

# THE FRAMING CURTAIN: THEATRICALITY AS A FORM OF CINEMATOGRAPHIC SIGNIFICATION IN RICHARD FLEISCHER'S *VIOLENT SATURDAY* (1955)

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## THE CURTAIN RISES: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

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In his film *Violent Saturday* (1955) Richard Fleischer takes a sublimated and mannerist approach to construct a story that is a hybrid of film noir and melodrama, in which a theatricalised construction of the *mise-en-scène* underpins an exploration of the moral duplicity of an American community. Through the arrangement of the characters at specific locations on the set, fenced in by the signifying power of objects whose placement is anything but arbitrary, Fleischer positions scenes between curtains as if to suggest that the events that unfold within the frame they form are lies. Cinema is, after all, an art of space, of what we leave in and out of it, of what falls within and beyond its boundaries, of what the characters say and do under its jurisdiction. The curtain thus signifies representation, appearance, a theatricalising construction in cinematographic language.

This noir melodrama depicts the convergence of two stories: the preparation and execution of a bank robbery by a gang of thieves in a fictional Arizona town, and the personal lives of a number of the town's residents. As if the criminal plotline were not enough, the film's exploration of the townspeople's relationships, conflicts and repressed desires delves into some unpleasant open wounds. Boyd and Emily Fairchild's open marriage, serving as a narrative gateway into the community's dark side, conceals a tragic reality in which they both feel trapped. Despite their efforts to depict their loveless relationship as a happy one, it will soon turn too destructive to survive. The focus of this study will be on the dialectic established between sound and image in certain segments: what we see and hear, and what we do not see or hear but can sense beneath the surface. Taking a paradigmatic example, the analysis of a local form will facilitate the interpretation of the global structural form of the film (Viota, 2020), as

a specific image can encapsulate the thematic essence of the whole story. The clues will be found in the positions of the characters and the distances between them, the layout and symbolic meaning of the dramatic spaces, and the theatrical staging of the set, editing, and use of music.

In short, by means of a cinematic and narratological analysis aimed at extracting the meaning of a text based on its expressive and narrative elements, this article seeks to explain how a thematic idea can be given cinematic form (Zunzunegui, 2016), through the expressive strategies and decisions adopted by the filmmaker to embody tragedy and the (self-)deception of appearances in sound and images in a local case. This idea constitutes the “exploratory hypothesis” (Casetti & Di Chio, 1991: 25) of this research, aimed at confirming the enriching and meaningful nature of theatricality in cinema. The analysis of the narrative structures will also draw on the concepts of focalisation, ocularisation, frequency and order established by Gaudreault & Jost (1995). But first, a brief overview will be offered of the frictions between cinematic and theatrical language, as well as a description of some of the particular aesthetic and narrative features of Richard Fleischer’s filmography. In this sense, of all the phenomena of interaction between film and theatre, this study will focus exclusively on the translation of the theatrical *mise-en-scène* (specifically, the performing stage and one of its traditional elements, the curtain) into cinematographic *mise-en-scène*. Thus, the aim of this article is not to explore the semiotic dialogue between the two art forms in a general sense, but specifically to analyse a film text that constructs its images by means of a dramatic device.

## **2. ACT I: PRESENCE, ABSENCE AND APPEARANCE**

Although it is not my intention to provide a comprehensive map of the symbiosis between film and

theatre, it is worth establishing a few basic points that will serve as a foundation for this analysis. To this end, the entry for the use of textile imagery in Juan Eduardo Cirlot’s dictionary of symbols is taken as a conceptual starting point:

it refers not only [...] to the ideas of linking and increasing through the blending of two elements (warp and weft, passive and active), or to the act of weaving as an equivalent to creating, but to the idea that for a certain mystical intuition of the phenomenal, the given world seems like a curtain that conceals our view of the true and profound (1992: 428).

The polysemous nature of the concept makes it a perfect fit for this study, which is concerned precisely with these two dimensions of the figurative object of the curtain in *Violent Saturday*: on the one hand, the creative nature of weaving, and on the other, the illusory power of what a woven cloth veils or prevents us from seeing in its entirety. The history of art abounds with textual operations of this kind, which are not “simple ornamental details, but signs of a meta-pictorial [or in this case, meta-theatrical] representation” (Polidoro, 2016: 76). Put simply, the interest here is in films that appear to “destroy the mimetic illusion in order to call attention to its mechanisms and invite us to uncover them in the construction of what we believe is real” (Pardo, 2018: 63). In other words, these are films of the late classical period that operate within the parameters of estrangement or distancing (Brecht, 2004: 167-169) that would later be consolidated by modern cinema.

