

AN ESSAY ON SUBJECTIVITY IN HOLLYWOOD: *DARK PASSAGE* (DELMER DAVES, 1947) AND ITS ASSIMILATION OF AVANT-GARDE FEATURES

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INTRODUCTION: FILMIC EXPERIMENTS WITH OPTICAL SUBJECTIVITY

David Bordwell (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985: 72) stresses the uniform nature of the classical stylistic paradigm, but at the same time, he recognizes certain deviations from the norm in Hollywood films. One of these deviations was the product of the rise of film noir, which challenged the classical style on various fronts (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985: 77-79), one of which is related to the subjective point of view around which these films tended to be structured. This mode of subjective narration, which Hollywood appropriated from popular literature, opened up various possibilities, including the incorporation into these films of certain procedures taken from avant-garde art. In this sense, *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947), by restricting the narration to the character's point of view—which is firmly tied both to optical subjectivity (throughout the first

part of the story) and to the character's psychological state (in decisive moments of the second)—takes Bordwell's proposition to the limit. Indeed, by exploiting the possibilities offered by this singular point of view, Daves' film would absorb a wide range of experimental practices developed in the avant-garde movements of European cinema in the 1920s, to produce one of film noir's most unique contributions to Hollywood's thirst for differentiation which, according to Janet Staiger (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985: 112), ended up becoming a key feature of classical Hollywood cinema.

It is particularly remarkable that it was Delmer Daves, an American filmmaker with no direct contact with the European avant-garde—unlike other film noir directors like Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder and Jacques Tourneur, who did have connections to the European film world—who created this innovative work. The level of his experimentation was so drastic—for example, it was Daves

himself who insisted on a restrained performance from the film's star, Humphrey Bogart, whose presence on screen is restricted to his voice during much of the film and who appears with his face bandaged and with no voice at all in other sequences of the film—that it ended up being largely panned by American critics, who responded negatively to the film on those very grounds. For example, Bosley Crowther, a film critic for one of the country's most influential newspapers, *The New York Times*, in addition to lambasting Bogart's performance, which he described as considerably inferior to Lauren Bacall's, concluded that the film's best feature was not the visual strategies it works with, which the reviewer either patently ignores or deems to be of no value, but its clever use of the streets of San Francisco: "San Francisco [...] is liberally and vividly employed as the realistic setting for the Warners' *Dark Passage*. Writer-Director Delmar Daves has very smartly and effectively used the picturesque streets of that city and its stunning panoramas [...] to give a dramatic backdrop to his rather incredible yarn. So, even though bored by the story—which, because of its sag, you may be—you can usually enjoy the scenery, which is as good as a travelogue" (Crowther, 1947: 23).

Obviously, audiences were not going to flock to movie theatres to watch a travel documentary, especially one that was offered merely to counteract the boredom induced by the film's story, and so reviews like Crowther's helped to ensure that the film went almost unnoticed—almost, because it did in fact yield good box office returns on its initial release, due not to its narrative or aesthetic value but to the presence of the Bogart-Bacall pairing, whose mere presence in a movie was enough to guarantee its commercial success. Indeed, it would be safe to assume that this would have been the reason why, even allowing for the disadvantage of Bogart's visual absence from much of the film, the producers agreed to support the picture, as unorthodox as it was. In Europe,

the critics at the time didn't know what to make of the film either.¹ It would not be until several years later that scholars like Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton (2002: 59, 63) would praise *Dark Passage* as a masterpiece of film noir, on a par with *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944), *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), or *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947). In their analysis of the film, Borde and Chaumeton highlight the following:

In the ideal museum of film noir, some images will undoubtedly endure: the truly repulsive surgeon; the necessary murder of the blackmailer on the deserted San Francisco dockside; the suicide of the demoniacal woman, played by Agnes Moorehead; lastly, the hero himself who—and the idea's new—changes face during the course of his adventures. And Daves has, in the first part of the film, risked a fresh stab at subjective cinema. Until Vincent Parry's been operated on, his face isn't seen. The "I" here is the escaped man. The experiment is motivated by the script, and that's why it proves more convincing than Robert Montgomery's. (Borde & Chaumeton, 2002: 64)

