

THE FRUSTRATION OF THE ASH GIRL
IN *THE BAREFOOT CONTESSA*:
TRACES OF *CARMEN* IN A HOLLYWOOD FAIRY TALE

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RESUMEN

«La frustración de la Cenicienta en *La condesa descalza*: la huella de *Carmen* en un cuento de hadas hollywoodiense». *La condesa descalza*, que trata de la evolución personal de María Vargas, es una película transgresora, pues desmitifica el nacimiento de una diva, aunque tanto la representación de la sexualidad como la de la protagonista son tan conservadoras como en cualquier otra película convencional de estudio en Hollywood. El propósito de este artículo es realizar un estudio comparativo entre la película y una de sus mayores inspiraciones, la novela corta *Carmen*. Se puede considerar a María Vargas como una figura intermedia entre la pasividad de muchas heroínas de cuentos de hadas populares y el salvajismo de Carmen. María cree en las convenciones patriarcales, convirtiéndose en víctima de sus deseos. Por el contrario, Carmen resulta un agente activo que se aprovecha al máximo de la dimensión sexual a la que se la reduce, y la usa contra los hombres.

PALABRAS CLAVE: crítica de cine feminista, drama del mundo del espectáculo, deconstrucción, cuentos de hadas, *Carmen*.

ABSTRACT

The Barefoot Contessa, which tells of the personal evolution of María Vargas, is a transgressive film, since it demystifies the rise of a diva, though both the representation of sexuality and the female protagonist are as conservative as those in any other mainstream Hollywood studio film. This paper aims to complete a comparative study between the film and one of its defining inspirations, the novella *Carmen*. María Vargas can be understood as an intermediate figure between the passivity of many popular fairy-tale heroines and Carmen's savageness. After all, María believes in patriarchal conventions while longing for Prince Charming; that is why she becomes the victim of her own desires. On the contrary, taking full advantage of the sexual dimension she is reduced to, Carmen uses it against men.

KEYWORDS: feminist film criticism, show business drama, deconstruction, fairy tales, *Carmen*.



The film *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954), directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, tells of a Spanish gypsy woman called María Vargas, who naturally dances flamenco in the dirt. She suddenly turns into a movie star, which involves becoming the object of desire of many men. Unexpectedly, she falls in love with an Italian count, though he turns out to be impotent. She cannot satisfy her sexual drive with her husband, but when the count learns that she is unfaithful to him, he kills both María and her lover.

This film has been traditionally analyzed as a show business drama. The main feature of this subgenre is its subversion, in the sense that it aims to condemn the economic ambition of film industry. It portrays the other side of the silver screen, that is, the behind-the-scenes world of film industry. It usually adopts a critical tone on celebrities and executives. Classics such as *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) or *All about Eve* (1950) are usually categorized as show business dramas. Incidentally, the award-winning screenwriter and director of *All about Eve* was Joseph L. Mankiewicz, who also wrote and directed *The Barefoot Contessa*.

In these films, Hollywood is not the dream factory, but a manipulative organization. Furthermore, *The Barefoot Contessa* has always functioned as a disenchanting version of Cinderella because it tells the story of an overnight star who felt happier living in poverty and is finally murdered by Prince Charming. But even so, in this paper I defend that in terms of gender and female sexuality this film is not subversive at all.

In order to identify and analyze the expectations produced by this subgenre regarding gender and sexuality, there is a literary referent in *The Barefoot Contessa* that adds a new dimension to the film discourse: the novella *Carmen*. Considering solid parallels, this novella written in 1847 by Prosper Mérimée turns out to be more advanced than *The Barefoot Contessa* despite its misogyny because, in the end, woman is triumphant. Consequently, Carmen becomes an active agent in a society where women are destined to be passive¹. She takes advantage of the sexual dimension she is reduced to and uses it against men². On the contrary, María Vargas—the protagonist of *The Barefoot Contessa*—will only feel guilty about it³. In order to uncover the phallogocentric ideology implicit in this film, my theoretical approach will be based on Feminist Film Criticism and Gender Studies.

The plot of the film introduces and subverts certain fairy-tale motives. In particular, the ones developed in «Cinderella». Indeed, the ash girl, shoes or Prince Charming are present in Mankiewicz's screenplay. In connection with this, the most

¹ Some obvious passages deal with the nerves he has: «vino a sentarse cerca de mí»; «también ella fumaba»; «los ojos tenían una expresión voluptuosa y feroz». P. MÉRIMÉE, *Carmen*, trans. L. López Jiménez and L.E. López Esteve, Madrid, Cátedra, 2003, pp. 120, 121, 124 (henceforth quoted as *Carmen*).

