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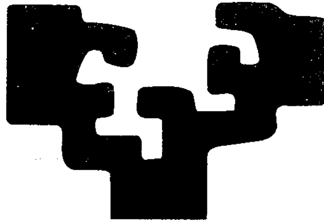

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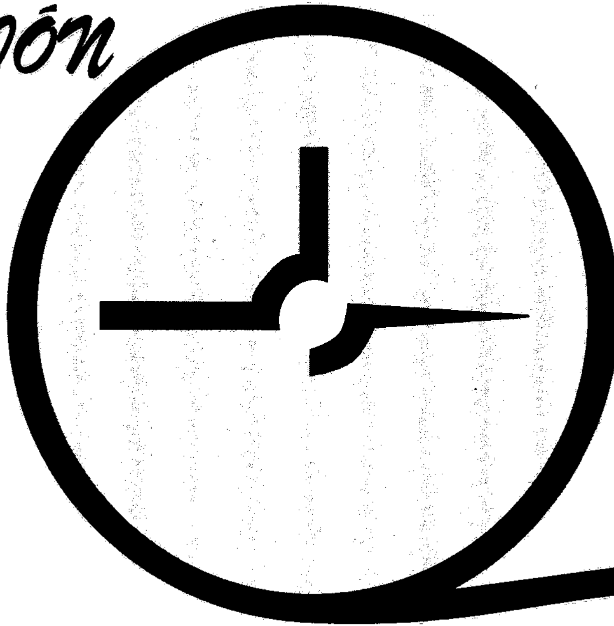

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ANGELA CARTER'S FOCUS ON CELLULOID DREAMS

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The novelist Angela Carter was explicit about her love of Hollywood cinema, especially in her novel *Wise Children* and in her last self-reportage for the BBC. She was also explicit about the ambivalence in her relation to Hollywood, the fact that, while it "fascinated" her, she "resented it" (Carter, 1992: 5).

Carter regarded herself "as a feminist writer" (1983: 69), and her feminism was most active in her literary practice of "turning myths inside out", in Lorna Sage's words (quoted by Alexander, 1989: 64). Carter herself declared emphatically: "I'm in the demythologising business" (1983: 70). For this "demythologising business" Carter found an arsenal of explosive material in popular or mass culture's mythical representation of femininity: the tradition of folk literature and Hollywood cinema, sometimes drawing them together, as in her script for the film *The Company of Wolves*, or in both the novel *The Magic Toyshop* and the script for the film with the same title.

She approached the cinema with the visual pleasure due to "the cinema of illusion and glamour" (Mulvey, 1994: 232), but also with what Mulvey calls "the pleasure of critical investigation", as a feminist female spectator searching for clues of the mythical unconscious under patriarchy (Alicante, 1994). Hence many feminist film theories can be easily and fruitfully applied to her texts; in fact her critical, demystifying use of the cinema seems to illustrate the theories themselves. If, as Ann Kaplan believes, it may be "useful to apply theories developed in relation to one aesthetic mode to the other" (1992: 60), in Carter's case, the use of feminist film theory is not only useful to analyse those texts that inscribe the cinema explicitly -namely, *The Magic Toyshop*, *The Passion of New Eve* and *Wise Children*- but also some texts where the cinema is not literally present in the text, such as "The Bloody Chamber".

Carter, like the feminist film theorists, was interested in female self-alienation through her body as erotic object, in the non-reflecting cultural representation of the female body and sexuality, and in the insistent erotization of women's images, topics which are superbly reflected in the cinema. That is why, where the female body and sexuality are concerned, Carter draws from the cinematographic tradition of representation of those topics. Sometimes writing scenes that are self-reflexively cinematic, such as Melanie's first sexual experience in the novel *The Magic Toyshop*, a scene where the realistic image of the girl's painfully unromantic, self-alienating sexual initiation is superimposed on the

image of the young lovers embracing in a romantic setting, "like a shot from a new-wave British film" (1967: 106). Other times Carter creates scenes that, without being literally filmic, clearly suggest a shot in a film, such as the opening scene of *The Magic Toyshop*, with Melanie posing her naked body in front of the mirror for the benefit of a "phantom" male gaze (1967: 1-2), which would be easily turned into one of the best scenes in the film, which she scripted and was closely involved with. Angela Carter's retelling of "Little Red Riding Hood" in her script for the film *The Company of Wolves* represents the fantasies of a female adolescent at the moment of her entry into sexuality. Like *The Magic Toyshop*, this film shows the adolescent rite of passage into female sexuality, although, as Mulvey suggests, the emphasis here is on the girl's free fantasy and desire, not on the real conditions of her socially constricted experience (1994: 238).