Beyond these images for the film noir museum—some of which will be taken up again later in this paper—Borde and Chaumeton do not overlook the fact that the first part of the film represents an innovative experiment of subjective cinema, an experiment based on an approach to subjectivity that was in fact tested out in another film released earlier that same year: *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947). Montgomery's film was shot entirely in the first person singular, i.e. the camera's view is equated with the character's. This was a technique that Montgomery had been playing with since 1938, based on an idea that Orson Welles also developed in his film version of *Heart of Darkness*, a project that was ultimately shelved.² But unlike Welles, Montgomery, who had just returned from the Second World War with battle honours, was given free rein by

the studio (in this case Metro-Goldwyn Mayer), and in particular by Louis B. Mayer himself, who was willing to allow him to try out any kind of technical innovation that he wanted to include in the film (Reid, 2004: 25) to follow through with the idea that Welles had ultimately failed to turn into a reality: to shoot a whole film from a subjective point of view. Ángel Fernández-Santos explains that when Montgomery repeated Welles' unprecedented idea ("Given that what happens in *Lady in the Lake* is what detective Philip Marlowe sees, why not turn the camera's gaze into Marlowe's gaze?"), it was no less than "a cinematic adoption of the logic of the noir style. As this was a success, the studio [MGM] took the bold move seriously" (Fernández-Santos, 1983: 46). In any case, the fact is that *Lady in the Lake* got produced.

It was a production which, incidentally, was anything but enjoyable for the actors. Lloyd Nolan (Fernández-Santos, 1983: 46) remarked that "it was terribly hard to have to always be looking at the camera lens, when for years and years we'd been shouted at that we should act as if the lens didn't exist." But the problems were not limited to the film shoot alone; the end result of the film as a whole also proved disappointing, largely because it failed to achieve what it sought to do: to get the spectator to identify with the character. Borde and Chaumeton (2002: 58) explain the problem this way: "But how could there be any rapport when all that was known of detective Philip Marlowe, the 'I' of the film, was the sound of his voice, his forearms, the smoke from his cigarette, and sometimes his fleeting reflection in a mirror? Added to which, [...] the acting of characters forever seen face-on [...] inevitably doomed this experiment to semi-failure."

The problem was that the mechanisms of identification with the character required the inclusion of secondary internal ocularisation techniques³ that would give the spectator the opportunity to see the character's face and facial expressions. Borde and Chaumeton (2002: 58)

THE PROBLEM WAS THAT THE MECHANISMS OF IDENTIFICATION WITH THE CHARACTER REQUIRED THE INCLUSION OF SECONDARY INTERNAL OCULARISATION TECHNIQUES

conclude by asserting that "*Lady in the Lake* has shown that the procedure, a highly valuable one when judiciously used—as [...] in the admirable opening sequence of *Dark Passage*—namely, when required by the action, turns out to be gratuitous when one tries to systematize it." The value referred to here is related to the fact that, while in *Lady in the Lake* the procedure is used systematically and gratuitously, in *Dark Passage* it is employed only in certain parts of the film, combined in some scenes with some other viewpoint(s). Moreover, Daves uses this subjective POV to incorporate a series of avant-garde visual strategies in the film that result in a genuinely innovative work of art. In the following sections I will analyse Daves' film based on both the fruitful narratological theories of Gaudreault and Jost, and on innovative formalist studies (predominantly expressionist and surrealist), while also considering classical contributions to the analysis of film noir such as Borde and Chaumeton's study cited above.

VISUAL TECHNIQUE AND SUPPORTING TECHNOLOGY

During the film's opening credits, a series of images present a bay-side landscape, with some outdoor shots identifiable as views of San Quentin Prison in California. When the credits finish, a sideways pan links the previous view to a truck, loaded with steel drums half-covered by a tarpaulin, driving away from the prison. This shot dissolves into another showing the truck once again, continuing on its route, and then the camera pans over to the prison again, rising abo-

ve a thick line of trees, while the sound of police sirens fills the air. The subsequent images place us on the back of the truck, where we see a pair of hands emerging from one of the steel drums. A straight cut draws our attention to how these hands pull back in to hide when the sound of the sirens, joined now by the barking of dogs, grows louder. Another straight cut returns us to the previous view, where we see the hands of the person hidden inside the drum rocking it until it finally bounces off the truck. This is a typically classical editing strategy that tells us without words—using only the sounds of the sirens and the dogs barking—that the person hidden inside the steel drum—represented metonymically by his hands—is a fugitive who has just broken out of the prison. The film thus introduces what will be its central theme: the man on the run. But at the same time, it creates the (narrative) conditions for the (visual) articulation of the next segment: the man on the run rolling downhill inside a drum.