² *Ibidem*, p. 154: «ya no te quiero. Toma, vete, ahí tienes un duro por el trabajo».

³ In fact, the protagonist is said to be based on Rita Hayworth, who was offered the part in the first place. A natural dancer in musicals, her career was reduced to sex symbol after starring in *Gilda* (1946). B.F. DICK, *Joseph L. Mankiewicz*. Ann Arbor: MI, Twayne Publishers, 1983, p. 107.



popular fairy tales, those from the popular tradition (whose so-called oral origin is questioned by Ruth B. Bottigheimer due to written records)⁴, tend to present submissive female roles for the audience. In opposition to this trend, Angela Carter's collection of fairy tales uncovers active heroines with unconventional happy endings that could be transformed depending on the audience's taste: «stories without known originators that can be remade again and again by every person who tells them, the perennially refreshed entertainment of the poor»⁵. Still, honorable virtues are many times related to passivity, whereas power and independence are mostly condemned. For instance, in «Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs» the devoted servant is rewarded with the perfect man, whereas her stepmother is punished for her arrogance. Bottigheimer urges the audience «to see the strong heroine in context»⁶.

The influence of fairy tales in our lives is tremendously significant: in our childhood we learn about ourselves and how we relate to others by means of these stories. In other words, we receive social conventions through fairy tales. Jack Zipes refers to Arthur Applebee to prove the role of fairy tales in «the manner in which children conceive the world and their places in it even before they begin to read»⁷. As a matter of fact, the collections of feminist tales are a direct product of women's social progress; they look into other options, certifying their validity. Finally, Donald Haase reveals the absence of a female prototype in these heroines of «women-centered tales»⁸.

The literary myth of Cinderella, whose Disney version was released in 1949, that is, five years before *The Barefoot Contessa* came out, is so immersed in the conception of female gender that there is a term called *the Cinderella complex*, coined by Colette Dowling⁹. This term deals with the repression that stops women from using full advantage of their ideas and projects in favor of an external factor that will change their lives for the better. This attitude implies that a woman needs to wait for a man to form her identity. Even Simone de Beauvoir alluded to the Cinderella myth: «Everything still encourages the girl to expect fortune and happiness from a 'Prince Charming' instead of attempting the difficult and uncertain conquest alone». According to Rob Baum, «a sense of female agency will always by definition be absent. In this folk tale, which is also a fairy-tale, the female character

⁴ R.B. BOTIGHEIMER. *Fairy Tales. A New History*. Albany: State University of New York P, 2009, p. 2.

⁵ A. CARTER (ed.). *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales*. London: Virago, 2005, p. ix.

⁶ R.B. BOTTIGHEIMER. «Fairy tales and children's literature: A feminist perspective», in G.E. SADLER (ed.), *Teaching Children's Literature: Issues, Pedagogy, Resources*. New York: MLA, 1992, pp. 101-108, p. 106.

⁷ J. ZIPES. *Don't Bet on the Prince. Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*. New York: Routledge, 2012, p. XII.

⁸ D. HAASE. «Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship», in D. HAASE (ed.), *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2004, pp. 1-36, p. 8.

⁹ C. DOWLING. *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence*. London: Fontana, 1982.

is positioned in terms of what it is not: not dominant, not powerful, not male»¹⁰. Therefore, Cinderella represents invisibility, the absence of an independent identity. Like fairy tales, mainstream cinema exposes social power structures in which women need to transcend the role traditionally assigned to their bodies in order to achieve universal acceptance. In other words, women's bodies are initially marked.

In opposition to Cinderella and many other heroines, Carmen constitutes the best example of the female protagonist whose features are those of a villain: unreliable, disobedient, unfaithful, impolite, sexual, and exuberant. For instance, Don José behaves like a puppet in her hands¹¹.

Actually, Carmen could be considered the precedent for *femme fatales*, whose most popular samples can be found in *film noir*. Incidentally, she has constructed her own definition of gender by defying the rules prevalent in patriarchal societies. Carmen transforms the negative connotations related to her body into positive ones as they imply freedom¹². After all, these connotations are the effect of cultural associations in which men would represent the mind and women the flesh¹³.

