

Problematics of Spectatorship in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*

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ABSTRACT:

The deviation from the dominant filmic modality of desire in Hitchcock's *Rebecca* provides a variability of spectatorial positions for the viewer. This seeming counter cinematic strategy, however, does not point to any subversive potency whatsoever, because the competing spectatorships finally give in to the look of the enunciator who, by erasing the ambiguous look, achieves a cohesive vision which is the annihilation of female desire. Laura Mulvey's codification of counter cinematic strategy, thus, needs to be further complicated and re-formulated in order to serve the purpose of filmic criticism not only along the gender line, but also across the spectrum of cultural mutual gaze.

KEY WORDS:

Spectatorship, film-wish, voyeurism, fetishization, trajectory of the looks, gaze, diegesis, cinematic apparatus, counter cinematic strategy, mise-en-scene.

In Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, the title character, being absent yet haunting the major characters in the film, functions as a floating signifier to which the three major characters--the Fontaine character, Maxim, and Mrs. Danvers--are engaged either in their imagination or memories. Because of their effort to grasp or make sense of the memories or imagination, each of the characters is given a position of spectatorship through their look to each other and eventually to the absent woman. The problem of spectatorship of the film is thus complicated, because the spectator outside the screen is positioned at a second remove from Rebecca's story. In other words, his desire has to be structured by the desire of the other three characters' desire for her. Yet, as much as his desire has to be structured through the desire of the three characters, he also constructs his own desire in unconsciously "choosing" the object of his identification. This is made possible only because he is given a look of his own which is also the look of the camera and eventually the look of the enunciator. Thus, we have a case of competing spectatorships. The three looks issued by the three characters are competing to engage the desire of the spectator, to gain his identification, while in the meantime the film-wish of the enunciator also tries to monitor the spectator's gaze through the camera's look.

This argument, inevitably, sets as its premise the variability of spectatorial positions in dominant film. In fact the formula of the modality of desire in dominant films suggested by Laura Mulvey--that the spectator is engaged to identify with the male character in his look and to derive his viewing pleasure from fetishism and voyeurism--is not always true in *Rebecca*.¹ The relay of look from the spectator to the camera and then to the male character, which is typical in dominant film, is not the only trajectory of vision in the enunciation of the film in question. And the camera-wish of the enunciator is not always compatible with the male character's. However, I would argue that even though the spectator is situated at multiple spectatorial positions from time to time, those positions have to give in to a final look and achieve a coherence of vision by effacing or suppressing the contradiction among the looks.

In the diegesis of the film, the Fontaine character is the first character in the film that shows interest and curiosity to Rebecca's story, yearning to find out who she is and how she looks. But she is not the first one to be given the authority of a look to desire for Rebecca. Instead, it is the spectator who is first

invited by the look of the camera to try to disclose the secret behind the door of the room in the west wing. That look is inscribed in the last two shots of the sequence when Mrs. Danvers, coming into the Fontaine character's room, asks for her opinion about the decoration of the room. The conversation leads to the description of Rebecca's room in the west wing, the only room that has a view to the sea. Mrs. Danvers then accompanies the Fontaine character out of her room in the east wing, walking with her to the door of Rebecca's room. The camera follows behind the two characters as they walk through the corridor. The shot is then cut to a medium shot of the backs of the two characters as they stop before the steps of the door. At this moment, the Fontaine character's look is suppressed, while Mrs. Danvers turns first aside, not to look to the Fontaine character, but up to the ceiling aiming nowhere; she then makes a full turn and walks away with the Fontaine character. Although the only look inscribed in the shot, Mrs. Danvers', however, does not engage the spectator's look because of its lack of focus and its eeriness. The spectator is left to identify with the look of the camera when the two characters walk sideway out of the screen. As the camera moves forward to the eye level of the dog Jasper, Rebecca's pet and a token of her former existence, the spectator is possessed by the power of the look. It is as if he were the camera looking upward toward the enigmatic giant door imagining "the only room with a view across the lawn to the sea." Thus, the viewer experiences his primary cinematic identification with the seeing, the look of the camera, and in that trajectory, is conditioned to desire as the enunciator--the camera man--does.