A PAN SHOT FOLLOWS THE DRUM AS IT ROLLS DOWN A HILLSIDE UNTIL IT CRASHES INTO A LARGE ROCK

A pan shot follows the drum as it rolls down a hillside until it crashes into a large rock. But our view of the drum's progress is interrupted by the insertion of another shot where the camera is positioned inside the drum (Image 1): the result is the establishment of a circular spinning gaze similar to one used in *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (Berlin, *Symphonie einer Grosstadt*, Walter Ruttmann, 1927), where the camera, adopting the movement of a roulette wheel in full action, moves out into the street while spinning so wildly and intensely that it turns the façades of the city's buildings into mere abstract circular shapes, images that ultimately end up melting into a pin-whe-



Image 1. The spinning gaze.
Dark Passage, Delmer Daves, 1947

el firework (Poyato, 2008: 214). Making use of the character's location inside the drum, the camera is positioned where his eyes would be to portray a dizzying view that dissolves all the details of the visual field into abstract geometrical shapes similar to those in Ruttmann's film, although in this case the vibrant blur is framed by the circular mouth of the drum, creating an effect that visually resembles the image of a front-loading washing machine in spin mode.

This operation, in addition to foreshadowing the optical subjectivity that will dominate practically the whole first part of the film, at the same time facilitates the inclusion of images suggestive of an avant-garde visual technique: the establishment of a point of view animated by a constantly accelerating circular motion, resulting in the representation of a circular-framed image of a visual vortex. This is a depiction whose appeal, as in Ruttmann's film, lies in the dynamic and energising capacity of the circle, an element associated with the visual culture of futurism. Of course, while avant-garde works would not need a narrative justification for this operation (although they would need a conceptual or a graphic one), in *Dark Passage* Daves is compelled to justify it on the basis of the subjective view of the character; nevertheless, the shot enriches the visual dimension of the film and at the same time invokes the spiral, a metaphor for the frenetic (narrative) journey of the man on the run.

After returning to the previous view of the steel drum rolling down until it crashes against the rock that stops it, we cut once again to inside the drum, although this time it is not to match up the camera's point of view with the character's, but to establish an objective POV that uses a zero ocularisation process to show the character, always with his back to the camera, emerge from his hiding place and stagger away. The result is a visually attractive shot, as once again the mouth of the container gives the image the quality of a cinematographic *tondo*, a circular composition centred in this case on the character's body movements as he runs away. The shot, which maintains the same frame over an extended span of time, shows the character, far away enough now to have become a mere silhouette, stripping off his shirt (Image 2), thus establishing a POV that is markedly separate from the protagonist's. This separation is particularly striking given that, as of the next shot, the two points of view will be collapsed to give way to the optical subjectivity and

the consequent mechanism of primary internal ocularisation that will dominate much of the following sequences.

No less interesting than the work with this technique is the use of the technology that makes it possible; technology which, in this case, includes a camera that is light and manageable enough to be able to be *positioned* with relative ease both inside the drum in the scene described above, and as the eyes of the character in the scenes that follow. In an interview, Daves himself (Coma & Latorre, 1981: 107) would make reference to this: "In *Dark Passage*, for the first time I used one of the cameras taken from the Germans, the 'Arriflex'. We got it from the American government, which had studied it during the war to make a mould of it. In the first five rolls of footage, the camera followed Humphrey Bogart as if it was him, in a POV shot."

Indeed, wartime savings measures, which included shooting outdoors, forced Hollywood to modify the way it made pictures, including the use of lighter and more versatile production equipment. Once the war was over, as Bordwell notes (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985: 590), manufacturers began creating equipment and film that facilitated shooting outdoors, and some camera operators began using the Arriflex, although, Bordwell clarifies, "lightweight cameras were rarely used in Hollywood before the 1960s" (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985: 590). Of course, one of those rare occasions was during the filming of *Dark Passage*, when the film's cinematographer Sidney Hickox used an Arriflex to film shots from the character's viewpoint. As noted above, this idea of tying the POV to the protagonist's gaze had been used just a few months

Image 2. Cinematographic *tondo*. *Dark Passage*, Delmer Daves, 1947



THE SAVINGS MEASURES IMPOSED IN TIMES OF WAR, WHICH INCLUDED SHOOTING OUTDOORS, FORCED HOLLYWOOD TO MODIFY THE WAY IT MADE PICTURES

earlier in *Lady in the Lake*, which maintained it throughout the whole film, although in that case the character's more stationary point of view made a lightweight camera unnecessary. And as far as the formal and functional effectiveness of this technique is concerned, as noted above, while in Montgomery's film it was used gratuitously,⁴ resulting in a failed attempt at optical subjectivity, in *Dark Passage* it proved to be a technique rich in spatial effects and formal conquests.