This myth has classical roots because it can be interpreted as a new Pandora, a beauty with no moral virtues. Originally, she opens the box offered by Epithemeus—who has been seduced—and spreads evil throughout the world. Carmen can also be linked to the Furies, who rule the destiny of mankind. Needless to say, she could represent a modern Venus, a goddess of love that is married to and confronts Mars (as Don José), the god of war. Finally, Carmen can be also linked to the vengeful spirit of Diana, whose reference is explicit in the novella when the narrator comments that Diana transformed the hunter Actaeon into a deer and sentenced him to be devoured by his own dogs¹⁴. Both Pandora and a *femme fatale* like Kitty Collins were played by Ava Gardner in *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* (1951) and *The Killers* (1946). Indeed, Carmen was the perfect part for such an actress, taking into account that Ava Gardner assumed this scandalous identity during her stay in Spain¹⁵.

¹⁰ R. BAUM. «After the ball is over: Bringing 'Cinderella' home», *Cultural Analysis*, vol. 1 (2000), pp. 69-83, p. 69.

¹¹ «Don José no respondió a ese gran torrente de elocuencia más que con dos o tres palabras pronunciadas secamente. La gitana entonces le lanzó una mirada de profundo desprecio; después se sentó en un rincón de la habitación, cruzando las piernas, escogió una naranja, la peló y se puso a comerla», *Carmen*, p. 126.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 134: «Una mujer con ese traje en mi país habría hecho persignarse a la gente. En Sevilla, todos echaban algún piropo atrevido a su figura».

¹³ J. BUTLER, «Sujetos de Sexo/Género/Deseo», in N. CARBONELL & M. TORRAS (eds.), *Feminismos literarios*, Madrid, Arco/Libros, 1999, pp. 25-76, p. 46.

¹⁴ L. LÓPEZ JIMÉNEZ and L.E. LÓPEZ ÉSTEVE. «Introduction», en P. MÉRIMÉE, *op. cit.*, *Carmen*, pp. 9-84, pp. 25-26.

¹⁵ Her romances with bullfighters and her enjoyment of night life while still married to Frank Sinatra were widely reported. L. SERVER, *Ava Gardner: «Love is Nothing»*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2007, pp. 195, 202, 206, 210, 231, 287, 291, 295, 342, 345, 387.

María Vargas could play the part of a tamed Carmen. She has a strong personality and will not let anybody control her¹⁶. Also, she despises the wealthy men who try to buy her with contracts and presents, but paradoxically keeps waiting for Prince Charming. However, once she becomes successful and finally finds her dream-man, María turns out to be happier dancing barefoot in the dirt. As the ash girl, María has no responsibilities whatsoever and she can follow her own rules. These contradictions fit in the analyses offered by contemporary feminist film critics such as Yvonne Tasker¹⁷ or Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer¹⁸, who provide a plural repertoire of gender, full of inconsistencies and paradoxes.

She has a profound effect on men, but does not take advantage of it. On the contrary, María longs for a man because she is afraid «of being exposed and unprotected»¹⁹. Somehow, María wants to please society by finding a partner that will enable her to retire. This is a key factor that differentiates María from Carmen because the former does feel different and detached from society just like Carmen, but at the same time María suffers due to this rebellious condition. In the end, she is willing to please patriarchal conventions once she meets a count, that is to say, Prince Charming for her.

The defiant attitude of Carmen is recurrent throughout the novella. For instance, she breaks up with Don José by clarifying that he was just a sexual relief²⁰. In the case of the film, María longs for an authentic man to make her complete. Once again, mainstream cinema produces images that are «not simply mirrors of real life but ideological signifiers»²¹. As we can see, María follows the role of a melodramatic heroine imposed by classical Hollywood narrative after all, not that of a daring masquerade inside the star system.

In the 1970s Marjorie Rosen and Molly Haskell depicted female classic Hollywood roles as strictly coded stereotypes, not verisimilar women. Subsequently, critics like Claire Johnston insisted on uncovering the ideology behind the images presented²². *The Barefoot Contessa* was released in the 1950s, a decade in which women received messages about the most appropriate behavior in the private and public spheres. Many of these messages came from cinema and TV in commercials, sitcoms and films starring Doris Day, Donna Reed or Lucille Ball. However, this portrait

¹⁶ As the owner of the nightclub in which she dances says: «No rules for Señorita Vargas. María. Vargas!» (J.L. MANKIEWICZ. *The Barefoot Contessa*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1954, n.p.).

¹⁷ Y. TASKER, «*Enchanted* (2007) by postfeminism: Gender, irony, and the new romantic comedy», in H. RADNER and R. STRINGER (eds.), *Feminism at the Movies. Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2011, pp. 67-79, p. 72.

