

SOME VISUAL THOUGHTS ABOUT PERCEPTION IN *REBECCA*

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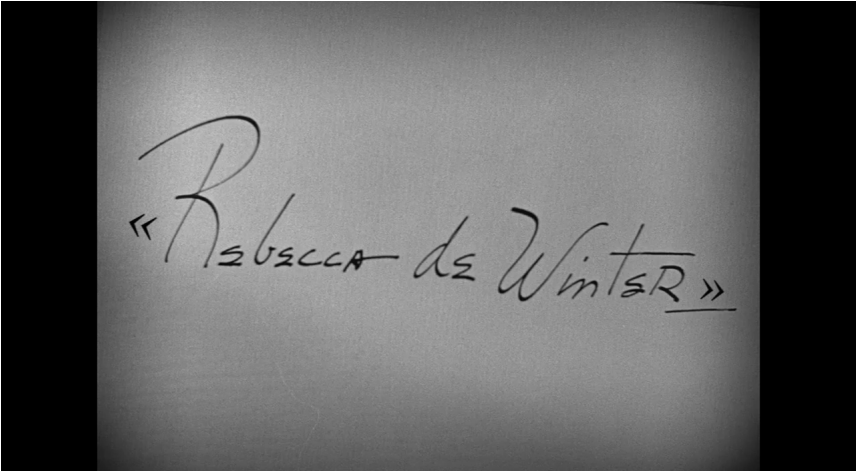
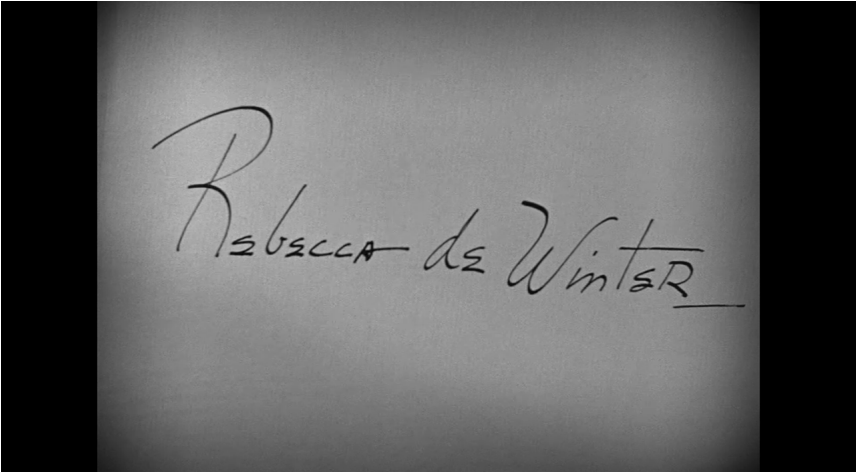
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ABSTRACT

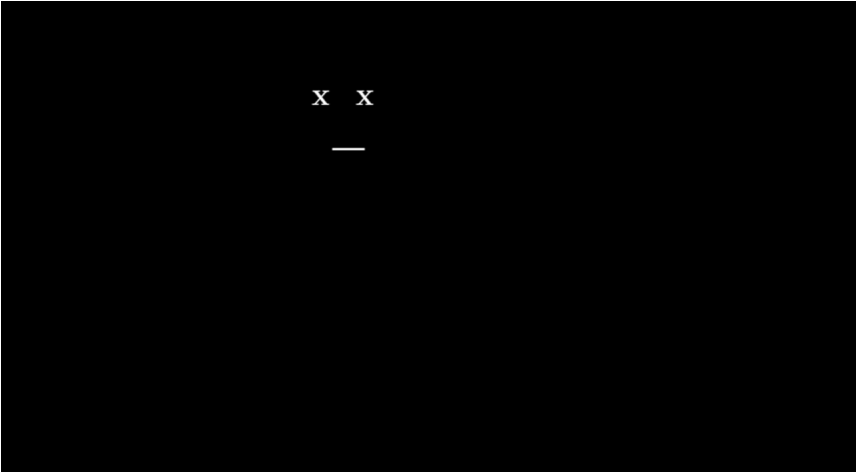
Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* is part of the series of 1940s gothic films. In this essay, one of the most common tropes of this subgenre of the psychological thriller is identified and analysed: perceptual ambiguity. Based on this element, I justify the formal choices of an (audio)visual essay - "Some Visual Thought about Perception in Rebecca" - made with images and sound from that film, which explores the gothic dimensions of the video-essayistic practice itself: research, contradiction, quotation and evocation.