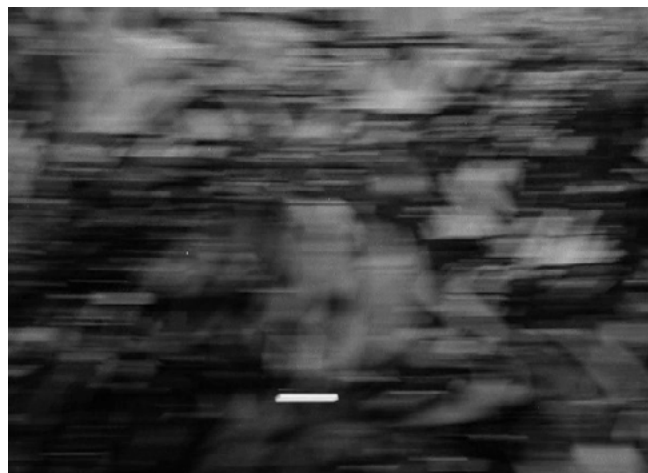
THE SPATIAL SYSTEM: AUTONOMOUS HANDS

In a manner analogous to the spinning shot that had previously placed us in the character's position inside the rolling steel drum, from this point it will be the use of sweeping pan shots that will remind us that we are seeing through his eyes. While before the character was trapped inside a container rolling downhill at a constantly increasing speed, now his rapid head movements, reflecting the agitation that torments him, serve to establish a point of view that results in the inclusion of more abstract images (Image 3). We are thus effectively looking through the character's eyes at the underbrush where his hands hide the shirt that betrays his fugitive status, or scrutinizing the road where the police vehicles appear, or searching for a sign of someone who might be able to help him escape. In this way, the story establishes an optical subjectivity which, like the steel drum shot discussed above, will allow the inclusion in the film of visual strategies that depart

from the classical paradigm and considerably enrich the aesthetic dimension of the film.

Moreover, the development of this kind of subjective POV effectively constructs a faceless protagonist, contradicting one of the most basic rules of the classical paradigm: the establishment of the character's face as the visual focus of the story (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985: 51). This operation thus means that the actor's performance is limited to the soundtrack, while the visual elements (both his facial expressions and his body gestures and movements) are excluded from the outset. This is far from a trivial point, given that the actor in question is Humphrey Bogart, whose presence on screen, other than the sporadic appearance of his hands, feet, or the occasional partial shadow, is considerably restricted. This restriction may be what influenced Crowther's opinion (1947: 23) of Bogart's performance, which he describes as being both limited and weak compared to Bacall's: "When [Bogart] finally does come before the camera, he seems uncommonly chastened and reserved, a state in which Mr. Bogart does not appear at his theatrical best. However, the mood of his performance is compensated somewhat by that of Miss Bacall, who generates quite a lot of pressure as a sharp-eyed, knows-what-she-wants girl." There is also the possibility,

Image 3. Abstraction.
Dark Passage, Delmer Daves, 1947



however, that Crowther's criticism of the actor's performance was related to the serious psychosomatic distress that Bogart experienced while making this film, which even resulted in severe hair loss. At one point during shooting, the actor had become so bald that he had to use a wig and fake sideburns. This pushed Bogart into a state of total depression that inevitably spilled over into his performance, although there are critics, like Fernández-Santos (1984: 44), who argue that this situation, far from undermining Bogart's acting, actually enhanced the gravity he brought to the role.