¹⁸ H. RADNER and R. STRINGER. «Introduction. 'Re-Vision'?: Feminist Film Criticism in the Twenty-First Century», in H. RADNER and R. STRINGER (eds.), *Feminism at the Movies*, pp. 1-10, p. 2.

¹⁹ J.L. MANKIEWICZ (dir.). *The Barefoot Contessa*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1954, n.p.

²⁰ «—Joseíto, escucha— dijo: —¿te he pagado? No te debía nada, según nuestra ley, porque eres un paylló, pero eres un chico guapo y me has gustado. Estamos en paz. Buenos días», *Carmen*, p. 151.

²¹ M. HUMM. *Feminism and Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997, p. 13.

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 12-13.



of the angel in the house did not fully correspond to real experiences, disconnected from the careless suburban housewife. On the contrary, some of them played a significant part in the rise of consumer culture or the Civil Rights Movement.

Nowadays, Feminist Film Criticism focuses on individual stories whose circumstances must be specified. In *Feminism at the Movies. Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer emphasize the role of films «as important and complex social documents in their own right, serving a variety of functions, not all of which are in the interest of a hegemonic status quo»²³. The utopian objective of a woman's voice, inherent in second wave feminism, has given way to the amplification of the volatile definition of femininity due to the effects of capitalist culture²⁴. Indeed, material success matters as much as any other factor in the analysis of a woman's identity²⁵.

María could represent the suffering caused by the repressive expectations imposed on women at the time. Her desire to have a voice of her own is suppressed—once and again—by the atmosphere of conformity. This position alludes to Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the *Other*, that is, the category linked to women as opposed to *Self*; the category linked to man's harmonious identity: «The concept of Self [...] can be produced only in opposition to that of not-self, so that the 'category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself»²⁶. In this case, the subtext could indicate that her challenge to this dichotomy would only lead to tragedy.

The challenge to social conventions is a leitmotiv both in *Carmen* and *The Barefoot Contessa*, and in both cases Carmen and María are punished for their rebellions, an attitude which is described as bohemian by literary critics such as Evelyne Gould²⁷. In fact, none of them has a stable homeland. Carmen is a thief and a prostitute, and she is time and again associated with the devil²⁸. As a result, at the end of the novella Carmen is stabbed by Don José because she does not let him dominate her and he—as the representative of authority—cannot accept that²⁹.

In the case of the film, the screenplay is definitely ambiguous as the count always remains a gentleman with no psychological problems. In short, Count Vincenzo is even more innocent than Don José because María's problems seem to be relegated to the sexual dimension, which is not socially approved. In other words, the tragedy of María Vargas is never due to patriarchal pressures, but to her own nature. The producer and his assistant are certainly caricatured as in most show

²³ H. RADNER and R. STRINGER, *op. cit.*, «Introduction. 'Re-Vision'», p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

²⁵ H. RADNER. *New-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks, and Consumer Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2011, p. 5.

²⁶ S. THORNHAM. «Postmodernism and Feminism», in S. SIM (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 2005, pp. 24-34, p. 25.

²⁷ E. GOULD. *The Fate of Carmen*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996, p. 1.

²⁸ «una fámula del diablo»; «demonio de chica»; «encontraste al diablo, sí, al diablo», *Carmen*, pp. 122, 142, 151, 157.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 159: «Yo era tan débil ante esa criatura, que obedecía todos sus caprichos».



business dramas. Nevertheless, María's dignity and social independence imply that she is out of reach for them. The discourse of the film suggests that they are incapable of doing any harm. The same applies to playboy Alberto Bravano. Even so, the ideological approach of the film suggests that María was the victim of her own transgression since she defied the codes established by Western civilization. According to Hélène Cixous, reality is culturally organized in binary oppositions that can be reduced to masculine/feminine in the end. The first term tends to be privileged, whereas the second one tends to be defined in terms of the first one³⁰. In short, there is a hierarchical relationship in which gender is classified, not negotiated. María will fight, but not overcome this barrier.

She is punished for defying authority because she despises society. As in the case of Carmen, her concept of love is not understood by the patriarchal society where she lives³¹. María was about to become a mother —an allusion to her name, the role every woman must aspire to in the Christian World as a reflection of the Virgin Mary— but perhaps she is not worthy of it according to patriarchal civilization, just because she is a rebel. The jet setter Alberto Bravano tells her: «You are not a woman»³². In other words, she does not fit in the patriarchal standards of society.