The look of the door--a fetishized object--looms big before the spectator for its unphantomability and its implied danger, indicated by the two guardians of the room, the dog, which reminds one of the dog of hell, and Mrs. Danvers, whose look gives a gothic element to the nature of the room. Without a demarcatory punctuation in its transition to the next sequence, the image of the door is superimposed by a close shot of the napkin with Rebecca's monogram on it--another token that addresses the existence of this female image. The lap-dissolve increases the fascination of the camera with Rebecca. Again, it is the spectator who is invited to have a direct look at it. And in the logic of cinematic apparatus, the spectator's fascination with Rebecca also increases. Then the camera moves up revealing the Fontaine character sitting at the dinner table, picking up the napkin, still without looking at the napkin, or noticing the monogram. Because of the power of the first part of the shot, the image of the Fontaine character

becomes vulnerable. She is looked at from the side, which renders her an object of the look but not the object of desire. But whose look? It appears that the Fontaine character is looked at by the camera and the spectator, but to look more closely, she is looked at by Rebecca's napkin, which, being empowered by the lap-dissolve, has gained a life and a look of its own. Thus, when the camera moves up to the Fontaine character's face, it is as if she were looked at by the napkin, and scorned by the dead woman for being an inadequate counter-part. The camera, thus possessed by Rebecca's look, then tracks back speedily, almost like the speed of a ghost, revealing the giant dinner table and the smallness of the Fontaine character. So the ghost in *Manderley* lies in the camera, which displays neurotic look on rare occasions to make comments on the looks of either the camera or the other characters. The absent woman is thus rendered not only the object but the subject, ever so rarely, of the look.

The sequence of family movie projection designates the Fontaine character's first attempt to gain her power as the mistress of the mansion. Her effort, however, is dominated by her imagination of Rebecca, who, according to Frank in the last dialogue of the previous sequence, is "the most beautiful creature [he] ever saw." In other words, the Fontaine character attempts to grasp, or at least recreates the image of Rebecca to gain the control of the male look, namely, to be looked at as the desired object. The sequence starts with a look at the cover of *Beauty* magazine. With the Fontaine character's hand turning the pages to the image of woman in black silk gown, the spectator realizes this is a look from her. Her obsession with the question "what was Rebecca really like" seems to be temporarily resolved by her fetishization with this female image. In this brief shot, the relay of look goes like this: the spectator--the camera--the Fontaine character--the woman image--Rebecca. Hence the spectator is actually positioned to desire for Rebecca. When the Fontaine character walks in as the copy of the woman image in the magazine the spectator experiences the voyeurist pleasure he has expected, for it is the spectator who gets the first look. His pleasure, however, is soon disturbed because Maxim does not react the same way. Instead of being pleased, he is first surprised and then tries to be patronizing. The spectator is thus unable to identify with the male look. But then the question comes: can the spectator identify with the look of the Fontaine character? What kind of look does she have? Is she even privileged with an authoritative look?

What the Fontaine character tries to do here is, as Mary Ann Doane observes in her analysis of the sequence of the family movie, to become "a spectacle for Maxim" (Doane, 109). But instead of being the object of the gaze, she is immediately turned into a spectator in front of the home movie. The childish image on the screen in the home movie indicates Maxim's desire for her. Her attempt to become a mature, powerful woman is now in conflict with Maxim's desire for her. In the diegesis of the film she is defeated in two senses: first, she fails to become a spectacle for Maxim; second, given her spectatorship, she, however, is situated to desire for something she tries to repudiate, namely the young, immature, and inexperienced look. Mary Ann Doane has explicated the use of the movie projector in denying the Fontaine character both as the object and subject of the look. For Doane the projector, being placed in between Fontaine and Maxim in the *mise-en-scene*, serves as a barrier to their interaction. At the beginning of the movie, the image of Fontaine feeding geese constitutes a denial to the image she has constructed for herself. That image of a mature woman is further fractured in the first interruption of the movie, when the servant comes in to report the missing of a china cupid, which Fontaine broke in an earlier scene. Soon after that, Mrs. Danvers comes in facing Fontaine, Maxim and the camera with a stern, judgmental look, a look that forces Fontaine to give in her image of the powerful woman, and admit her inability to replace Rebecca. The second interruption comes when Maxim walks between the projector and the screen, listening to Fontaine's self-pitying remarks upon his motive of marrying her. With his body blocking the screen he gives her a stern, menacing look, thus castrating Fontaine's gaze. When he moves aside the screen resumes showing Maxim looking with binoculars--the symbol of his authority of look. At those moments Fontaine's face is illuminated and fragmented by the light from the screen, contrasting it with the clear image of the heterosexual couple on the diegetic movie screen. The frame of the home movie screen looms bigger as the camera tracks forward until the shot is interrupted by a final cut to a closer shot of the couple. As Doane concludes: "The cut guarantees a certain rhetorical finesse, a satisfying closure which demonstrates the stability of the couple and simultaneously sutures the diegetic film to the larger film" (Doane, 111). In the final dissolution of the edge of the home movie to the movie itself, the spectator is inscribed to desire for the happy marriage. This is, in the logic of the film, Maxim's desire, and as I will prove later, the final desire of the camerawish.

