

THE INVISIBLE WOMAN: *REBECCA*, AFTER AN AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY BY R.V. LISBOA

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes several aesthetic, narrative and theoretical topics firstly developed by Alfred Hitchcock in *Rebecca* (1940) and recently explored and reinvented by Ricardo Vieira Lisboa in his audiovisual essay *Some Visual Thoughts About Perception In Rebecca* (2020). Other specific works and references also come into play, such as the (original and derivative) novels of Daphne du Maurier and Ana Teresa Pereira, other films by Hitchcock, and Stanley Cavell's conceptualization of the "unknown woman" in classical melodrama. In Hitchcock's film, the topics under analysis here are narratively acted out in the characters of Rebecca and the unnamed protagonist played by actress Joan Fontaine. However, they also materialize theoretical aspects of the spectral ontology of cinema: i.e. the dynamics between absence and presence, invisibility and visibility, past and present, the dead and the living, perception and point of view, the indexicality and materiality of moving images.

Keywords: Absence; Audiovisual essay; Alfred Hitchcock; Invisibility; Ricardo Vieira Lisboa; Spectrality.

Do you think that the dead come back and watch the living?
 Sometimes I wonder if she doesn't come back here to Manderley
 and watch you and Mr. de Winter together.
 Mrs. Danvers, *Rebecca*

Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) poses an inherent reflection on the nature of film motivated by two female characters. One is alive while the other is dead. One embodies the present while the other is locked in the past. And there are other paradoxical attributes associated to each of them. However, in purely cinematic terms, the key feature distinguishing them is their *visibility*: one is visible on the screen while the other escapes even the smallest glimpse. One is played by Joan Fontaine, the actress, but there is nobody playing the part of Rebecca, and, as such, she is presumably banned from the visual flow of the film. And yet, we could say that both women are present, even the invisible one. In fact, Rebecca is possibly more *present* insofar as she is present as herself and not, like the second Mrs. de Winter, *represented* (in Fontaine).

These two characters show some surprising and surely unexpected qualities. As the protagonist, the woman taking the place of Rebecca at Manderley is strikingly passive throughout most of the film. She seems psychologically flat and all around rather "dull" and "plain" (her main epithets). In addition, and even more interestingly considering that she is the main character, she is never given a name. On the contrary, Rebecca possesses several traits that usually befit heroines. She has an "aura" that dominates the film (something her successor very obviously lacks), and we are told that when she was alive, she had a strong personality and unmatched beauty. Moreover, she has a name of her own and shares it with a film that – outrageously! – is centered on another woman.

However, carefully comparing the two characters also reveals uncanny points of confluence between them. Following Daphne Du Maurier's novel, Hitchcock creates a visual and narrative structure characteristic of Doppelgänger tales. While it is certainly true that these women are very different from each other in several aspects, it is also unquestionable that they both share their married name (Mrs. de Winter) and their role as the lady of Manderley.

In *Rebecca*, Hitchcock seems particularly interested in these blurry margins where the two Mrs. de Winter become dangerously confused. Maybe because the two seem to be battling for the lead role in his film? Was he attracted to the idea of interdimensional female catfighting (remember *Vertigo* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1958])?

The psychological and psychoanalytic implications of this Doppelgänger effect have already been vastly discussed. What I would like to stress here is that, in what regards the visual dimension of the film, the single most important difference between the two women is the visibility of one and the invisibility of the other. The productive dynamics between presence and absence, visible and invisible, become thus the key factor of Hitchcock's film. And, since a film is made of visible

and invisible images, this means that there is a meditation on the Image itself at the center of Rebecca.

In *Some Visual Thoughts About Perception in 'Rebecca'*, Ricardo Vieira Lisboa emphasizes this reflexive dimension. The title of the audiovisual essay calls our attention to perception as a core concept in the praxis of cinema. This process is of course related to the act of seeing, of adopting a certain perspective, but also to the effect of being seen and in a way transformed in(to) an image.

Lisboa's film begins in Rebecca's room. Mrs. Danvers urges (us) to "listen to the sea!," and walks to the window as if she were answering the call of the waves. Then the shot of the housekeeper at the bedroom window dissolves into an image of the ocean and, finally, into one of Rebecca's phone book.

This sequence takes place halfway through Hitchcock's film, but Lisboa chooses it as the starting point to his audiovisual essay. This is a profoundly appropriate and clever choice, since the introductory dissolve-sequence merges three different instances in which Rebecca is *present*: 1) her room, which is exactly as it was before her death, thus underlining her ghostly, indexical permanence (see Mulvey [2006, p. 99], on another of Hitchcock's haunted rooms); 2) the sea, which is a symbolic figure for Rebecca, as she loves it, dies in it, and reemerges from it; 3) the phone book, which, with an initial "R-" engraved on its cover, is a paradigmatic object opening up a line of communication with her and concentrating her social relations (it is suggested that she was a very outgoing and worldly woman).