In «Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire», Judith Butler denaturalizes the concept of gender by showing its political pretensions. Thus, instead of a stable signifier attached to a stable signified, the idea of woman is interpreted as a fictitious definition in which sex delimits freedom of choice. Furthermore, gender can be considered a cultural construction. In connection with this, Butler makes reference to Luce Irigaray when she claims that the essence of women is exclusion, in other words, undecidedness. Actually, the sexual dichotomy man/woman is so restrictive that it only presents reproductive objectives³³. Any other possibility is deleted or, at least, silenced. For Butler, gender impersonates a copy whose origin cannot be traced back. In fact, Diana Fuss states that our actions do not depend on the heterosexual binarism, but on performance. Consequently, heterosexuality is just a fantasy continually transforming itself: «Gender, like other categories of knowledge, is the product not of Truth but of power expressed through discourse»³⁴. This theory displays that María is controlled and finally rejected by society as a woman, simply because she destabilizes the only roles offered in the binarism man/woman.

Like Carmen, the contessa is a bohemian rebel. The scene at the cemetery employs a high angle shot highlighting a splendid statue of María standing alone, and surrounded by other mausolea with statues of couples. This scenography could

³⁰ T. EBERT. «Feminismo y postmodernismo de la resistencia. Diferencia-dentro/Diferencia-entre», in N. CARBONELL and M. TORRAS (eds.). *Feminismos literarios*, Madrid: Arco/Libros, 1999, pp. 199-232, p. 217.

³¹ «No quiero ser atormentada ni, sobre todo, mandada. Lo que quiero es ser libre y hacer lo que me place», *Carmen*, p. 172.

³² J. MANKIEWICZ (dir.). *The Barefoot Contessa*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1954, n.p.

³³ J. BUTLER, *op. cit.*

³⁴ S. THORNHAM. «Postmodernism and Feminism», in S. SIM (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 28.

be a way to underline María's independent personality beyond death, but it is also a way to look at her eternally as the splendid object of the male gaze. This term was coined by Laura Mulvey in «Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema» so as to define the identification between the spectator and the perspective of a heterosexual man. For Mulvey, this subjective male construction of the feminine identity is so influential that it relegates women to objects of desire. Paradoxically, this would imply that the female spectator would experience the very same objectification beholding female characters on the big screen. This is a destabilized power relationship since only the male gaze is possible. Therefore, death does not provide peace to María, as in the case of Carmen³⁵. Instead, it shows everlasting *scopophilia*, that is, sexual pleasure from looking at erotic objects. As a sculpture with its own full shot, María will not bother the established social system either in fiction or reality. Once she passes away, all the characters can go back to their daily lives.

Subsequently, several critics have disagreed with Mulvey. For instance, B. Ruby Rich claims that women may filter the sexist messages they receive and deactivate the male gaze³⁶. All they have to do is deconstruct the fake transparency displayed and consider images as an accumulation of discourse. For Carol J. Clover, this male identification is discontinuous across genders³⁷.

María does not fit in society, while Carmen is not a pure gipsy³⁸. *Carmen* and *The Barefoot Contessa* are stories about people on the borderlands (the term coined by Gloria Anzaldúa), women with alternative points of view who dare defy patriarchy and die for not being absorbed by the system. Nonetheless, Carmen has a defined personality, whereas María is a victim of her inner conflicts.

Both texts are inside masculine universes full of phallic symbols. Both female protagonists are essentially characterized as sexual objects based on fetishistic details: the cigars, knife, and shotgun in the case of *Carmen*; close-ups of the shoes that María will not wear or the cigarettes she will not smoke in the case of *The Barefoot Contessa*. Carmen dresses in black and red, has jet-black hair, soft skin, and tasty lips. This description coincides with Ava Gardner's presentation in Spain in a medium shot followed by a full shot: red lips, big eyes, red and black combination, the shawl, or the flower in the hair³⁹.

³⁵ Even her murder is depicted in erotic terms: «Saqué la navaja. Yo habría querido que tuviera miedo y me pidiera clemencia, pero esa mujer era un demonio», *Carmen*, p. 181.

³⁶ T. DE LAURETIS. *Alice Doesn't. Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984, p. 29.

³⁷ B. CREED. *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge, 2007, pp. 125-26.

³⁸ At least, that is the narrator's perception: «Dudo mucho que la joven Carmen fuera de raza pura», *Carmen*, p. 123.