In any event, this optical-narrative approach in *Dark Passage* involves experimentation not just at the technical level, but also at the systemic level—specifically, the spatial system. Aligning the visual field with the character's point of view turns that character into a creator of spaces, as can be seen in the long segment where the fugitive Parry and Irene (Lauren Bacall), the unknown woman who picks him up on the road, arrive at her home. This segment is constructed entirely by Parry, based on the character's optical perspective. The POV shots of Parry getting out of the car, entering the building through the front garden, reaching the elevator and finally entering Irene's apartment, gradually build a space organised around coordinates quite distinct from classical parameters. It is a space characterised by an irregularity of distances, as while one POV shot positions us, for example, at just a few inches from the glass walls of the lift, allowing us to see every detail of its geometric patterns, in the hallway leading to the apartment the space opens up considerably, in a wide shot with a marked depth of field, stretched by Irene's movement down the hall. There are also shots where the protagonist's nervous gaze is represented in panning that effectively dissolves the shapes filling the space panned over, and other shots where Irene is so close to Parry that her hair obstructs his view. And in Irene's apartment, the space is also constructed around

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the protagonist's gaze, although now the point of view is fixed and the scale of all the shots is similar. In all cases, the space is expressive rather than narrative, based as it is on the optical subjectivity that structures this whole part of the film.

But even more significant than this unique construction of space is the incorporation into the images, also justified by the first-person perspective, of an innovative avant-garde visual technique. I refer here to the continuous segment in which Parry, having settled in at Irene's apartment, takes a shower, shaves and tosses the package containing his clothes into the incinerator—actions which, linked together by a series of dissolves, are all visually represented in close shots of Parry's hands turning on the taps and adjusting the shower head, turning off the sink tap after washing his razor under the water, and opening the incinerator chute to put the package of clothes inside. This series of shots ends with another close-up shot of Parry's hands turning on the record player. What is the significance of this segment, which takes up a considerable amount of time yet contributes little or nothing to the development of the action? Given that it is preceded by Irene's suggestion, before her departure, that Vincent bathe, shave and throw out his clothes, it is clear that the relevance of this series of shots is narrative. But it also undoubtedly has to do with the presence of the protagonist's hands. It is no mere coincidence that the character's hands are featured in every shot, like restless protagonists, because the unification of the visual field and the character's field of vision appears to give his

IN ITS USE OF OPTICAL SUBJECTIVITY, DARK PASSAGE THUS INTRODUCES A FEATURE MORE CHARACTERISTIC OF AVANT-GARDE CINEMA, AND CERTAINLY ALIEN TO THE HOLLYWOOD PARADIGM

hands autonomous movement whenever they perform an action. And the idea of hands with a life of their own, as Román Gubern (1999: 399) has pointed out, is a favourite theme of the surrealist aesthetic, especially in the work of Luis Buñuel. Indeed, before directing his first film, Buñuel himself (1928: 187) would offer a reflection that seems to foreshadow this predilection: “Why do they insist on demanding metaphysics from cinema and not on acknowledging that in a well-made film the fact of opening a door or seeing a hand—a great monster—seize an object could contain a genuine and hitherto unheard-of beauty?”

Indeed, the primary internal ocularisation technique applied in the film gives the shots of the character’s hands, as they take hold of and handle objects, that very unheard-of beauty that Buñuel is talking about. The film segment described above, rather weakly justified in narrative terms by the tasks that Irene charges Parry with performing, appears to reflect that beauty exactly. It is worth recalling here that the beauty Buñuel alludes to has been a feature of cinema since its origins: for example, in *Le rêve du cuisinier* (Segundo de Chomón, 1909), a mysterious pair of hands appear out of nowhere to peel and cut vegetables, write down the costs of the food on a board, etc., while the cooks are asleep. But it would be the filmmakers of the avant-garde who would engage most with this idea, like the Expressionist filmmaker Robert Wiene in *The Hands of Orlac* (Orlacs Hände, 1924), a film about the hands of a killer that are transplanted onto a pianist. In 1925, William Fryer Harvey published the novel *The Beast with Five*

Fingers, which explores the theme of a living severed hand, an idea that Buñuel would take up in Hollywood in 1944 when he wrote *Alucinaciones en torno a una mano muerta* [Hallucinations about a Dead Hand] and would subsequently bring to the screen in his film *The Exterminating Angel* (*El ángel exterminador*, 1963).

In its use of optical subjectivity, *Dark Passage* thus introduces a feature more characteristic of avant-garde cinema, and certainly alien to the Hollywood paradigm, where human hands take on a life of their own, even if they are not engaged in strangling or killing as they are in the avant-garde films, but in shaving, putting on a record, etc., and in this sense they are revealed to be more like the hands in Chomón’s film. The optical point of view around which the film is structured facilitates this strange vision of hands severed from the body; hands which, while they perform mundane everyday tasks, exhibit an autonomy evocative of the beauty captured in the images described above.

