



The Pleasures of the Spectacle

Edited by
Phillip Drummond

The London Film and Media Reader 3



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The London Film & Media Reader 3

The Pleasures of the Spectacle

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31 / The Pleasure of Appearances: Image and Narration in *Film Noir*

Linda Huszár

Introduction

This essay focuses on the narrative structure of American classical *film noir* during the 1940s and 1950s. Appearing to maintain the goal-driven attitude of classical narration, the *noir* narrative gently starts to derail its rational trajectory, opening up a new approach to cinematic narration. Yet my approach is not exclusively historical. I concentrate on *noir* practice itself, the dissembling subversion itself, which has a clear connection with the power of images to undermine narration. This is why *appearance* seems to be a suitable concept, linking ideas about the visible to an implicit story, an in-between phenomenon comprising both a surface-dimension (something to look at), and its disruption by

narrativisation (a story to understand). I'm trying to dislocate and dramatise this concept by confronting the images of the characteristic *femme fatale* with the increasing manifestations of (men's) narrative voice in a gendered battle for dominance.

A brief outline of my theoretical framework is followed by analysis of sequences from a symptomatic *film noir*, *The Lady from Shanghai* (Welles, USA, 1948). The film is narrated in a gigantic, confessional flashback by Michael O'Hara (played by Welles), an Irish sailor hired by the wealthy cripple Bannister to work on his yacht on a cruise from New York to San Francisco, via the Caribbean and Mexico, after Michael rescues his wife Elsa (Rita Hayworth) from robbers in New York's Central Park. In a complex series of manoeuvres, Michael is ensnared in a triple-cross involving Bannister, his business partner Grisby, and Elsa, ending the film as a man on the run, framed for a murder he did not commit.

An inspiring connection between the concepts of spectacle in feminist film criticism and theories of early cinema, focussing on ideas of the 'attractions', has been drawn by Scott Bukatman. The central idea of both conceptions is the spectacle, and thus the visual as a form of presentation that is categorically different from the representational mode of narration. My premise is that any cinematic representation can be defined by Bukatman's notion of spectacle, namely that it is "*an impressive, unusual, or disturbing phenomenon or event that is seen or witnessed*", but the narrativisation usually overwrites and smooths its effect.¹ Both sides, image and verbal narration, have their own appeals for the spectator: the first is largely sensational, the other intellectual and existential.

In *film noir*, however, the visual power happens to be a threat incarnated in the *femme fatale* and must be repressed. Even if *film noir* is not a particularly spectacular genre - compared to, say, the musical or the horror film - its strong visual style and, especially, the stress on images of women leads us to the question of spectacle. *Film noir* actually thematises and embodies the interplay of the two poles discussed above (presentation and the image, representation and narration) by creating and manipulating a multi-level play of appearances. By 'appearance' I mean the narrative manipulation of the visual layer: that is, when the visual (or sensational) presence gets affected by narrativisation, by the force of an exterior logic, or, we might say, when a story penetrates the silent surface of the image.

Although verbal narration is only one of cinema's narrative devices, it is striking how it dominates - or tries to dominate - in *film noir*, often by a voice-over narrative frame. The image itself is not true or false, it is only *present*, without past or future - and this unsettling visual presence must be conquered or at least challenged by logocentric verbalism. Not surprisingly, in *film noir* the image is strongly connected to the female character, and the narrative voice, typically, seems to be a male privilege.

While the connection between the image of the woman and visual or sensual pleasure, and the reason for having intellectual or existential pleasure in narration, have been investigated and debated in Film Studies, it is less obvious why one should find any pleasure in forms of 'appearance' which have negative connotations (unsteadiness, lies, betrayal, etc.). I propose that *appearance* provides the spectator with a certain perverse pleasure of the spectacle,

but meanwhile helps us to maintain a secure distance by the narrative regularisation of the visual.