³⁹ In fact, this portrait is just one of the many recurrent Spanish clichés present in Hollywood films: rural areas recreated in Cinecittà (Rome), inauthentic Spanish accent, flamenco, tragedy, passion, and exuberance. The origin of all of these elements can be found in the aesthetics of *Carmen*, both the novella by Prosper Mérimée and the opera by Georges Bizet. See L.K. STEIN, «Before the Latin tinge: Spanish music and the 'Spanish idiom' in the United States, 1778-1940»,



The recreation of Carmen's physical description could be a symptom of *scopophilia*, considering that it may provoke an unconscious process of association to sexual pleasure in the reader. At the same time, it intensifies the erotic objectification of the character. While Carmen uses her sexuality, María regrets her magnetism. Whenever the demands of her life represent too much for her, she takes off her shoes in an extreme close-up and demeans herself having sex with any man available. This could be interpreted as submission to social conventions because she assumes that female sexuality must be invisible. No wonder, she hides her lovers. María is one of the few characters taken seriously by Mankiewicz's screenplay, together with the director and script girl in several three-shots. Unfortunately, the serious tone adopted for her affected her free will insofar as she feels obliged to obey conservative standards. To sum up, María needs to feel accepted by a patriarchal society.

Some of these episodes include the scene in which her mother predicts a tragic end for her, or the one in which she justifies her father in murdering her mother. In the first case, there is a medium shot emphasizing the delicate facial features of María in contrast with her mother's, who actually looks like the witch in the Disney production *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). In the second case, there is an entire silent sequence where flash-editing predominates in order to show María's interventions in the trial. She moves all over the room like a silent film star in full and medium shots while the narrator makes comments on her courage. In general, she is usually right at the center while her father looks miserable on the corner. As a matter of fact, these scenes could allude to the Electra complex. On the one hand, María's mother clearly plays the part of the cruel stepmother from fairy tales. On the other hand, María's father symbolizes a role model that she will never find in any lover. Only Harry turns out to be a father figure once she becomes a celebrity, so presumably that could be the reason why their love remains platonic. For instance, there are several medium-shots of him smoking while staring at her; no desire to be the center of attention is ever reflected. In all these cases, he looks worried or, at least, pensive.

Somehow, it is María's anger against her mother that makes her leave Madrid as María Vargas and start her professional career as María D'Amata. According to this theory, the mother functions as a castrating figure in the family, that is why María shows devotion for her father: his phallic role has been negated and suppressed by his wife. He is a victim just like her. In other words, María believes in patriarchal conventions after all.

Carmen is presented from the point of view of two male, misogynistic narrators: the fascinated traveler and Don José. Both of them establish a kind of homoerotic relationship that goes further than mercy. An example of this is the fact that Don José is described by the traveler as the typical Petrarchan beloved⁴⁰. Somehow, Don José's violent and aggressive actions tend to be justified by Carmen's

in R.L. Kagan (ed.), *Spain in America: The History of Hispanism in the United States*, Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2002, pp. 221-23.

⁴⁰ *Carmen*, p. 111.

cruelty. He keeps reminding the audience that she had to be his and no one else's. As regards Carmen, we will never read her own words but the traveler's and Don José's interpretations of them. That explains why Carmen can look sensual and despotic on the very same page. In this novella, Mérimée creates a profound sense of male comradeship in which women are the object of the male gaze. Men stare at women as a hobby and create fantasies that the latter are supposed to fulfill, while the former follow a kind of macho code based on violence. At least, Mérimée is honest when he presents the relationship between men and women as the battle of the sexes.

Carmen is the only portrait of a woman that the narrators offer, except for the fragment in which another bandit's woman is described as a humble silent girl who continually suffered dishonor and physical abuse from her man⁴¹. In addition, in *The Barefoot Contessa* there is, at some point, a comparison between the protagonist and another woman. María is opposed to Myrna, not only physically (bleach blonde without curves), but also in terms of attitude: Myrna is always shown smoking and drinking and looks existentially disappointed. She reluctantly obeys Edward's commands as his high-maintenance escort. María has a high sense of dignity that Myrna must have lost in the past, that is why she is shown submissive instead of her complaints. Even the *mise-en scène* shows this. Myrna is usually sitting down in eye-level shots surrounded by men who ignore her most of the times. Incidentally, she is never placed at the center. In opposition to this, María appears alone walking around rooms in loose framings where her spectacular dresses are always at the center. In these scenes, there is often an eye-level shot showing men sitting down, chatting and expecting to admire María at some point. Right after that, there are also reaction shots showing María standing up in full detail. Myrna considers herself «a tramp»⁴². Indeed, this is a potential future for María as well, that is why this character becomes so pathetic.