Keywords: Gothic film; Audiovisual essay; Alfred Hitchcock; Visual perception.







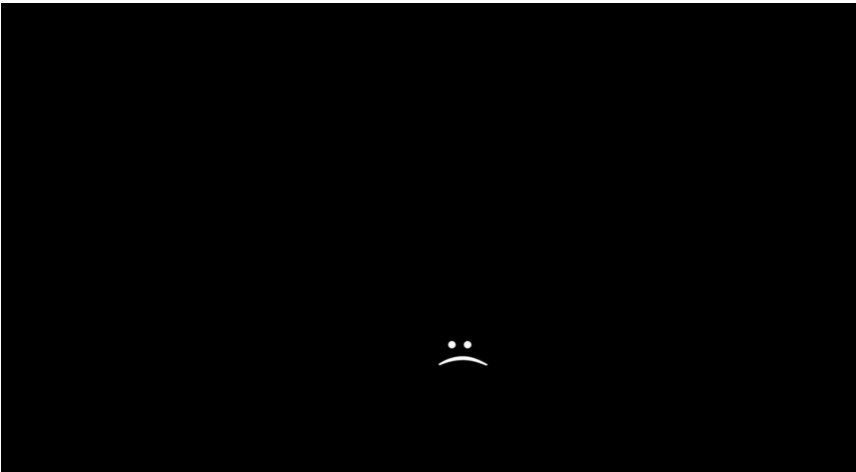












As with many cinematic genres, the Gothic has started with literature. The precursor titles of the genre are *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) – that defined the haunted castle ideal – and *The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story* (1778) – that delineated the archetypes of the young female protagonist. Afterwards, there were Ann Radcliffe's books *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1791) and *The Italian* (1797) (Hanson, 2007, p. 34). These novels would be infinitely repeated and modified under all kinds of ways (including cinema).

In cinema there are multiple interpretations of these literature inspired universes. In particular, a group of films produced in the 40's by the North-American studiomajors. Throughout the decade all studios produced at least one title that can be included in this genre. Some of the directors that worked within the Gothic cycle are: Vincente Minnelli (*Undercurrent*, 1946), Joseph L. Mankiewicz (*Dragonwyck*, 1946), George Cukor (*Gaslight*, 1946), Alfred Hitchcock (*Rebecca*, 1940; *Suspicion*, 1941; *Shadow of a Doubt*, 1943; *Spellbound*, 1945; *Notorious*, 1946; and *Under Capricorn*, 1949), Fritz Lang (*The Secret Beyond the Door...*, 1947), Jacques Tourneur (*I Walked With a Zombie*, 1943; and *Experiment Perilous*, 1944), Robert Siodmak (*The Spiral Staircase*, 1946), Orson Welles (*The Stranger*, 1946), Douglas Sirk (*Sleep My Love*, 1948), Max Ophuls (*Caught*, 1949), Robert Stevenson (*Jane Eyre*, 1943) and William Wyler (*Wuthering Heights*, 1939).

The researcher Diane Waldman, in an important article from the second wave of feminists critique in the eighties, summarily described the Gothic film genre in the following way:

A young and inexperienced woman meets a handsome older man to whom she is alternately attracted and repelled. After a whirlwind courtship (72 hours in Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door*, two weeks is more typical), she marries him. After returning to the ancestral mansion of one of the pair, the heroine experiences a series of bizarre and uncanny incidents, open to ambiguous interpretation, revolving around the question of whether or not the Gothic male really loves her. She begins to suspect that he may be a murderer. (Waldman, 1984, pp. 29-30)

Adding to these broad strokes of narrative and the construction of its two main characters, Gothic is also commonly associated to a group of spaces, situations and typical characters. Common *décors* are the abandoned castle, the ruin, the cemetery, the decadent church, the isolated house, and later, the shadowy apartment, the closed building, the degraded factory or the deserted city. The typical situations involve stairs that lead to hidden secrets kept in humid basements, endless corridors, well-locked and never opened doors, false walls, two-way mirrors, secret passages, candles, ancient books and documents that reveal secrets from the past. The typical characters include the silent

butler or maid, characters affected by a disabling disease, the handsome young man, the crooked doctor, the aristocrat, the mad scientist, the hidden criminal or the disguised psychopath. In many cases, the male character establishes with the constantly fainting innocent girl a professional or romantic relationship, that takes her to that shadowy place where she is lost, disorientated and submitted to the dimension of fear caused by the house itself. But she is, most of the times, equally curious, adventurous and willing to discover and clarify the mystery that afflicts her.