Before going any further, it is important to acknowledge that contemporary theatre studies have moved beyond the definition of theatre as an illusion or an appearance of the real (Lehmann, 2013: 184-192). The images analysed in this study reflect the convergence of three other theatrical concepts: performance, as an involuntary and unconscious act carried out by individuals in their social lives, like characters in a film (Goffman, 1997); performativity, referring to the idea

of “masking” reality (Sánchez, 2010); and staging, understood as the “process of planning” that controls the elements and development of a scene (Fischer-Lichte, 2014: 373). However, for the purpose of this study I also take illusion and appearance into account due to their thematic and narrative relevance to the object of study, without entering into discussions of literary theory.

In the interests of brevity, the two main currents of opinion on the cinema-theatre divide can be placed on two ends of a spectrum. Since the earliest years of film theory and criticism, there has been a debate that has split opinion on cinema’s theatrical heritage into two factions. In general terms, on one side is the faction led by André Bazin, whose concept of “pure cinema” argues for the peaceful coexistence and mutual enrichment of the two art forms. For Bazin, the supplement of theatricality injected into cinematographic discourse has two effects, as “playing theatre-in-film” (Genette, 2004: 78) accelerated the growth of the latter and ensured the survival of the former. Because cinema—which is by no means a monolith that resists all expressive contamination in the name of purity—ensures “liberty of action in regard to space, and freedom to choose your angle of approach to the action” (Bazin, 1967: 85), it unhackles theatre from its spatio-spectatorial chains.

On the other side of the spectrum, the filmmaker Robert Bresson’s aphoristic and effective notion of the *cinematograph* (his filmmaking) has its nemesis in *filmed theatre* (everything other than his filmmaking). As Bresson puts it, “a film cannot be a stage-show, because a stage-show requires flesh-and-blood presence” (Bresson, 1979: 12). From this perspective, it seems more than likely that a “photographic reproduction of a stage-show”, as *Violent Saturday* clearly seems to be, is what the man who made *Pickpocket* (1959) would call a falsity of presence. But my analysis here is not concerned merely with theoretical exchanges of accusations. What is of real interest is precisely the point of connection where this film

reconciles the two (p)arts, as it is their symbiotic nature rather than a disjunctive “contamination or remediation” (Gieseckam, 2007) that films like this one exploit.

In *Violent Saturday*, Fleischer uses theatre as a linguistic resource which, on fusing with reality, becomes false—with all the aesthetic force that this entails. Or at the very least, it becomes doubly illusory, as it is at once a representation and an incision into real space, with no material basis other than the world itself. This does not mean that Fleischer is rejecting the validity of theatre. On the contrary, he draws out theatrical paradigms and inserts them into his cinematic language. Thus, the scene between curtains in this film is not a theatrical representation, but a theatricalising or theatricalised representation, because what it shows us on a staircase between curtains is a very real and operative part of the story. This is the irony and the cruelty to which the filmmaker subjects his characters. Although, as Bazin points out, film not only mobilises “a paradoxical modality of theatre production” (1967: 120) but also takes into account the formal extension of that paradox, the greatest filmmakers have known how to exploit the limitations of theatre, the art of presence, in a slide into the realm of absence that is cinema. In opposition to the negativity of those who believe that “the curtains play only a small perceptual role and their residual symbolic value is trivial and somewhat foolish (attempting to imitate the nobility of the theatre show)” (Aumont, 1997: 86), the analysis here aims to turn a microscopic lens on those films “that turn to the theatre to explore the theme of truth and lies, of representation” (Abuín, 2012: 17).

Further to this discussion, it is worth concluding these theoretical considerations with Christian Metz’s reflections on the osmosis between cinema and theatre. Metz understands cinematographic theatricality as estrangement, artificiality, as a “splitting, counterpoint, philosophical reflection and metafictional convergence” (2002:

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**WHILE DRAMATIC FICTION ALREADY INVOLVES A PROBLEMATIC DIALECTIC BETWEEN THE STAGE AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD, WHEN THAT DRAMA IS EMBEDDED ON SCREEN IN A FILM FRAME, IT PRODUCES A DOUBLE ARTIFICE**

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24-25). A dialectic operates in cinema between the real and imaginary planes, whereby the real imitates the imaginary. Representation and the thing represented in cinema are imaginary; conversely, in theatre, both these spaces are real:

as the world does not interfere with the story to constantly disprove its pretensions to establish itself as a world (as occurs in theatre), the diegesis of films can provoke this strange and well-known impression of reality (Metz, 2002: 38).

In other words, while dramatic fiction already involves a problematic dialectic between the stage and the outside world, when that drama is embedded on screen in a film frame, it produces a double artifice. As suggested above, these qualities of theatre and cinema lie at the very heart of the film analysed here.