María looks sophisticated and distant in high-society parties, but that does not stop jet setters from sexualizing her. Despite the fact that she is alone in traveling shots, the spectator not only perceives her strength, but also her haute couture clothing. Indeed, the gowns are so luxurious that they cause a tremendous impact. Actually, it is the dress that is placed right at the center. E. Ann Kaplan follows Laura Mulvey when she states that the male gaze defines woman as a body full of sexual possibilities⁴³. This reduction has social, political, and economic consequences, as there is no significant room for women in these areas. The only dimension which they inhabit is that of object of male desire. According to Kaplan, «Assigned the place of object (lack), she [Woman] is the recipient of male desire, passively appearing rather than acting»⁴⁴. Woman is a fictional construct by male ideology, not a reality. In extreme close-ups, we first see María's hands and later her feet, which introduce

⁴¹ *Carmen*, p. 164.

⁴² J.L. MANKIEWICZ (dir.). *The Barefoot Contessa*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1954, n.p.

⁴³ E.A. KAPLAN. *Women and Film. Both Sides of the Camera*, New York: Methuen, 1983, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

her not as a complex human being, but as pieces of a fetishized body. In other words, a decomposed text. The tagline of the film is illustrating: «The world's most beautiful animal». But this animal lacks the strength to follow her own views on existence in contrast to Carmen's marginal lifestyle. In short, *The Barefoot Contessa* follows the representation of woman as spectacle. Teresa de Lauretis states: «body to be looked at, place of sexuality, and object of desire»⁴⁵. In spite of Mankiewicz's efforts to show the circus around María, this is not enough. The strength of this show business drama has to do with pushing barriers, though this approach should be complete including gender.

As in *Carmen*, *The Barefoot Contessa* is narrated from the point of view of several men whose lives were affected by María's presence. In order to expose the different perspectives visually, the very same scene at the cemetery shot from a bird's eye view is repeated three times. Only the final moment changes, that is, the one in which the next narrator is zoomed in by means of a crane shot. In other words, the audience will never receive her own interpretations and reasoning. Like Carmen, María's attitudes seem to be contradictory, as no cause is evident. She looks desirable, but at the same time untouchable since, most of the times, she is standing up all by herself in full and medium shots as part of reaction shots. Previously, a group of men was staring at her in medium shots.

As a sample of this desire, there is a key scene in which several men from different countries are discussing María's future after a screen test, and all their conversation revolves around power. María is not present, even her friend Harry attempts to control her acting as a mentor. The editing of this scene is similar to previous ones, though amplified. There is a group of men sitting down in a series of eye-level shots. This *mise-en-scène* presents them as a dehumanized crowd where only Harry is sometimes shown apart in a medium shot. Still, he also appears as part of the crowd and, therefore, as part of the male gaze. However, in this case there is no reaction shot, precisely because María has just been beheld on the screen in the dark. This is the climax of her objectification, the fact that she is not even present in person.

Kaplan uses Laura Mulvey's theory of the three male gazes in cinema to explain the effect of *scopophilia*: the gaze of the camera while it shoots —mainly, there is a cameraman, not a camerawoman— the male protagonists, who objectify women, and the male spectator⁴⁶. Consequently, María as an entity is reduced to one dimension. Laura Mulvey claims that the gaze, the way that the image is perceived, is a sign of control. Particularly, the looks have sexual connotations, «which in turn shape editing and narrative, and, further, that these looks are completely and eternally those of men looking at women»⁴⁷. In other words, in film men are unavoidably active watchers, whereas women are passive recipients. This tendency includes not

⁴⁵ T. DE LAURETIS, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴⁶ E.A. KAPLAN, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁴⁷ M. HUMM, *op. cit.*, p. 17.



only characters, but also filmmakers and spectators. Truth be told, at the time there were predominantly cameramen. Regarding female spectators, they experienced the male gaze too, so they projected the voyeur attitude just like any other man⁴⁸.

This theory was a landmark in second wave feminism. Even though some of its postulates may sound questionable, the historical context after 1968 demanded such a radical response. Mulvey reviewed her theory in «Afterthoughts», concluding that the female spectator had the chance to go from the masculine perspective to the feminine one. This implied an inclusive perspective, though she was attacked anyway. Questions of race and sexual preference were never mentioned, but all in all, this essay was groundbreaking at the time⁴⁹. The same could be applied to *María*, a strong character who fought social conventions, yet in the end she did not succeed. Obviously, the historical and social context behind the production could not allow such a thing.