The Lady from Shanghai

The Lady from Shanghai, suggests Telotte, is a film driven by the conflicting forces of an urge for a linear narrative and the circular structure of desire incarnated in the woman (the spectacle): *"the narrative's concerns with circularity, fiction, and consumption all join together as a fascination with and a desire for certain things develop in parallel to an obsession with certain images and a need to narrate them."*² And so the spectacle is embodied in the *femme fatale* figure – that source of *"epistemological trauma"*, as Doane describes her – and the ego is incarnated in the narrator, Michael O'Hara, as we can see in the very first scene of the film.³

The flashback narration is a posterior struggle, an attempt for correction in order to restore sense, a goal-driven narrative, since there and then, enchanted by the image of the woman, the protagonist wasn't in his right mind: *"When I set out to make a fool of myself there's very little can stop me. If I'd known where it would end I'd have never let anything start. If I'd been in my right mind, that is - but once I'd seen her, once I'd seen her, I was not in my right mind for quite some time."*

His retrospective verbal narration is thus both a self-criticism and a self-defence, an attempt or a device to separate himself from the image. It is also important to notice that the voice (and the voice-over as well) always comes from within the self, enunciating a consciousness, while the image itself is the impenetrable surface. When the former tries to incorporate the latter, therefore, it must be able to disrupt that attractive surface and fill it up with its own interpretation.

The reason why the woman is so dangerous for the man, for the narrative, for the sense, is that she becomes conscious of her spectacularity, of being an alluring surface, and then uses her image-ness as a form of power. She intentionally acts as what Telotte calls an "*image of desire*",⁴ parading her surface - it is surely not accidental that during the credits we see a waving, trembling water surface that is impenetrable by the eye, has no identifiable directions, and can cover anything. She may be the 'Lady from Shangahi' as the film's title suggests, but even her background is remote, unclear, and indeed inessential to this narrative set in a panorama of the Americas.

The retrospective narration, with its belated reflexions and reactions, thus marks an ironic distance from the action, producing a narrator who has no direct influence on the action through acting, but only a subsidiary power by re-interpreting it. This process is dramatised in the opening sequence where O'Hara is speaking ironically not only on the level of content, but on a formal level as well: he is, as it were, split in two by the commentating voice-over, alternately passing the word and then re-taking it from his acting character. In this sequence, after a few establishing shots of a New York evening, the camera tilts up from the shadow of the carriage on the pavement – at first in a long shot before closing in on a medium shot of the woman, accompanied by O'Hara's voice-over.

Here the soundtrack performs a strange transition: though the reverse shot reveals the protagonist actually escorting the coach (and thus declares the previous shot as his subjective view), the voice-over narration still holds the speech, and 'over-voices' himself (*Good evening" - said I*), then

commentates ironically on the situation, while his character in the frame is also speaking to Elsa - as we can see, but cannot hear. What we hear is the narrator's acrid self-commentary. By disrupting the image-voice unity of the present tense (in so far as is currently seen) action, 'real' action gets replaced by the act of interpretation and loses its autonomy – strongly influencing the spectator's attitude as well.

The present tense turns out to be past, it is all already over; the image gets dominated by the voice-over, overwritten with surplus meaning that doesn't result from the flow of images: it is the verbal narration, outside or beyond the image, that presses this meaning on it. Thus verballity, connected to the sense-making 'ego' of flash-back narration, establishes the presented scene and the woman as *appearances*. In a way the film is about how this narrating ego gets back its integrity: the elimination of the woman in the end is a punishment for provoking the necessary but dangerous splitting of the self.

Regarding Elsa

As a basic thematic motif, *appearance* permeates all human relations in *The Lady from Shanghai*, and the centre of the intrigue is the woman, using herself as a seductive surface, reflecting the very image of each one's desire, manipulating her surroundings by means of this mirror-mechanism. But this power is relative, closing her as well in a fixed position, forcing her fatalistically into the role of the *femme fatale*. True, at several points in the film it is possible to give the female character an alternative interpretation which does not accumulate as a sum total of these reflecting surfaces (as the closing sequence in the mirror-maze suggests), and which deals with the woman as a victim, too.