### **3. ACT II: MELODRAMA AND FILM NOIR IN RICHARD FLEISCHER'S WORK**

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Of all the themes explored by Fleischer, the most obvious is the old adage that “appearances are deceptive”. To offer a few brief examples, his characters include an Amish patriarch with a violent streak, a puritanical librarian who turns to robbery, a shy banker with voyeuristic tendencies, and a cowardly father who will regain his courage and the love of his children. And the thieves are simply thieves; not very professional, but thieves, nonetheless. Above all the others are Boyd and Emily, who stand out as the only characters, apart from the gangsters, whose story ends with death. But what is of interest for this study is the veil of

Maya and its stripping away employed by Fleischer not only for these characters, but also for the spaces they inhabit and the situations and actions that take place in them. In *Violent Saturday*, we hear things that have nothing to do with what we see. The crowning glory of Fleischer’s contribution to the film noir genre, this film works with a dialectic “between what each character could be and what they end up being in their interactions with objects and other characters” (Losilla, 1997: 15). Moreover, as “the stylistic scenery is populated with elliptical elements, double meanings, indirect allusions, expressive ambivalences and underground tensions” (Heredero & Santamarina, 1998: 27), the fusion of typically film noir stylistic elements with melodramatic narrative developments turns out to be a highly astute strategy for expressing the opposition between reality and appearance. This is largely due to the fact that “in film noir, shadows and lights pursue characters who struggle in a gloomy ‘no man’s land’”, an illusory space-time where “reality and dream intertwine in an atavistic schizophrenia that reveals much about human nature” (Simsolo, 2007: 19).

In this sense, it is important to bear in mind that in the late 1950s and early 1960s, “making a gangster movie meant taking a leap into the past, assembling a complex—and costly—reconstruction that was not always appealing to bankers and producers” (Coma & Latorre, 1981: 191). Moreover, colour and other technological advances constituted expressive contradictions of the thematic and formal ontology of film noir, with its absence of colour and its shadows. However, Fleischer had good reasons for choosing colour and a widescreen format for this film, although they might at first seem out of keeping with the gloom and oppressiveness of a paradigmatic black-and-white noir film with a 4:3 aspect ratio.

To achieve his aims, the director chose to use CinemaScope, a spectacular system that attempts to “cover a lot all at once” (Viota, 1966), resulting in an unreal, explicit and baroque representation

that instantly elicits comparisons with theatre. Expanding on Viota's perspective, it is worth considering a remark that he attributes to Fleischer in an original, invented interview: "I try to do things as if I was in a theatre."<sup>1</sup> Given that CinemaScope can take in wide open spaces, the contradiction resulting from the incompatibility of this formal decision with the film's narrative function is obvious. The people of the town depicted in the film have a lot of space to move around in on screen, but the story is constantly pushing them into closed spaces and dead ends, such as in the hold-up in the bank, the shoot-out in the barn, or the mock-theatrical setting in the Fairchild residence, discussed below. In this regard, Losilla (1996: 214) points out that in the 1930s and 1940s it was rare for colour to flood the images of Hollywood films, partly because it would have alienated an audience beset with all manner of economic woes who would only accept bright colours in exotic, escapist or fantasy stories. In the more prosperous context of the 1950s, the movie screens became wider and more colourful:

both the colour and the panoramic screen [...] tended to reinforce an aesthetic that had already been emerging in the previous decade as a reaction against the saturation of the classical style (Losilla, 1996: 215).

With longer takes, the scenery was more powerful, and a wealth of objects and figures were spread all over the screen, expanding life, making it bigger and more vivid. This phenomenon occurred in melodrama, which used these devices to distort and exaggerate reality to the utmost. The "Scope" format introduced the problem of the human figure in the space, in its emptiness and its clutter, in its inhabitability. Its aim was to show everything, and as a result it created an unreality, an explicit, enunciated representation by means of long, rhythmic horizontal shots. The dimensions of the format sought to emulate the boundless, panoramic size of the proscenium stage, but the setting of the drama is open, with no barriers

or frames, with no secondary format that captures the actors' performances in any medium other than reality itself.