Carter, who, like the feminist film theorists, knew Freud's theories, could see how Hollywood used psychoanalysis as a blunt, unambiguous discourse for ideological ends. One of the Freudian binary oppositions most recurrent in the cinema is the active/passive one. An active masculine gaze looking at a passive female object. The surveyor/surveyed opposition is repeatedly present in most of Carter's texts, in scenes that are explicitly filmic or that are constructed like film-scenes. For example, in *The Passion of New Eve*, the male spectator/surveyor Evelyn is seen by the reader in the voyeuristic enjoyment of the female film-star Tristessa, a visual pleasure reproduced in his voyeuristic contemplation of the spectacle of real life Leilah, whose image is shown to be, like the cinema star's, "a piece of pure mystification" (1977: 6), a construct for the male gaze. In *Nights at the Circus* Carter creates a female star (of the circus) that plays to her own advantage with this feminine predicament, constructing her image for a fascinated audience with all the illusion and glamour of a Hollywood star but refusing to become the mirror of male expectations, by never offering to the gaze an unambiguous, fixed image.

Mulvey notes that Hollywood's representation of woman's "look of curiosity", although culturally linked to the feminine in a derogatory way, can be taken positively as an active gaze. Curiosity is the desire to see secrets. It connotes danger, forbidden spaces, enclosed spaces, which is , of course, part of the cultural definition of femininity itself, but it can be used to connote a positive investigative force, a strength hidden in the desire to penetrate a mystery or enigma that is not her own. Like in Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (Alicante, 1994).

Carter offers a great example of this female active gaze in the story "The Bloody Chamber", which Mulvey considers one of Carter's texts that, without inscribing the cinema on the page, is pervaded by a "magic cinematic attribute" in the Hollywood style (1994: 230). "The Bloody Chamber" represents both the binary opposition male active surveyor/ female passive surveyed, and the possibility for the woman of having her own active surveying gaze in her look of

curiosity. The feminist twist in Carter's retelling of the fairy tale "Bluebeard" is that the curious heroine does disobey her husband by looking into the forbidden dangerous space, hiding for a change a male mystery or enigma. Carter is thus subverting an old folk tale by using a film device to construct a positive female figure, who starts as a passive erotic object displayed for the male gaze but ends up displaying an active gaze in her "feminine curiosity", which leads her to the intrepid transgression of the male prohibition to look into **his** mysterious space.

In her essay on Angela Carter's cinema, Mulvey's main focus is on the writer's fascination with Hollywood cinema rather than on her ambivalence. She emphasises Carter's tribute to the power of "cinema magic", the power shared with traditional fairy tales to show "the collective investment in the fantastic" (1994: 241). But my emphasis is on her feminist re-appropriation of the collective fantastic to reverse it or show its myths as fantasies dreamt not so much by a collective -plural, universal- imagination but by a male imagination. Thus *The Passion of New Eve*, which Carter herself considered her most demythologising novel -"I wrote one anti-mythic novel in 1977, *The Passion of New Eve*" (1983: 70)- illustrates how "the social creation of femininity" is a question of men by using, among other devices, a Hollywood star of the Marilyn Monroe type, an image of a "love goddess" and "exquisite martyrdom" that is shown to be a product of men who, like the spectator Evelyn, have a sadistic imagination (Carter, 1979: 63).

The first two pages of the novel are self-reflexive. In them the narrator comments on both the form and ideological content of the text. The description of Tristessa's acting style mirrors Carter's own narrative style: executed "in arabesques of kitsch and hyperbole yet transcended the rhetoric of vulgarity by exemplifying it with a heroic lack of compromise" (1977: 5). Tristessa is refered to as an adequate "symbol" of woman; but what that symbol signifies is "false", it is "pure mystification" (1977: 6), because Tristessa is emblematic of the image of woman but only as a reflection of men's various fantasies, not only their "masturbatory fantasy" (1977: 75) but also their fantasies about themselves.

Evelyn is introduced in the first lines of the novel as Tristessa's desiring spectator. What the development of the plot will show is that what makes her image desirable for him is his projection on it of an image he carries within him of himself, as if illustrating Lacan's assertion that "what makes an object desirable is what leads to its confusion with the image we carry within us" (quoted by Rose, 1986: 174). Evelyn's desire for the cinematic star Tristessa is an act of projective identification: "Tristessa", he admits, "was an illusion that could fill my own emptiness with marvellous, imaginary things..." (1977: 110).