Now go back to the question: Can the spectator identify his look with Fontaine's? Given that she can neither achieve the status of the object of desire,

nor the subject of the look, the spectator obviously has a hard time to identify with her. And as I have remarked above, in the final shot of the sequence, the spectator is positioned in the trajectory of vision to desire for the happy marriage, which now the Fontaine character is also drawn to yearn for. In other words, both of the Fontaine character and the spectator are situated to desire through the male gaze for the nothingness, the total denial of her subjectivity. But this final desire does not solve the initial desire evoked by the female image in the fashion magazine--the desire for Rebecca. Thus, although the Fontaine character submits her look before the male gaze, the spectator, however, experiences a sense of loss and inadequacy. Still, the obsession remains: "What is Rebecca really like?"

This then leads us to the question of the nature of these two desires--the desire for Rebecca and the desire for the happy marriage. Are they conflicting erotic drives that cannot be solved in the dominant cinematic narrative? Is the spectator situated in two different positions of look in the sequence? In the diegesis of the film, Rebecca is always given the praise for her supreme beauty, intelligence, wit and upper class background--"breed, brain, and beauty." The combination of body and mind makes her a different object of gaze. Namely, she is not only the object of gaze, but the subject of look. She is empowered by her 3Bs and becomes a woman of her own desire. Her desire, according to the story, is to subvert the heterosexual marital institution which is crucial to the inheritance of upper class life. This desire is inscribed in the lap-dissolve of Rebecca's door and the napkin with Rebecca's monogram. In that scene the spectator is engaged to desire first for Rebecca then like Rebecca. Hence, we have three spectatorial positions of look, thus three kinds of desires in the two scenes discussed above: 1) To desire for Rebecca (from Fontaine's and the camera's point of view), 2) to desire like Rebecca (from Rebecca's--hence the camera's--look) in a symbolic way, 3) to desire through the male gaze (Maxim's gaze). To desire for Rebecca means to desire for a beautiful and powerful woman, to yearn for an object of gaze and to become the subject of look. To desire like Rebecca--to desire like a powerful woman--means to desire for a transcendence of upper-middle class sexual economy. On the other hand to desire (through Maxim's look) for the happy heterosexual marriage leads to the inevitable denial of female objectivity and subjectivity, which is the final aim of the male gaze. The second desire, hence the second position of look--Rebecca's desire and look --,because of its symbolic nature (it can only be indicated indirectly through the look of camera on her tokens) in the diegesis and because of its rarity, is unable

to constitute a competing trajectory of vision in which the spectator is drawn strongly to identify with her look. My discussion, therefore will focus on the competing nature of the other two relays of look where the spectator is situated.

According to the sexual division of the look, the last two spectatorial positions are easy to be categorized. To identify with Rebecca's look is obviously to possess a female look which engages a desire of horror, thus needed to be checked. To identify with Maxim's look is, in the same sexual ideology, to possess a male look which desires for the nothingness of femininity. The first spectatorial position (to desire for Rebecca), however, remains problematic in terms of its gender category. Is it a male desire to yearn for a beautiful but subverting woman? Or is it a female desire to crave for the authority suggested in the powerful woman who is also a desired object? The ambiguity of this look highlights the paradox of upper-middle class sexual economy--a paradox that needs to be concealed if the appearance of fixed sexual difference in patriarchy is to be maintained and consolidated. On the other hand, the power of the look and desire for Rebecca comes mostly from the camera's fascination with the absent woman. In other words, the camera-wish, the desire of the enunciator also fluctuates between the two looks. The ambiguity of desire, thus, has to be resolved at the end by suppressing the one that is most menacing to the stability of bourgeois heterosexual economy, which is the desire for Rebecca.

In discussing the contradictory nature of male desire, Tania Modleski comments:

Feminist critics have noted the conflicting attitude towards the female expressed in film noir: on the one hand, the domestic woman is sexually non-threatening, but she is boring; on the other hand, the *femme fatale* is exciting, but dangerous. From the woman's point of view, then, man becomes an enigma, his desire difficult to know. (Modleski, p. 38)

The enigma exists in fact for both sexes. What does *he* want? and what does *she* want? But these are questions that can never have an answer. What is crucial in the cinematic apparatus of the film, in my opinion, is the power relationship among these looks. Is the look of ambiguity, i.e., the look for Rebecca, allowed to dominate the cinematic apparatus of the film? Or is it Maxim's look that surpasses the other looks?