It is difficult to determine whether *Violent Saturday* should be classified as a melodrama about the problems faced by people in a small town or a canonical gangster movie about a skilfully planned bank robbery that goes awry due to a coincidental convergence of problematic characters on the day of the heist. The seemingly unambiguous yet exaggerated and overwrought clarity (Oroz, 1995: 25) of the images and situations conceals the truth (negative or positive, depending on the character) beneath the town's surface. This may be enough to justify its classification as film noir, but at the same time there are reasons for defining it as a generic drama. For example, despite taking up a substantial amount of film time, the planning of the hold-up is merely a minor cog in the narrative machinery. The police are also largely left out of the story; they are not present to prevent the tragedy and serve no narrative function. Moreover, the gangsters' motivations are unknown and unimportant. The thieves serve the purpose of destabilising the town, of pulling the lid off the shiny Pandora's box filled with secrets of rot and decay on every level. Rooney argues that melodrama has been depicted as a genre that "tends to reinforce the status quo and/or as a mode that generates melancholy and thwarted wish fulfilment" (2015: 2), a description that sums up the plot of *Violent Saturday* to perfection.

In this context, the fusion of melodrama and film noir effectuated in this film serves a very specific function:

the melodramatic apparatus is founded on the need to break through the visible surface of the text, to explore beyond the appearance of reality, because melodramatic reality is always a physical space with powerful resonances, but also a mask that covers the concealed passion, the hidden morality, or the buried pain (Pérez Rubio, 2004: 104).

In visual terms, *Violent Saturday* is a melodrama, because the cinematography and the imagery have little of the gloom and ambiguity that characterise film noir. The film's bright colours and warm lighting, so dear to Hollywood in the decade from 1955 to 1965, might easily have been designed for a Douglas Sirk picture. And at the same time, dramatically it is pure film noir, fatalistic and with a complex happy ending (or a happy-ending complex). Put simply, *Violent Saturday* straddles the line between noir and deceptive reflection, always evading both, while seeking to construct its discourse on the selection of ingredients of stage drama analysed above.

In any case, as viewers we have to deal with visual information that cannot be easily decoded in a standard reading. This is because the scene analysed below mobilises a series of signifiers whose meaning will only be understood in the key sequence of the thwarted bank robbery. The theme could be summed up as follows: in appearance, "everything is fine", but on that same shiny surface we can find signs of the reality that lies hidden beneath it. It is important to bear in mind that "every (linguistic) semiotic object, and even any of its elements, is vested with a double existence, as it exists both in the form of being and in the form of seeming" (Greimas, 1973: 108). Specifically, the discourse in the sequence in question displays a highly significant mismatch between denotation and connotation. The confusion this provokes is shared between the spectator and the two characters involved: the hold-up is suspense material, while the tragedy of the townspeople's lives and its denouement constitute a surprising twist.

#### **4. ACT III: TRAGEDY ON A VIOLENT SATURDAY**

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As noted above, the thematic principle of the scene analysed here—and by extension, the film as a whole—is that appearances are deceptive, but there is no reason for this to be limited to the appear-

ances of the characters alone, as it applies equally to the places, and the characters cannot avoid the violence they inflict.

After an evening of flirting, indecent propositions and romantic suggestions with a nurse named Linda, the owner of the local copper mine, Boyd Fairchild, has had a little too much to drink, and he ends up having to be taken home by this same young woman to whom he has shared the details of his troubled marriage. The reason that for a few hours he seems to forget that he is "happily" married to the lofty and liberated Mrs. Fairchild lies in the fact that she has once again failed to show up for the lunch date they had arranged for that day. His married life is an illusory mirror-image that looks perfect to everyone else in town but that for all practical purposes is a lie. This thematic principle of the frailty of an apparently indestructible bond is formally represented in little hints in the *mise-en-scène* that warn the spectator of what is about to happen a few minutes later. The first of these hints can be found in the single shot showing Boyd's attempt to pick up Linda. The scene takes place in the local bar, where we see all the main characters in the story: Harry, the timid, voyeuristic bank manager; the trio of thieves who hatch the meticulous plot to rob the bank; and the aforementioned Boyd and Linda.

At the height of his inebriation, Mr. Fairchild begins dancing with the attractive young woman on the dance floor. Fleischer uses the transparent composition to slip in a shot showing the bashful Harry as a tiny bust framed in the mirror above the bar, compelled to share the same illusory space containing his fantasies of Linda while she dances with his sexual competitor. The suggestion is that he is unable to find the slightest satisfaction of his frustrated longing even in the illusory world of the mirror, precisely because the reflection there contains his object of desire (Linda) in Boyd's arms. It should not be overlooked here, incidentally, that Fleischer also frames the drunken businessman in a kind of frail curtain of delicate





Above. Figure 1. Below. Figure 2

wine glasses; the shot captures the hugeness of the mirror over the counter of the bar, so that we are offered two specular appearances, the larger, definitively ill-fated one being reserved for the owner of the mine. His life, in addition to being a false reflection, is confined in a framework that could easily be shattered to pieces [Figure 1].