Very concisely, with these three interconnected shots, Lisboa begins his film by drawing our attention to the fact that, in spite of her invisibility, Rebecca exerts her presence through different figures connected to her on a symbolic or an indexical level.

The following section of the essay is entitled "Signature, appropriation", and it isolates a series of shots where we can see the "R-" inscribed in various objects that belonged to Rebecca. By juxtaposing shots of the woman's initial, of her signature and of her belongings, Lisboa mirrors Hitchcock in singling out the visual authority that Rebecca maintains over the visual surfaces in the film.

This tension is identified in other moments of the essay. In "je suis un chien qui suit Godard", various shots of Rebecca's dog suggest her own vicarious presence in the animal. In "copie conforme – idealization", Lisboa comes back to the sequence of Hitchcock's film that most clearly shows the process through which the new Mrs. de Winter becomes a mirror image of the dead woman. This sequence – designed around a portrait aptly analyzed by Marc Vernet (1988, pp. 89-95) – concludes with the unnamed woman coming down the staircase wearing a similar dress to the one Rebecca had worn one year before. When she reaches the ground level, de Winter's sister, Beatrice, exclaims: "Rebecca!" The confusion is now literal, and it contaminates both image and discourse.

However, the most striking section of the audiovisual essay is “the secret beyond the door is the absence of image – aniconism” (on Fritz Lang and *Rebecca*, see Leutrat, 1995, p. 102, 138). Mrs. de Winter enters Rebecca’s room. But as the sequence progresses Lisboa cuts to a shot of Rebecca’s cabin on the beach, instead of showing us her room. In a seemingly subjective shot, the camera wanders around this place that was once Rebecca’s refuge. The cabin exudes aural Rebecca. The way Lisboa edits the two shots suggests that this shot gives us the point of view of the second Mrs. de Winter, who we just saw reaching for the door. However, hauntingly disembodied, the camera also seems to adopt the perspective of Rebecca over her own domains. Her spectral gaze. This way, Lisboa seems to combine three distinct but correlated points of view: those of the camera, Mrs. de Winter and Rebecca.

This daunting – but, I believe, fruitful – idea makes us want to watch Lisboa’s film again, and, by extension, Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* again, while considering this (con)fusion between the perspectives of the machine, of the living and of the dead woman.

We wonder if Lisboa could have been inspired by *O Verão Selvagem dos teus Olhos* [*The Wild Summer in your Eyes*], a 2008 novel by Portuguese writer Ana Teresa Pereira that is a retake on Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, also filtered by the memory of Hitchcock’s film. While in du Maurier’s novel the second woman narrates the action, in Pereira’s novel it is Rebecca who tells her story. And she does this while haunting Manderley and *watching* the new woman taking her place (just as Mrs. Danvers suggests is happening in the quote that I use here for my epigraph). As an ineffaceable ghost/hidden camera watching over what happens in Manderley, Rebecca is the “I” of narration in Pereira’s novel just as much as she is the “eye” of the camera in Hitchcock’s film. This means that, in either case, *to see* is to see what Rebecca sees while not being seen.

The last section of Lisboa’s film, “in the darkness of the theater I take off my shoes”, is a *séance*, which notably refers in French both to a film session and a session of spiritism. After stressing the dynamics between presence and absence, present and past, actual and virtual, dead and living, Lisboa ends his film with an unexpected turn of the screw. He edits the sequence as if the De Winter couple were not watching a home movie (as in Hitchcock’s film), but a Portuguese 1941 newsreel showing the arrival of Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh in Lisbon [Lisboa...].

Lisboa’s final gesture is as playful as it is provocative, because it generates a vivid rupture in the web of meaning produced along his essay. As a last “surprising, inventive, and boundary-breaking” act – as Álvarez Lopez & Martin (2014), borrowing from Volker Pantenburg, suggest an audiovisual essay should be –, Lisboa introduces a third woman in this story about women who strive for presence and visibility. In fact, Leigh is a perfectly adequate figure, for she possesses something of the two other women. When she declares “darling, I don’t give a damn,” she is as strong

and supercilious as Rebecca. When she depends “on the kindness of strangers,” she is as helpless and fragile as the unnamed protagonist. In any case, there is no final piece to complete this puzzle. Having started his essay by *critically* finding patterns in *Rebecca* – cataloguing figures, themes, sequences –, Lisboa ends up *creatively* proposing an entirely new film: one that naturally borrows from Hitchcock’s feature but also shatters it in a “cinephiliac” fashion (see Grant, 2014), conjuring up Lang and Godard, blurring fiction and actuality, ghosts and living beings, and a whole plethora of – as Stanley Cavell (1997) would call them – unknown women (Mrs. de Winter, the woman with no name, Mrs. Danvers, Vivien Leigh, Blanche, Scarlett). They are all Rebecca – the invisible woman.

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