But the dominance of the narrative voice holds this version back, it never gets clearly explicit and rarely manifests itself – when it does, it is always represented in the absence of O'Hara's verbal narration and with an accentuated visuality. One of these visual anomalies appears when Grisby (also madly in love with Elsa) is watching her jumping into the sea from the rocks. The structure and the point-of-view are equally strange in the scene which begins with Grisby looking at Lisa through a telescope. Instead of changing from the close-up of Grisby to Elsa as a conventional method of creating a subjective shot, we first get a close-up of the telescope's front lens itself, reflected in it a long-shot of a woman in silhouette preparing to dive into the sea from some rocks.

The telescope indeed comes to focus as a device, a prosthesis for the eye, but not in the conventional way. This 'impossible' shot – it is by definition not truly a subjective point-of-view shot, yet this is what it suggests. The pleasure of watching Elsa is our voyeuristic pleasure as well – and we are confronted with it for a fleeting but intense moment. Then, as he moves the telescope away we are suddenly confronting a very different human form, a close-up of Grisby as he smiles ironically, not to say perversely.

The simultaneous acts of a radical change between the two shots and Grisby's straight look at the camera (without any cut or camera movement) suggest sexual desire and also another kind of anticipation: we are as yet unaware of Grisby's plot to fake his own death (a plot which backfires; he is indeed killed). In the remainder of this sequence we see a mixture of shots as Elsa sunbathes and dives again: not only point-of-view shots from the position of the unseen watcher

and audience, but even a view across Elsa's body to the source of the voyeurism.

In another revealing scene, at night on board the yacht, we again see Elsa's prostrate body at the centre of a subtle and complex series of exchanges with the three men. It starts out with Elsa, who wants to smoke a cigarette; she gives it to Grisby, but he hasn't got a match either. Then O'Hara lights the cigarette in the mouth of Grisby, who passes it back to Elsa, so that this symbolic object of exchange between the sailor and the woman (this motif runs throughout the film, binding them physically together) performs a complete circle. The scene simultaneously depicts the intricate relations among the characters, supported also by the claustrophobic tension of the yacht's enclosed space and shows Elsa as the centre of this web of intricate connections.

In a further relay, Elsa starts to sing a love song at the beginning of the scene and repeats it at the end after it is picked up by the drunken Bannister. She can be seen as a seductive predator, waiting at the centre of her web, deliberately manipulating her network, but also as fixed and hypnotised by the male gaze, with no chance of breaking out of the role of *femme fatale*. A close-up, shot from above, provides the visual climax of the scene. As the song ends, the camera settles on her face; her eyes are closed, the scene fades out. After the extreme intensity of this fascinating spectacle the face is gone.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to demonstrate, with the idea of *appearance*, a particular *film noir* symptom, namely the way verbal narration tries to overwrite and dominate the visuality

embodied in woman and her images, in order to let us savour visual pleasure without the threat of the emergence of a multi-level, heterogeneous film-material that might resist the dominance of the verbal narrative. Putting it back into historical context, we might recall that the very first pleasure of seeing moving pictures (for example, the 'cinema of attractions' associated with early film-making) is later overtaken by narrative potential of film (moving pictures can tell stories, and so we see the development of classical narrative devices).

Narrative patterns are then institutionalised, and film cinema language begins to even out the epistemological difference between the two aspects. First it takes shape as a conflict, threatening classical Hollywood narration (including the *noir* paradigm), then materialises in modern cinema as a kind of philosophy of the medium. As a transitional phenomenon, *film noir* emphasises and dramatises this relation and thus provides fertile terrain for further investigation of the sheer heterogeneity of the cinematographic medium.

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Notes and References

¹ Scott Bukatman, 'Spectacle, Attractions, and Visual Pleasure', in Wanda Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions, 1986-2006*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006, p. 81.

² J. P. Telotte, 'Narration, Desire, and *The Lady from Shanghai*', in Telotte, *Voices in the Dark. The Narrative Patterns of 'Film Noir'*, Urbana and Chicago IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989, p. 67.

³ Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 3.

⁴ Telotte, *op. cit.*, p. 70.