The second image hinting at Boyd's nature and his narrative arc can be found in the scene of an informal meeting with his associate, Shelley. In the scene, Boyd is handling the various components of a photo camera, including the device itself, a flash bulb, rolls of film, and even a small viewfinder. Most of these items are shown together alongside a framed picture of his wife, with Shelley's closed fist looming threateningly over them, in a metonymic shot. These are objects used to capture somebody's image, a visual representation, but it is just a false illusion, a mirage. Everything foreshadows the great degree-zero illusion of the theatrical: fiction in life itself, in which the real and the fake cannot be distinguish-

shed. This scene is the first time we see the couple "together", but she is only in a photo, absent, re-presented.

The most interesting aspect of this scene from the perspective of this analysis is the positioning of the actor on screen: standing upright above the picture portrait of his wife, framed by the curtains of his office, Boyd is expressively and spatially distanced from Shelley [Fig. 2]. The composition is split in two, with Boyd standing and Shelley sitting down, and with different backgrounds behind them that also separate them visually. This separation foreshadows the final outcome of their respective narrative arcs: a happy ending for Shelley and a devastating denouement for Boyd. As this scene suggests, the meta-framing of one or more figures with a curtain image in *Violent Saturday* acquires a

connotation of theatricality and meta-representation that the characters themselves remain unaware of. In this way, the cinematographic discourse gradually begins to arrange the characters according to its designs. We will obtain the information that reveals the full meaning of these images only after the fact. It is not only the paradigmatic dimension of theatricality but also its syntactic dimension, involving the arrangement and selection of certain elements in the editing process, that gives these images their meaning.

Another equally important sequence takes place at the country club, the location that conveys the unrestrained and carefree personality of Mrs. Fairchild. It is worth highlighting the detail that this is not actually the sequence that first introduces us to Emily, as the story begins with a scene in which she almost runs over one of the thieves just after his arrival in the town, in a moment similar to the shot-reverse shot in *Psycho* where Marion exchanges glances with her boss



**Figure 3**

just as she is fleeing with the company's money. The images in the country club sequence establish aesthetic contrasts with the scene of the conversation between Boyd and Shelley described above: while the men talk about the work in the mine in a humdrum office, Emily and her lover are enjoying the brisk morning under the shady trees of a golf course. Work is thus contrasted with leisure, the manmade office furniture with the lushness of nature, as a metaphor for Emily's supposed conjugal freedom. And in fact, that freedom is really no more than supposed: while Boyd is hemmed in first by the curtains of his office (work) and later by the rows of wine glasses (alcohol), in Emily's case it is the trunks of the trees that, in this context, leave the adulterous woman with no escape [Fig. 3]. Exploring this construction further, the shadows of the leaves on the characters' bodies add a hint of drama, with lighting that is not as idyllic in the foreground as it is in the background. Fleischer thus conveys the idea of distance between the Fairchilds. It is late in the film when they finally appear together, and when they do it is climactic—and false. In fact, when Emily is killed by one of the gangsters in the hold-up, Boyd is not even present, as if turning the tables on his repeatedly absent wife.

In this way, the discourse connects the couple through the composition, while at the same time the content places them on very different coordinates through the contrast between natural and artificial worlds.

Boyd's drunken return to the Fairchild mansion will provide the spark that lights the tragic, inextinguishable fire of that violent Saturday. After bringing him home, Linda keeps vigil by his side as he sleeps, waiting for his wife to get home and look after him. After a long day of infidelities and disagreements, Mrs. Fairchild is surprised to find a nurse in her living room watching over her husband. Following a heated discussion in which Linda questions Emily's role in a marriage that she is unwilling to give up and actually greatly desires, Emily, furious and proud, drives out her competitor. Judging by the expression on her face and her dejected posture as she climbs the stairs to her bedroom, it would seem that Linda's reprimand has done more damage than she is able to withstand. Despite her objections, she knows perfectly well that Linda is right.

It is precisely at this moment when the stairway framed by huge curtains is revealed to us for the first time in all its splendour [Fig. 4]. This means that the key object of the scene



offered a few shots later is introduced by Emily: the performance has begun. At this point, we need to jump ahead a few sequences to the moment when Boyd wakes up, as Fleischer uses a cross-cutting technique that indiscriminately switches between the various events leading up to the Saturday in question. The decisive scene that is the focus of this analysis thus begins a few minutes later in the film.

In a medium shot at the height of the sofa where Boyd is lying, Emily enters the frame to shake her husband, who wakes up in a daze. In response to his wife's evident concern, he sits up, coming eye-to-eye as if in preparation for the imminent fight. The shot continues without a cut, pulling out to a medium-long shot of the couple. In a dance of shifts and turns, the two figures exchange positions as if disputing the territory, as if their domination of the domestic space will give them the power necessary to claim victory over the other. In this context, Fleischer's use of CinemaScope gives the actors considerable room to move in a seemingly vast frame that nevertheless limits their constant movements to an enclosed space. Although CinemaScope was normally used to create a more natural, realistic effect, as it could cover much more space with more depth, in this

case Fleischer, with the help of the set, the duration, the colour and the lighting, manages to give the shot a kind of artificial appearance.