This last aspect reflects the double nature of many Gothic narratives, an ambiguity always present both on the nature of the protagonist's experience, and on us, as spectators, who follow the unfolding of the plot with and through her. What the protagonist perceives... is it the result of a difficulty in communication or a truncated understating of reality? Or, inversely, is this experience purposely conditioned by a malefic figure who intends to drive the woman into madness? "(...) the central feature of the Gothic is ambiguity, the hesitation between two possible interpretations of events by the protagonist (...)." (Hanson, 2007, p. 31)

For myself, *Rebecca* (1940) – the complex adaptation of the famous Daphne du Maurier's eponymous novel – is one of those films each cinephile keeps religiously to himself, like a magic globe, where all the world's mysteries may be reflected. For me, it has been the fruit of endless pleasures. It's a film I watch very often, that I know more or less by heart, but still is always able to offer me small discoveries (signs of my demons that infect the film - or, better still, demons that find, in the film, ways of communicating with me). It's one of these revisitations of the film, that I began to collect images and sounds that reminded me of that abovementioned "essence" of the Gothic genre: the ambiguities of perception (including the actual ambiguous perception of the audiovisual essay spectator).

I naturally started by the aphorism that haunts me for years – "Do you think the dead come back and watch the living?" – imposing a haunting gaze upon all the images that are about to follow. Then, I tried to implant another doubt, just like one of those husbands, manipulators of young and delicate wives: to whom belongs that initial letter? "R" from *Rebecca* or "R" from Ricardo? Signature as appropriation? To which point does the audiovisual essayist make his the images of the films he uses? The answer: by quoting – literalised by the use of the quotation marks, « ». This, followed by a Godard's own quote about his method, in which he describes himself as like a dog chasing his own tail, taken from *JLG/JLG - autoportrait de décembre* (1994). All this to approach Rebecca's inner core the absence of the eponymous character. A film made of images and sounds about a figure without a body or presence.

Another quote follows. As João Bénard da Costa says, we can link the scene where, after Olivier e Fontaine's marriage, the notary throws the nuptial agreement from the first floor to the ground, to this other scene where Olivier is at the verge of a cliff. A man and a woman connected by a ghost (Rebecca), by a cliff (the Hitchcockian fall) and the sea, always the sea (*see – sea*). Also, from the Bénardian writing comes the description

of that Fontaine's point of view shote that slowly covers an empty room (where a crime took place). In another words, "the two women merge one into the other: (...) through Fontaine's eyes, we see everything he is describing (ashtrays, ropes, etc.) as if things would return again to that night, brought back by Rebecca's body and Fontaine's appearance." (Costa, 2002) The ghost finds a body in the gaze, like a virus that takes advantage of the senses of the living. However, there is also an appropriation of Maxim's gaze by Fontaine: her point of view corresponds to his gaze, memory and description. For this reason and for the first time he submits to her gaze. And it's from then on, that the inversion of powers will occur.

And it all ends in a kind of triviality: a newsreel from *Jornal Português* – a series of national *actualités* produced between 1938 and 1951 (under the supervision of António Lopes Ribeiro, Portuguese dictatorship regime's unofficial filmmaker). In particular, a visit of Lawrence Olivier and Vivien Leigh to Portugal, in 1941, "for" the *première* of *Rebecca* in Lisbon. In this way, one transports the film to a very particular context, the one of its Portuguese *première*, in the first years of Estado Novo's dictatorship, where – as it happens with Maxim de Winter – what mattered the most was not to have *gossip*. Moreover, this element also reminds us of the way the commercial circuit shapped and imposed certain readings and "ambiguous interpretations", defined by states' ideologies or personal interests¹. The spectator can also be manipulated like a helpless young wife and he also has the capacity to understand more than just what he sees or hears.

¹ On this, I point to the article I wrote on this subject (in Portuguese) "A representação do cinema no Jornal Português: da capital das vedetas à agenda de António Lopes Ribeiro" (2016).

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