Another key scene is the one in which Alberto Bravano and Kirk Edwards have an argument and *María* is the prize in the competition. As Oscar remarks: «When he watched *María*, he watched Bravano watch *María*»⁵⁰. She becomes an exchange commodity for rich men in search of social prestige. In this film the sexual exploitation of the image of woman is more brutal than in the case of *Mérimée* because it is disguised as protection by gentlemen, that is, women are treated as weaker human beings whose function is that of luxurious objects of decoration. In short, the discourse of gender in the film follows morality codes.

Mankiewicz's films tend to offer several points of view revolving around the same incident: *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949) is composed of flashbacks about the marriage life of three women, whereas *All about Eve* (1950) reveals the fall of the diva Margo Channing through the perspective of three women. Unlike the aforementioned films, this time Mankiewicz selected male perspectives in some key point-of-view shots so as to intensify the effect of sexual objectification. This way, the perception of annulment and defencelessness becomes evident.

The Barefoot Contessa examines idealized male screen heroes such as Errol Flynn by introducing the figure of Count Vincenzo, whose masculinity is questioned by him being wounded in a military action. In the case of the figure of the hero, the discourse of the film is ambiguous. Certainly, the count does not make *María* complete, albeit he looks dignified and honest. Both Don José (a previous soldier) and Vincenzo are related to Mars, even though in their cases this bond does not reflect mastery and courage, but chaos and victimization. Both male characters are aristocrats. The difference is that Don José leaves everything behind in order to be with Carmen, whereas in the film *María* is the one that abandons her cinematographic career so that she can move to Count Vincenzo's secluded castle. After all, she assumes her duties as a man's property once she becomes his wife.

⁴⁸ B. CREED, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

⁴⁹ M. HUMM, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

⁵⁰ J.L. MANKIEWICZ (dir.). *The Barefoot Contessa*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1954, n.p.

Both Carmen and María could be interpreted as phallic women who have the controlling phallus inside their bodies as a symbol of their independence and strength, but in the case of María she could be considered victimized since her husband is sexually impotent and she learns about it on her wedding night, too late for someone like her to leave him. They never get to initiate any sexual intercourse, which makes María feel guilty and responsible. Consequently, she assumes the *vagina dentata* complex, as she feels that she has annihilated or even swallowed her husband's manliness.

Fatalism impregnates everything in the novella and the film from the start and the tone never changes. Therefore, both texts could be categorized as tragedies. The death of Carmen appears as a consequence of destiny, not of Don José's abusive behavior. She knows from the start that, according to her selected destiny, she will be murdered by him, that is why she is not scared of Don José nor does she try to run away when he takes her to a desolate place.

As related to this view, the narrative of the film is composed of several flashbacks that once and again end up in the choral scene of her burial. These recurrent flashbacks never let the audience forget the fact that María is dead. Nonetheless, the audience never gets to see that she has any intention whatsoever to die —as in the case of Carmen. This increases the tragic tone. There are no rational explanations, just an accumulation of tragic motives. Vincenzo even looks civilized in distant full shots when he calls the police in opposition to Don José's desperation when he is about to kill Carmen. Count Vincenzo's rational behavior is that of a man of honor whose dignity has not been respected by María as his property, not that of a man dominated by his passions. Somehow, the ideology implicit in the film justifies Count Vincenzo's homicide despite the fact that María was expecting a baby. In the novella, Don José is seen as the victim of Carmen's sexual games because she is a superior entity. Definitely, she is the one that pulls the strings in spite of social marginalization or even prohibition.

The novella by Prosper Mérimée is profoundly misogynistic, but the strength of the female protagonist surpasses every possible condemnation. Her most remarkable quality is her invincibility in a social system where women must not be visible. Granting the narrators' comments, the reader can deconstruct their gazes and reconstruct Carmen's brave personality in nineteenth-century Spain. Unfortunately, the interpretation of this myth in the case of the film is a step back in the representation of women. The discourse presented is misleading, as it underates the relevance of María's psychological complexity much as its compassionate description. In the end, María's existential philosophy provides mental torture, not freedom, that is, the lesson that women have to learn. Obviously, the discourse adopted is not coherent in terms of gender. It maintains a brave viewpoint when it deals with labor and personal exploitation and producers' incompetence for art, but it remains conservative when dealing with the reflection of María's gender. After all, she remains unknown.

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