After three minutes sustaining the same shot, the first clear cut occurs, once again spatially splitting the characters with a considerable initial distance, generating a long match cut of gazes that fades as the dramatic tension increases. Moreover, this syntactic decision establishes the two diegetic spaces that underpin the argument here: a) the living room, which is occupied by Boyd, associated with the harsh reality of his romantic situation [Fig. 6]; and b) the grand staircase framed by the huge curtains that so resemble those of a theatre stage, where Emily becomes the object of a meta-representation [Fig. 5]. It is this that gives rise to the pseudometalepsis (or false metalepsis) that sustains this analysis. A metalepsis occurs "when the passage from one 'world' to another is masked or subverted in some way: textually masked" (Genette, 2004: 137). What is curious here is that this technique, so popular in fantasy fiction and meta-cinema, receives here what could be called a realist treatment. In other words, everything that happens inside the theatrical space of the staircase constitutes a kind of unconscious performance by the characters, in which their acts, promises and

Figure 4





Figure 5

forgiveness will be valid only within the boundaries of the frame—or, to put it in cinematographic terms, only until a fade to black brings an end to the shot and to the scene.<sup>2</sup> Let's explore this a little further.

The camera position marks the threshold between the realm of reality (the living room) and the realm of falsehood (the stairs). The second shot in the scene shows Boyd with a quizzical look in response to Emily's behaviour; he moves towards her at once, although he stops short before stepping into the dramatic space of the stairway (shots 1 and 3). Similarly, the scale of the shots undermines the cruel unreality. The shot-reverse shot dynamic now consists of much closer frames, effectively asphyxiating the characters. An example of the formal expression of this idea of confinement can be found in the fifth shot of the segment, where Emily, who until now has been standing on the stairs holding onto the handrail, sits down on the stairs sobbing, so that she appears imprisoned behind the posts of the banister, which now appear as a metaphor for the bars of a cell

Figure 7



Figure 6

[Figs. 7-8]. Before going any further, it is worth highlighting the symbolism associated with stairs. According to Cirlot, the staircase symbolises "the relationship between two worlds" (1992: 187). He also points out that these worlds are signalled not just by two points (middle/earthly and upper/heavenly) but by three (the third point being lower/infernal) (Cirlot, 1992: 187).

If we apply the above idea to this analysis, it seems clear that Emily inhabits the intermediate point between the heavenly ideal they are trying to fabricate—with the idea of escape as a catalyst—and the infernal cesspit of marital breakdown. This division of incompatible spaces persists even when Boyd and Emily share the space of supposed positivity. Thus, Boyd finally enters the theatrical frame of the lie on the staircase, and proposes the idea of leaving town, because "there's nothing to hold us here." This dissonance between what we hear (their plans to get away) and what we see (a "free" woman imprisoned in her own house) could be said to sum up the cruel irony that these images will acquire at the end of the story.

Figure 8



**THE SHOT ENDS WITH THIS DOUBLE LAYER OF CONFINEMENT TO WHICH EMILY AND BOYD ARE SUBJECTED: THE ENORMOUS CURTAINS AND THE STAIRCASE/CELL, WITH THE MUSIC SWELLING TO A CLIMAX AND A FADE TO BLACK THAT SEEMS TO SUGGEST THE IMMINENT APPEARANCE OF THE WORDS “THE END”**

As the couple are about to consummate their hasty and ultimately thwarted reconciliation, Fleischer offers his penultimate expressive touch prior to completing the construction of the tragedy. Boyd, positioned emotionally in parallel with his wife, moves around to the other side of the banister to join her on the staircase, thereby entering the prison it symbolically represents. Considering once again the division of the stairway into three levels, it is worth noting that upon their reconciliation the couple will remain there, on the middle level. The discourse of the film does not yet tell us whether their future will take them up (to happiness) or down (to separation). In other words, the stairway “is a stable space in terms of framing but unstable in terms of content, with a surface onto which uncertainty is inscribed, in a veritable hallucinatory device” (Stoichita, 2018: 154). In short, both are imprisoned the moment they tell each other “I love you.” However, we have yet to come to the final stroke that closes this sequence. With the couple having made what will ultimately prove to be a fleeting reconciliation, the camera begins zooming out. This technique gives the impression that at any moment a theatre full of people will appear in the Fairchilds’

living room, cheering and applauding as the curtain framing the stairway closes, manifesting the latent metalepsis discussed above. But the zoom-out stops and the shot ends with this double layer of confinement to which Emily and Boyd are subjected: the enormous curtains and the staircase/cell, with the music swelling to a climax and a fade to black that seems to suggest the imminent appearance of the words “THE END” [Fig. 9].

