attempting to change her social and economic standing. Rather, the mixture effected by a marriage between two different classes produces horror and paranoia.

By making sexuality extremely difficult in a rich environment, both films—*Caught* (USA, 1949) and *Rebecca*—promote the illusion of separating the issue of sexuality from that of economics. What is really repressed in this scenario is the economics of sexual exchange. This repression is most evident in *Caught*, whose explicit moral—'Don't marry for money'—constitutes a negation of the economic factor in marriage. But negation, as Freud points out, is also affirmation; in *Caught* there is an unconscious acknowledgment of the economics of marriage as an institution. In the course of the film, the woman becomes the object of exchange, from Smith Ohlrig to Dr Quinada. A by-product of this exchange is the relinquishing of the posited object of her desire—the expensive mink coat.

There is a sense, then, in which both films begin with a hypothesis of female subjectivity which is subsequently disproven by the textual project. The narrative of *Caught* is introduced by the attribution of the look at the image (the 'I' of seeing) to Leonora and her friend. The film ends by positioning Leonora as the helpless, bedridden object of the medical gaze. In the beginning of *Rebecca*, the presence of a female subjectivity as the source of the enunciation is marked. A female voice-over (belonging to the Fontaine character) accompanies a hazy, dreamlike image: 'Last night I dreamed I went to Manderley again. It seems to me I stood by the iron gate leading to the drive. For a while I could not enter.' The

voice goes on to relate how, like all dreamers, she was suddenly possessed by a supernatural power and passed through the gate. This statement is accompanied by a shot in which the camera assumes the position of the 'I' and, in a sustained subjective movement, tracks forward through the gate and along the path. Yet the voice-over subsequently disappears entirely—it is not even resuscitated at the end of the film in order to provide closure through a symmetrical frame. Nevertheless, there is an extremely disconcerting re-emergence of a feminine 'I' later in the film. In the cottage scene in which Maxim narrates the 'unnarratable' story of the absent Rebecca to Joan Fontaine, he insists on a continual use of direct quotes and hence the first-person pronoun referring to Rebecca. His narrative is laced with these quotes from Rebecca which parallel on the soundtrack the moving image, itself adhering to the traces of an absent Rebecca. Maxim is therefore the one who pronounces the following statements: 'I'll play the part of a devoted wife'; 'When I have a child, Max, no one will be able to say that it's not yours'; 'I'll be the perfect mother just as I've been the perfect wife'; 'Well, Max, what are you going to do about it? Aren't you going to kill me?' Just as the tracking subjective shot guarantees that the story of the woman literally culminates as the image of the man, the construction of the dialogue allows Maxim to appropriate Rebecca's 'I'

The films thus chronicle the emergence and disappearance of female subjectivity, the articulation of an 'I' which is subsequently negated. The pressure of the demand in the woman's film for the depiction of female subjectivity is so strong, and often so contradictory, that it is not at all surprising that sections such as the projection scenes in *Caught* and *Rebecca* should dwell on the problem of female spectatorship. These scenes internalize the difficulties of the genre and, in their concentration on the issue of the woman's relation to the gaze, occupy an important place in the narrative. Paranoia is here the appropriate and logical obsession. For it effects a confusion between subjectivity and objectivity, between the internal and the external, thus disallowing the gap which separates the spectator from the image of his or her desire.

In many respects, the most disturbing images of the two films are those which evoke the absence of the woman. In both films these images follow projection scenes which delineate the impossibility of female spectatorship. It is as though each film adhered to the logic which characterizes dreamwork—establishing the image of an absent woman as the delayed mirror image of a female spectator who is herself only virtual.

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Tania Modleski, from Tania Modleski, *The Women who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1988).

As is well known by now, Laura Mulvey considers two options open to the male for warding off castration anxiety: in the course of the film the man gains control over the woman both by subjecting her to the power of the look and by investigating and demystifying her in the narrative. In *Rebecca* (USA, 1940), however, the sexual woman is never seen, although her presence is strongly evoked throughout the film, and so it is impossible for any man to gain control over her in the usual classical narrative fashion. I have discussed how, in the first shot of Maxim, the system of suture is reversed. This is of utmost importance. In her discussion of the system, Kaja Silverman notes, 'Classic cinema abounds in shot/reverse shot formations in which men look at women.' Typically, a shot of a woman is followed by a shot of a man—a surrogate for the male spectator—looking at her. This editing alleviates castration anxiety in two ways: first, the threat posed by the woman is allayed because the man seems to possess her; secondly, the 'gaze within the fiction' conceals 'the controlling gaze outside the fiction'—that of the castrating Other who lurks beyond the field of vision. But in *Rebecca* the beautiful, desirable woman is not only never sutured in as object of the look, not only never made a part of the film's field of vision, she is actually posited within the diegesis as all-seeing—as for example when Mrs Danvers asks

the terrified heroine if she thinks the dead come back to watch the living and says that she sometimes thinks Rebecca comes back to watch the new couple together.