At the end of the movie projection sequence, the spectator is situated at two different positions: to desire for Rebecca and to desire for the happy marriage of the heterosexual couple, namely, the happy ending. But the desire for Rebecca is soon rendered horrifying in the sequence in Rebecca's room. The sequence starts with the Fontaine character's approach to the door of Rebecca's room. In a reverse shot, the camera shows us Fontaine's look and the object of her gaze--the door of Rebecca's room. That look registers Fontaine's desire for the powerful woman, to know her in order to be like her. That desire is soon fulfilled when Mrs. Danvers comes in and attempts to "substitute her body for the body of Rebecca." (Modleski, 36) In this eerie sequence, Mrs. Danvers recreates the scene of her serving Rebecca after bath. When she says, "she finishes her bath. She goes to the bedroom. She walks toward the dressing table," she looks aside as if Rebecca was right there. To intensify the "existence" of Rebecca, the camera is situated toward the empty space where Rebecca is supposed to be. The camera then tracks back as if Rebecca is walking forward. The shot then cuts to the dressing table where the Fontaine character comes to fill in the space, while Mrs. Danvers pretends to brush her hair and repeats her former conversation with Rebecca. Once becoming Rebecca, the Fontaine character realizes that instead of substituting for Rebecca, she is actually possessed by her. In other words, she has lost her own identity in trying to identify with Rebecca. When the camera moves to the picture of Maxim, what Fontaine character sees is Maxim's gaze of Rebecca--the very thing she tries to overcome. The sequence thus suppresses the desire for Rebecca, condemning it as the loss of one's own identity. At the end of this sequence, the most gothic scene of the film, Mrs. Danvers scares the Fontaine character by mentioning the coming back of Rebecca's ghost. In a lap-dissolve that reminds us the one mentioned above, the enunciator puts together three shots, the frozen image of Mrs. Danvers saying "listen to the sea," the waves, and the address book with Rebecca's initial on the cover. From the last shot the camera, again, moves up revealing the Fontaine character's frighten look at the initial. The three shots indicate Rebecca's absent presence encoded on three counts: Mrs. Danvers servings as her agent, the mediator through whom the ghost haunts the house; the sea signifying the source of Rebecca's power; lastly, the address book, like the napkin, constituting a token of Rebecca's existence. In the same logic as I have discussed before, the superimposition of the three shots intensifies the absent presence of Rebecca. Thus the final shot gives the spectator the feeling that it is Rebecca staring at the Fontaine character, sneezing at her insignificant role in the mansion. This time the Fontaine character realizes the horror of Rebecca's absent presence. Her

look at Rebecca (the address book) is turned from a look of desire to a look of horror.

In her attempt to construct her own image, the Fontaine character propose to hold a costume ball in which she will put on the wardrobe she designs personally. Her effort to transform herself from a lower class woman to a lady that fits the upperclass surrounding, and to repudiate from the influence of Rebecca is appropriated by Mrs. Danvers, who, by suggesting Fontaine to put on the evening gown copied from a portrait of a lady ancestor, manages to possess the Fontaine character's body with Rebecca's image. The punishment of this move comes quickly from Maxim's angry look. The sequence addresses not only the cinematic apparatus's attempt to undermine the look for Rebecca, but also indicates the difficulty in constructing a female subjectivity in a patriarchal society. To desire for Rebecca or to desire for a female subjectivity eventually leads one to horror or death.

The look to Rebecca appears for the last time in the sequence of the log cabin on the beach. This time the look belongs to Maxim. In an even more spell-bound manner than it does in the scene in Rebecca's room, where Mrs. Danvers reproduces Rebecca's existence, the camera imitates Rebecca's final movement in details. As Doane suggests about this scene: "In tracing the absence of the woman, the camera inscribes its own presence in the film as phallic substitute--the pen which writes the feminine body" (Doane, 115) But, I will suggest, the aim of this writing is to erase the female body. Maxim's look to Rebecca is a paradoxical look that engages fear and desire at the same time. The ambiguity of the look, in the logic of the film's cinematic elements, is something to be abolished. The abolition of this look is enacted by the camera movement which is accompanied with Maxim's narrative. The whole process starts with Maxim's look at Rebecca's ashtray on the sofa, and Fontaine's look at Maxim, then her look to the sofa, thus appropriating Maxim's view. As the camera pans from right to left, imitating Rebecca's body movement, Maxim assumes Rebecca's point of view, making 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?" Then in an impossible manner, since this is Maxim's point of view, the camera is blocked by Maxim's body.