In this sense, the final image of the scene suspends judgement, although the general thematic context of the film and of this sequence in particular gives us no warning that the direction will be inevitably downward: to death, hell, and tragedy. And there is yet one further touch: although the fade-out indicates the end of the sequence, a fade-in that immediately follows it interrupts Boyd and Emily’s “happy mini-ending”. The next image we are shown is of pistols laid out on a bed in the hotel room where the gangsters are staying [Fig. 10], the same weapons that will be fired a few minutes later when Emily loses her life, in the

Above. Figure 9. Below. Figure 10





thwarted robbery of the local bank. This juxtaposition reflects the axiom that editing can sometimes join together more than it separates, although in this case what it joins is a fatal link.

One additional detail worth pointing out is the use of sound at this point in the film. The music that plays at the end of this sequence offers yet another twist in Fleischer's mannerist exercise here. Making expressive use of the classical music score as an emphasising technique, the director brings in Hugo Friedhofer's theme at the exact, meaningful moment when Emily, overwrought with guilt, crosses the line into theatricality, where she will remain through to the end of the sequence. The final notes of the theme are still playing during the fade-out at the end of the scene. With a musical logic, the wide shot of the stairway ends with the tonic chord of the romantic piece, which is held for a moment after the fade to black, as if inviting us into that space of happiness invented by Boyd, Emily and the *mise-en-scène*. It is at this point that the music should end, together with the scene. But instead, the band continues to play in the dark, and at that moment the tonality changes from major to minor, connecting the two scenes with a dominant chord that generates tension while seeming to place a question mark over everything we have just seen, especially given that the first image that appears after those ominous notes in the dark is of the weapons that will be used by the gang of thieves.

## **5. ACT IV: A MIRROR IN A DEAD-END STREET**

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The above description of the formal and narrative strategies of the scene in question points to an immediate conclusion concerning a characterisation at the heart of this analysis, related to the melodramatic elements of Boyd and Emily's pseudo-theatrical scene in particular and of film noir's stylistic techniques in general. Fleischer embeds this melodramatic fragment into the very core of a

tense plotline. As exaggerated, theatrical and false as the stairway scene may be, "the introduction of the romantic universe into any given structure is not intended to be offered as formal melodrama" (Monterde, 1994: 57). In other words, this moment in the narrative should be considered a (melo)dramatic insertion aimed at augmenting the tragedy of the story. Theatricality is imposed on two characters who have no idea that the idealised mannerism of their theatrical reconciliation is nothing more than a tragedy disguised as romance. And the spectator only knows (or will find out) when Emily dies.

The characters in the melodrama are fated to suffer a tragedy that they seem constantly to deny or to want to ignore. Doomed to misfortune, the Fairchilds end up being the town's greatest victims. The metonymic device of the curtain in the vast living room of their mansion provides an eloquent "dual framing" that "physically expresses the difficulty of gaining access to the visible" (Stoichita, 2018: 51) of a town that turns into a huge theatre of the absurd. As Boyd himself puts it in the final scene: "It's so stupid and pointless to be alive in the morning and dead in the afternoon." This consolidates the idea of the world as a theatre in which the characters are merely marionettes at the service of a capricious narrator. In this case, the catalysts, the connections between thieves and future victims, Emily's infidelities, the revelation of the secret and subsequent redemption of Shelley as a hero... all of it points to the falseness of the scene: declared in the narrative, enunciated formally and confirmed dramatically.

The couple offers a double performance: one on an extradiegetic level for the spectator watching the film, and the other on an intradiegetic level for themselves and for an implicit spectator. This scene in *Violent Saturday* is a false framed theatre and a cinematographic stage replete with theatricality, not only as a distancing device, but also to mark the enunciation, conferring *knowledge* through *viewing* in a specific way, i.e.,

as theatre. This type of distribution of information, through “a story enacted by the characters that interacts with their everyday existence” (Pérez-Bowie, 2018: 101), results in the hybridising of genres formulated by Fleischer, who creates a melting pot of iconographic motifs, diegetic shifts and structural archetypes drawn from the two classical Hollywood genres preferred by the major studios.