In 'Film and the Labyrinth', Pascal Bonitzer equates the labyrinth with suspense and notes the power of off-screen space or 'blind space' to terrorize the viewer

Specular space is on-screen space; it is everything we see on the screen. Off-screen space, blind space, is everything that moves (or wriggles) outside or under the surface of things, like the shark in *Jaws*. If such films 'work,' it is because we are more or less held in the sway of these two spaces. If the shark were always on screen it would quickly become a domesticated animal. What is frightening is that it is not there! The point of horror resides in the blind space.

Similarly, Rebecca herself lurks in the blind space of the film, with the result that, like the shark and unlike the second Mrs de Winter, she never becomes 'domesticated'. Rebecca is the Ariadne in this film's labyrinth, but since she does not relinquish the thread to any Theseus, her space, Manderley, remains unconquered by man.

In one of the film's most extraordinary moments the camera pointedly dynamizes Rebecca's absence. When Maxim tells



A negation of female subjectivity or a variant on the Oedipal drama? *Rebecca* (1940)

*Rebecca* continued

the heroine about what happened on the night of Rebecca's death ('She got up, came towards me', etc.), the camera follows Rebecca's movements in a lengthy tracking shot. Most films, of course, would have resorted to a flashback at this moment, allaying our anxiety over an empty screen by filling the 'lack'. Here, not only is Rebecca's absence stressed, but we are made to experience it as an active force. For those under the sway of Mulvey's analysis of narrative cinema, *Rebecca* may be seen as a spoof of the system, an elaborate sort of castration joke, with its flaunting of absence and lack.

It is true, however, that in the film's narrative, Rebecca is subjected to a brutal devaluation and punishment. Whereas the heroine, throughout most of the film, believes Rebecca to have been loved and admired by everyone, especially by Maxim, she ultimately learns that Maxim hated his first wife. 'She was', he says, 'incapable of love or tenderness or decency.' Moreover, the film punishes her for her sexuality by substituting a cancer for the baby she thought she was expecting, cancer being that peculiar disease which, according to popular myth, preys on spinster and nymphomaniac alike. In addition, Mrs Danvers receives the usual punishment inflicted on the bad mother-witch: she is burned alive when she sets fire to the Manderley mansion.

The latter part of *Rebecca*, concerned with the investigation, can be seen as yet another version of the myth of the overthrow of matriarchy by a patriarchal order. After all, Rebecca's great crime, we learn, was her challenge to patriarchal laws of succession. The night of her death she goaded Maxim into hitting her when she told him that she was carrying a child which was not his but which would one day inherit his possessions. Even more importantly, after Rebecca's death her 'spirit' presides and its power passes chiefly down the female line (through Mrs Danvers). Rebecca's name itself (as well as that of the house associated with her) overshadows not only the name of the 'second Mrs de Winter' but even the formidable one of the patriarch: George Fortesquieu Maximillian de Winter.

Ultimately the male authorities must step in and lay the ghost of Rebecca to rest once and for all (and true to Hollywood form, the point of view is eventually given over to Maxim while the heroine is mostly out of the picture altogether).

Nevertheless, despite this apparent closure, the film has managed in the course of its unfolding to hint at what feminine desire might be like were it allowed greater scope. First, it points to women's playfulness, granting them the power and threat of laughter. Over and over Rebecca's refusal to take men seriously is stressed, as when Mrs Danvers tells Maxim, Jack Favell, and Frank Crawley (another victim of Rebecca's seductive arts) that 'she used to sit on her bed and rock with laughter at the lot of you'. Even after the investigation, Maxim becomes upset all over again at the memory of Rebecca on the night of her death as she 'stood there laughing', taunting him with the details of her infidelity.

Moreover, Rebecca takes malicious pleasure in her own plurality. Luce Irigaray remarks, 'the force and continuity of [woman's] desire are capable of nurturing all the "feminine" masquerades for a long time'. And further, 'a woman's (re)discovery of herself can only signify the possibility of not sacrificing any of her pleasures to another, of not identifying with any one in particular, of never being simply one'. Rebecca is an intolerable figure precisely because she revels in her own multiplicity—her remarkable capacity to play the model wife and mistress of Manderley while conducting various love affairs on the side. Even after Rebecca's death, the 'force of her desire' makes itself felt, and, most appropriately, in light of Irigaray's comments, during a *masquerade* ball, in which the heroine dresses up like Rebecca, who had dressed up as Caroline de Winter, an ancestor whose portrait hangs on the wall. And all this occurs at the instigation of Mrs Danvers, another character who is identified with Rebecca, but to whom Rebecca is not limited. The eponymous and invisible villainess, then, is far from being the typical femme fatale of Hollywood cinema brought at last into the possession of men in order to secure for them a strong sense of their identity. Occupant of patriarchy's 'blind space', Rebecca is, rather, she who appears to subvert the very notion of identity—and of the visual economy which supports it.

It is no wonder that the film is (overly) determined to get rid of Rebecca, and that the task requires massive destruction. Yet there is reason to suppose that we cannot rest secure in the film's 'happy ending'. For if death by drowning did not extinguish the woman's desire, can we be certain that death by fire has reduced it utterly to ashes?