In a similar scene in Rebecca's room, it is the Fontaine character's body that fills in the space which is supposed to be Rebecca's body. In that instance, the Fontaine character's body, instead of erasing Rebecca's, is consumed and possessed by the other woman; in the case with Maxim, his body confronts with the invisible presence of the woman, framing her with his language, his interpretation, and the powerful existence of his male body. As a result, the threatening female body loses its supernatural power and the ability to articulate its presence. Furthermore, its absent presence suffers a total annihilation later on when Rebecca's pillow case (one of the many tokens of her presence) is consumed by flames at the final shot of the film.

At this stage we can also explore the problematic of spectatorship and cinematic apparatus engaged in the striking sequence in the log cabin. When the camera recreates the female body of Rebecca, its "writing" makes manifest the fact that the desired object is the result of representation. Unlike the point of view shot in which camera or character looks at an existing object--something that is already there before being represented--and thus conceals the existence of camera in the look, the camera's writing of female body uncovers the materiality of the camera and the artificiality of cinematic apparatus. In doing so, it blocks the linear narrative order and temporarily deviates from the time flow of the diegesis. The spectator is positioned to feel the difference of the shot, its temporal deviation, its articulation of camera manipulation, its inconsistency in point of view when the camera pans from right to left, and, because of that, the violent insertion of Maxim's body in a look which is supposed to be Maxim's own look.

Theoretically, the "difference" of the shot is supposed to create distance between the spectator and the camera look. Namely, the spectator is positioned to detach himself from the camera look, and, with this consciousness, disrupt the mechanism of hypnotism and dream-work inscribed in the viewing of dominant films. But the potential of resistance of the shot is soon undercut before it has a chance to evoke viewer's cognitive recognition. After the camera pans down to indicate Rebecca's death, Maxim walks away to the side of Fontaine as the camera follows him in the same shot. At that moment of transition the camera is exorcised from the possession of Rebecca, and its movement changes from an embodiment of a female body to a look of desire for the heterosexual couple, a desire usually associated with the melodramatic plot. In the rest of the diegesis, that desire becomes the only desire inscribed in the camera look. The expectation

to see the Fontaine character ascend in her role as mistress, and in the meantime descend in her search for a distinctive feminine identity, contributes to the final coherence of vision.

The manipulation of the camera movements in the two scenes--the camera tracks back to indicate Rebecca's forward action in the sequence in her room, and the camera pen writing Rebecca's body movement in the scene of the cabin--instead of inducing viewer's resistance, only strengthens the awareness of the power of the camera, and the man behind the camera, the enunciator who is in full control of the narrative of the film. In both scenes the desire for Rebecca is enlarged and then either twisted or dwarfed to show an even more powerful will of the enunciator in taming this unsettling desire for a absent woman whose femininity has trespassed the established sexual difference. And the voyeurist pleasure which is never fully fulfilled is replaced by the pleasure of seeing the preservation of a happy marriage.

Laura Mulvey's call for a counter cinematic strategy codifies a subversive filmic manoeuvre in making bare the cinematic manipulation of the look and problematizing the voyeuristic pleasure of cinema sited in the image of woman.² But the mere exposure of cinematic manipulation of the look, as I have shown above through Hitchcock's film, cannot constitute the counter cinematic strategy as such. Quite the contrary, Hitchcock's intervention of the dominant filmic narrative only reasserts his total control of the images, and the impossibility of the formulation of female desire. An additional/alternative counter strategy or theoretic elaboration needs to be addressed and explored along the gender line, which can then serve as the theoretic foundation for the counter cinematic strategy along the line of cultural mutual gaze in global capitalism.

Notes

¹ Recent feminist analysis of female-image in film representation observes that woman is represented as an empty sign to which men project their desire. The presence of woman image evokes a kind of castration anxiety to which men react by exerting voyeurism and fetishism. In each case men experience visual pleasure while woman's subjectivity is eroded by the male gaze. They also point out that the representation of woman as the object of male gaze is constituted in the very apparatus of conventional cinematic enunciation. As Mulvey says, "the cinematic apparatus is designed to produce the look and to create in the spectator the sensation that it is he/she who is producing the look, dreaming these images which appear on the screen." See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

² Mulvey suggests "the first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions...is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment." Ibid. P. 757.

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