## **6. THE CURTAIN FALLS: CONCLUSIONS**

As has been stressed above, Richard Fleischer’s formal approach in *Violent Saturday* brings together the opposing positions in the debate over the lack of communication or compatibility between cinema and theatre. Returning to Bresson’s division, in one corner are “those that employ the resources of the theatre (actors, direction, etc.) and use the camera in order to reproduce” and in the other are “those that employ the resources of cinematography and use the camera to *create*” (1979: 11). But Fleischer, a weaver of cinematic fabric, slips easily between one and the other. He reproduces to create, using theatrical language and composition to make cinema.

In the final scene, with Emily now dead, Boyd remarks that it seems like a lie that just a few hours earlier they were sitting in their living room, talking, reconciling, planning their trip. That she was alive and healthy. To be alive in the morning and dead in the afternoon, on a violent, tragic Saturday. Boyd is finally left alone, his back to us, weeping, with the barren, desolate quarry of his copper mine in the background, in a very closed shot that imprisons him, this time in the open air. In the quarry, a kind of stairway or ramp—a structure connecting the upper and the lower—appears to cross through his head [Fig. 11]. And Linda, who tries to console him, has been expelled from the shot: “I don’t want you to see me cry,” Boyd tells her. Boyd’s is the only character arc (apart from Emily’s, of course) that does not get a “happy ending”. While the stairway symbolises ascent or descent, in Fleischer’s work nobody goes up or down; they remain in the middle with no way of getting out.

The theatrical or theatricalising composition of this film signifies duplicity, appearance, suspension of judgement. Through dramatic masking, the scene analysed above tells us: “This is not what it seems; this will not be what it is now.”

Figure 11





The happiness of which we are the only spectators (not even Boyd, because he is an actor on two levels in his own scene) will end with a cruel death. If a representation, a story, is something that is neither true nor false but in between the truth and a lie, a representation within another representation—i.e., a series of theatricalised actions within a film—will be doubly deceptive, and doubly meaningful. In this way, Fleischer's film questions us, as Bazin would say, given his observation of cinema's capacity to "transform theatrical situations that otherwise would never have reached their maturity" (1967: 78). *Violent Saturday* is, in short, a paradigmatic example of this positive exchange between the two *mises-en-scène*. ■

## NOTES

- 1 The writings of Viota cited here were provided by Rubén García López, to whom I am grateful for his kind assistance.
- 2 It is worth noting that this scene ends with a fade to black after Emily makes several references to living in "the dark".

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## THE FRAMING CURTAIN: THEATRICALITY AS A FORM OF CINEMATOGRAPHIC SIGNIFICATION IN RICHARD FLEISCHER'S *VIOLENT SATURDAY* (1955)

### Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the film *Violent Saturday* (Richard Fleischer, 1955). Specifically, it focuses on the narrative and expressive decisions made by the filmmaker in order to formalise an idea: the idyllic appearance of a small town hides the rotten core of the people who live there. To do this, Fleischer makes use of certain theatrical objects, concepts and compositions whose nature and meaning is transformed when framed in cinematographic language. The complex marriage between cinema and theatre, which has received so much attention from theorists and critics, finds the perfect example of its usefulness in this film: theatricality, defined as duplicity, as illusion, can be used as an element of cinematographic signification. Moreover, these particular qualities facilitate the manipulation of the aesthetic-narrative codes of two of the most overwrought and artificial genres that characterised the rise and fall of Hollywood: film noir and melodrama.

### Key words

Theatricality; Classical Hollywood; Appearance; Melodrama; Film Noir.

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## TELÓN DE FONDO Y FORMA. LA PLANIFICACIÓN TEATRAL COMO ELEMENTO DE SIGNIFICACIÓN CINEMATográfica EN *SÁBADO TRÁGICO* (1955) DE RICHARD FLEISCHER

### Resumen

Este artículo consiste en un estudio de la película *Sábado trágico* (*Violent Saturday*, Richard Fleischer, 1955). En concreto, se centra en las decisiones expresivas y narrativas tomadas por el autor para poner en forma una idea: la apariencia idílica de un pueblo esconde una esencia corrompida de las personas que idealmente lo habitan. Para ello, Fleischer se sirve de ciertos objetos, figuras y planificaciones teatrales que modifican su naturaleza y significado al entrar en el lenguaje cinematográfico. El complicado maridaje entre cine y teatro, del que tanto han discutido la crítica y la teoría, encuentra aquí un ejemplo perfecto de su utilidad: la teatralidad, entendida como falsedad, como ilusión, puede ser utilizada como un elemento más de significación cinematográfica. Además, estas particularidades ofrecen una manipulación de los códigos estético-narrativos que conforman dos de los géneros más barrocos y artificiosos del esplendor y decadencia de Hollywood: el cine negro y el melodrama.

### Palabras clave

Teatralidad; Hollywood clásico; Apariencia; Melodrama; Cine negro.

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