FROM THE NIGHTMARE TO THE AWAKENING

To escape from the police as they close in on him, Vincent Parry chooses to undergo plastic surgery to have his face altered. Thus, with the help of a taxi driver (Tom D’Andrea), he goes to see Coley (Houseley Stevenson), an unlicensed plastic surgeon. This sequence begins with a wide shot of the city streets at night, illuminated only by the flickering lights of some street lamps. Down one of the steep slopes of the street we see an individual walking towards the camera, his face moving in and out of the shadowy spaces, in a shot that continues for some time and which we quickly realise is from Parry’s point of view. The flame from a match fleetingly lighting up the face of the stranger, who has asked Parry for a light, brings an end to these images, whose graphic nature gives them an oneiric quality in keeping with the presence of this unknown individual who,

it might be said, seems to have stepped out of a dream. In any case, this sequence serves as an introduction to the scene that follows, where Parry meets the doctor who will operate on his face: another character who seems to have stepped out of a nightmare. Like the previous one, this scene is structured entirely in the first person, so that though the optical “I” of the character we see the ageing, wrinkled face of the doctor, in a shot that finds its continuation in subsequent shots of the medical instruments laid out on a table and of the operating chair, images that collectively give the space the appearance more of a barbershop than of a clinic, an appearance that is further supported by a subsequent shot showing the surgeon brandishing a barber’s straight razor (Image 4). The face of a skinless mannequin adorning one of the walls of the room further contributes to the sinister quality of this place, presided over by a plastic surgeon who resembles a cross between a barber and a butcher. Once again, the film makes use of the character’s optical subjectivity to create and characterise the space; in this case, a space with the unsettling feeling of a nightmare.

The doctor covers up the patient’s face with a towel soaked in anaesthetic. This is followed by a fade to black. Next, we see a parade of dissolving images, beginning with the face of the mannequin split into three identical faces which, shown in profile, turn around into frontal position so that the right eye of each one becomes the vertex of a luminous triangle, and in the centre of this shape the successive faces of different characters appear, some of them spontaneously multiplying and revolving like satellites or in concentric circles around the one occupying central position. Finally, these faces give way to the horrific face of the surgeon, which quickly splits into six identical faces that partly over-

lap, and then these same faces put on a series of grimaces that make them look like a bulldog and then a monkey. This leads to a succession of hideous figures, as added to the deformations made by the grimaces are further distortions resulting from the use of optical filters (Image 5). The doctor’s outburst of laughter has the effect of a further multiplication of the faces, filling the frame with the black holes of laughing open mouths. The sequence is basically a chain of grotesque images justified by the drugged condition of the protagonist under the influence of the anaesthetic.

At this point, with the fade to black mentioned above (a blackness that is also diegetic, since Parry’s eyes—which until now have also been the spectator’s—are covered by the anaesthetic cloth), the optical subjectivity of the character gives way to a new subjectivity, in this case associated with his psychological condition, reflected by the preceding parade of surreal images described above, a kind of visionary spiral in which faces split, multiply, twist, turn and melt into each other. This is the nightmare logic that avant-garde cinema

Image 4. Barber-surgeon. *Dark Passage*, Delmer Daves, 1947





Image 5. The grotesque.
Dark Passage, Delmer Daves, 1947

adopted in films like *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), where Freder (Gustav Fröhlich) catches his father (Alfred Abel) in a loving embrace with the false María (Brigitte Helm), provoking a state of shock that is visually expressed in various phases, one of which is depicted as an inferno of dissolving images (Pedraza, 2000: 66) to which Daves's film clearly owes a debt. In this way, *Dark Passage* once again incorporates avant-garde visual techniques that are explained by the character's subjectivity (now psychological rather than optical), experimenting with them and creating images like the ones described above.

When Parry wakes up, after a brief blurring of the image to represent his recovery from the effects of the anaesthetic, the faces of the surgeon and the taxi driver looking at the camera appear in the frame, in a new POV shot from the protagonist's perspective. But then something unexpected happens: the camera offers us a reverse shot of Vincent Parry (Humphrey Bogart). The story is thus disengaged from the optical subjectivity of the character to show us his face, in a reverse shot that up until now has been denied, as the actor's performance has hitherto been restricted to the soundtrack, with the exception of the *tondo* shot

at the start of the film where we saw him from behind, moving away into the background of the frame, and a few shots in another scene where Parry is in the back seat of a taxi, his face shrouded by the shadows of the night. But the character's face in this reverse shot is also shrouded, in this case by bandages that leave only his eyes visible.