Carter's demystifying twist consists of showing how those "marvellous, imaginary things" of his that he finds reflected in Tristessa's melancholy eyes, are not the product of his self-recognition but of "an illusion in a void" (1977: 110). For that woman -the quintessence of femininity he dreamed of in front of

the cinema-screened Tristessa- turns out to be a travesty. The "real life" Tristessa -not the projected image of the male spectator's dream- is a man masquerading as a woman.

Tristessa is a man who, unlike Evelyn, consciously and voluntarily assumed his recognition in the image of "quintessential femininity" of his own dream of unity and fixity: "Passivity", he confesses, "Inaction. That time should not act upon me, that I should not die. So I was seduced by the notion of a woman's being..."; he wanted to become "inviolable, like glass" (1977: 137), therefore he turned himself into Tristessa, the "master image" (Rose's words) of unity and fixity, for to its status as quintessential femininity -transcendentally fixed, inviolable- has to be added its cinematographic status, **materially** fixed in celluloid.

As Mulvey points out, woman as icon, displayed for an active male gaze, not only evokes erotic desire, but strangely, simultaneously, a threat of castration (1973: 21). Mulvey suggests two mechanisms used by man to handle "the dread of woman" (Horney's expression), two avenues of escape from his anxiety: one of them is a combination of voyeurism and sadism.

Evelyn's sexual drive towards Tristessa is voyeuristic-sadistic, which is why he gains pleasure from the spectacle of her suffering. Evelyn as an adult remembers the adolescent Evelyn enjoying erotically the spectacle of "Tristessa's speciality", her suffering, which (strangely, almost absurdly) always aroused in him a twitch in his "budding groin" (1977: 8). Tristessa as "the tragedy queen", as "Our Lady of the Sorrows", with a face as "an invitation to necrophilia", is the focus not only of the spectators' pain "projected out of their hearts upon her image" (1977: 121), but also (paradoxically, or rather, perversely) of their erotic desires. As Ann Kaplan observes and Carter illustrates, "the spectator is obviously in the voyeur position when there are sex scenes on the screen, but screen images of women are sexualized no matter what the women are doing literally" (1984: 232).

The second mechanism suggested by Mulvey to handle the masculine dread of woman, or, in strictly Freudian terms, his "castration anxiety", is the complete disavowal of that anxiety or fear, by turning the figure of woman into a fetish, a beautiful object so satisfying in itself that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous -hence the overvaluation, the cult of the female star (1973: 21).

Evelyn clearly enacts both mechanisms, sadism-voyeurism and fetishistic overvaluation, glorification of woman. He himself recognizes his own "ambivalent attitude towards women" when remembering his spectator's reaction to Tristessa, his double attitude of "sentimental" sublimation and "a marked sadistic streak" (1977: 9).

The fetishistic glorification of the image of woman by Evelyn -shown is his sentimental and nostalgic cult of the female star- is made possible by the passivity and fixity of the female character. Molly Haskell notes that "women who develop experientally are virtually absent from American film. Female charac-

ters **are**, male characters **do**" (quoted by Kasdan, 1983: 258). Tristessa's characteristic pose as an actress is **to be** a woman. She never develops experientially, like "a sleeping beauty who could never die since she had never lived" (Carter, 1977: 119).

Tristessa's textual status is, like her life, an iconographic one: to incarnate one myth of essential femininity with "kitsch excess", in Carter's pet expression. Carter embodies the myth with the express purpose of showing a) that it is a fallacy, and b) that it is a masculine fallacy. Thus when Evelyn faces the source of Tristessa's ultrafeminine melancholy -of her enigma and mystery, of her essence as object of desire, love and mystery- hidden behind her celluloid veil, that is, when he sees "the rude red purple insignia of maleness", he recognizes immediately what makes her "the perfect man's woman": she incarnates his own dream, his "secret aspirations"(1977: 128-9), thus illustrating that the "concrete essence" of her marvellous femininity is a masculine abstraction. Tristessa is **his** own abstraction as his own object of desire, "and this object was, itself, an idea" (1977: 129).

Carter's literary reflection of the "illusion" in cinema is, at least in her most explicit feminist novel, more than a "celebration", a "tribute", or a "memorial" to cinema magic (Mulvey, 1994: 231, 242), a feminist critique of the power of male conscious and unconscious fantasies in the cultural production of women's non-reflecting cinematic and other images.

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