From the face withheld (from the spectator's view) to the face in bandages: this is the transition that the character undergoes. And thus, the subjective gaze that has dominated the film until now is visually given eyes: eyes to see, but also, and above all, to become the character's only element of facial expression. This is what happens in the segment where Vincent goes to the house of his lifelong friend, George, and finds that he has been murdered: the short scene features an extreme close-up shot of Parry's face (Image 6), with all the emotion concentrated in his eyes—eyes that not only look as they have up to now, but also feel—staring sorrowfully through the bandages. The importance of this shot is reflected in its repetition at two other moments, so that it appears in the scene three times altogether: first, when Parry confirms that his friend is dead; second, while he realises that he will be accused of the crime; and at the end, when Vincent looks at his friend for the last time. This scene also includes a voice-over of Parry's thoughts about his murdered friend, which serves to provide essential narrative information, in accordance with the classical canon.

Even now that Parry's face-change operation has resulted in a change of point of view from primary internal ocularisation to secondary internal or "zero" ocularisation, the character's subjectivity continues to facilitate the structuring of subsequent segments. One of these segments begins with Parry's arrival at Irene's apartment: racked with exhaustion, he collapses in a faint at her door after ringing the bell. Following the inevitable dissolve, the next shot is an extreme close-up of Irene's face in which the details of her features are blurred, subjected to an optical pro-

cess using diffracting filters that give the shot a dreamlike appearance, while at the same time highlighting its expressiveness. This image is similar to Man Ray's work in *The Starfish* (*L'Étoile de mer*, 1928), for which he filmed the nude shots of Kiki de Montparnasse with special gelatin filters that distorted the pictures in order to get past the censors (Acosta, 2006: 20). Daves uses practically the same effect in this shot, shrouding the actress's face in a kind of shimmering halo. But unlike the images of Kiki, this shot of Irene comes into focus immediately afterwards to reveal the woman's beautiful face—in a shot which (and this could hardly be coincidental) is the most extreme close-up in the whole film—smiling and greeting Vincent as he slowly comes to.

This transition from dream-state to wakefulness introduces another visual shift, in an operation intended to frame the woman's beauty right where the shimmering haze—the material out of

which cinema is made—is rendered visible. The avant-garde strategy incorporated here is thus not an end unto itself, but a means of representing the crystallisation of the filmic form, in this case embodied in the (beautiful) face of the woman. In this sense, it is an operation based once again on the psychological subjectivity of the character, which, as noted above, is still there, as if embedded in the marrow of the narrative, facilitating this new filmic experimentation.

CONCLUSION: THE DENOUEMENT

Shown first as a body seen from behind, staggering through the mud as he tries to escape in the *tondo* shot at the beginning of the film, and then as a passenger whose face is concealed in night shadows in the scene where he takes the taxi that will take him to his friend's home, Vincent Parry is only a gaze for long segments in the first

Image 6. Eyes that feel. *Dark Passage*, Delmer Daves, 1947



part of *Dark Passage*. As the story progresses, the face is then visually endowed with eyes, but not a face, which is wrapped up dramatically in bandages. The character thus becomes a faceless pair of eyes, eyes that serve as his only means of facial expression. At last, the eyes find their place in a face, which is at last revealed when his bandages are taken off. The character's face is finally present on screen, so that the actor now has all his features, both on the visual level (body and facial expression) and on the soundtrack (the voice and its effects). This process constitutes a piece-by-piece visual structuring of the character until his face is finally revealed.⁵ But the interesting aspect of all these intermediate states is their contribution to the development of a series of differentiating operations influenced mainly by European cinema, which reflect Hollywood's tactics to exploit avant-garde stylistic techniques (Thompson, 1993: 198), from the use of vibrant abstract shapes to hands endowed with autonomy, and including the construction of spaces and faces, in some cases evocative of nightmare imagery. These are not merely experimental, gratuitous techniques, as was the case in *Lady in the Lake*, a film reduced to a single procedure based on tying the point of view entirely to the eyes of the protagonist, but techniques rich in formal conquests to reflect "the overwrought absorption by an insane retina of the cadence of an equally insane external nightmare," to quote Fernández-Santos (1990: 37).

When the character's face is revealed, the film's formal structure changes. Lacking the pretext to include any new visual strategies, the filmmaker chooses to wrap up the story which, inexorably tied to Parry's fate, ultimately leads him to freedom. As Borde and Chaumeton (2002: 63) point out, Daves masterfully guides the narrative to its conclusion with a series of episodes that include Parry's confrontation with Madge (Agnes Moorehead), a key scene in which, once she realises she has been found out, she throws herself to her death so that Parry might take the blame for

it. Yet even when it seems all the odds are stacked against him, Parry manages to get across the border and to be reunited with Irene. The nightmare ends, as "[l]ike a powerful river swollen with slack water, the vista broadens enormously and opens onto the immensity of the Pacific" (Borde & Chaumeton, 2002: 64). There, in a café in Pativilca, Peru, the couple's prototypical marital kiss against the background of the endless sea represents the sanctioning of this happy ending to all the preceding conflicts. Because this is the ultimate objective of the classical narrative, regardless of whether it is film noir and regardless of the obstacles to its achievement: to impose law and order on the prevailing chaos (of injustice).

NOTES

- 1 And not just at the time. Even today, Daves's film tends to be overlooked, as it was in a recent study (Duncan & Müller, 2017), where it doesn't even appear on the list (a list no less arbitrary than any other, but a list nonetheless) of the fifty film noir productions selected.
- 2 *Heart of Darkness*, which Welles had already brought to radio in 1938, was meant to be his first film for RKO Pictures. The screenplay, written by Welles and John Houseman, was to be filmed entirely from the point of view of Charles Marlow. Welles even made a short introductory film to present his plan for the project. However, the combination of financial difficulties and the bold nature of the idea led to the project being shelved (Zunzunegui, 2005: 46-47).
- 3 The concept of ocularisation and its classification as either internal ocularisation (further subdivided into primary and secondary forms) and external ocularisation have been taken from Gaudreault and Jost (2001: 139-144).
- 4 "A technical discovery is pointless unless it is accompanied by a formal conquest in whose crucible it can shape the mould which is called 'style'" (Godard: 1998: 69).

- 5 In fact, Parry's face before the face operation is shown in a newspaper earlier in the film, but it is a still shot, frozen in a photograph.

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AN ESSAY ON SUBJECTIVITY IN HOLLYWOOD: DARK PASSAGE (DELMER DAVES, 1947) AND ITS ASSIMILATION OF AVANT-GARDE FEATURES

Abstract

Even after the Hollywood system had become clearly defined and uniform, its filmmakers were still attentive to alternative movements that could potentially enrich it. There was thus a delicate balance between innovation and standardisation, as stylistic elements based on new techniques were inevitably subjected to the prevailing norm of narrative logic. One of the most interesting examples of this phenomenon is *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947), a noir film produced by Warner Bros. Pictures, which imbues its images with a large dose of avant-garde visual elements without abandoning the narrative focus expected of classical Hollywood cinema.

Key words

Film noir; *Dark Passage*; Delmer Daves; Classicism; Subjectivity; Avant-garde.

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Article reference

Poyato Sánchez, P. (2019). An Essay on Subjectivity in Hollywood: *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947) and its Assimilation of Avant-garde Features. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 27, 91-104.

UN ENSAYO DE SUBJETIVIDAD EN HOLLYWOOD: LA SENDA TENEBROSA (DELMER DAVES, 1947) Y SU ASIMILACIÓN DEL RASGO VANGUARDISTA

Resumen

Aun cuando el sistema hollywoodiense se quería tan sólido como uniforme y bien definido, no por ello dejó de estar alerta a todas aquellas prácticas alternativas que podían enriquecerlo. Se planteaba así un delicado equilibrio entre innovación y normalización por cuanto la estilización derivada de los nuevos recursos incorporados había de ser en todo caso sometida al predominio de la lógica narrativa. Uno de los casos más interesantes que ilustra esta máxima es *La senda tenebrosa* (*Dark Passage*, Delmer Daves, 1947), un film de cine negro producido por la Warner Bros. Pictures que inyecta en sus imágenes una buena dosis de recursos visuales de la vanguardia sin alterar por ello la motivación narrativa propia del cine clásico.

Palabras clave

Cine negro; *La senda tenebrosa*; Delmer Daves; clasicismo; subjetividad; vanguardia.

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Referencia de este artículo

Poyato Sánchez, P. (2019). Un ensayo de subjetividad en Hollywood: *La senda tenebrosa* (Delmer Daves, 1947) y su asimilación del rasgo vanguardista. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 27, 91-104.

Edita / Published by



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ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB www.revistaatalante.com MAIL info@revistaatalante.com