

> Gender & Perspective in *Scarlet Street*

> Gênero & Perspectiva em *Scarlet Street*

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Abstract

This paper presents an interpretation of the 1945 forbidden film *Scarlet Street* in a way so as to touch the problem of gender in *film noir*. Firstly, I give an account of *film noir*, agreeing with Robert Pippin's argument concerning film genres. Then, I claim that time and repetition, irony and hierarchy, art and perspective constitute the core subjects explored in *Scarlet Street*. Furthermore, I try to connect all the subjects into a single one. My point is to show how art, perspective, time, repetition, irony and hierarchy are articulated in the main character's gender identity. Finally, I suggest there is a deep connection between the movie's character constitution and Cavell's understanding of gender and agency.

Keywords: Film. Gender. Psychoanalysis. Cavell. Freud.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta uma interpretação do filme *Scarlet Street*, proibido em 1945, a fim de abordar o problema de gênero no *filme noir*. Primeiramente, busco explicar o que é *filme noir* concordando com o argumento de Robert Pippin sobre gêneros de filme. Posteriormente, defendo que tempo e repetição, ironia e hierarquia, arte e perspectiva constituem o núcleo dos temas explorados no filme. Além disso, busco conectar todos esses assuntos em um só. Meu argumento é mostrar que arte, perspectiva, tempo, repetição, ironia e hierarquia estão articulados na identidade de gênero do personagem principal. Finalmente, sugiro que há uma conexão profunda entre a constituição da identidade de gênero no filme e o entendimento de Cavell da noção de gênero e agência.

Palavras-chave: Filme. Gênero. Psicanálise. Cavell. Freud.

> Artigo recebido em 19.05.2019 e aceito em 15.07.2019

Since Stanley Cavell started reading comedies and melodramas from the '30s and '40s, the study of films as sources where traditional philosophical subjects are explored has become a fever in the U.S. and in Europe. These genres helped Cavell scrutinize relations of recognition and avoidance between couples and, in a wider perspective, expressions of skepticism about other minds. In this paper, I follow Robert Pippin in his convictions about *film noir*. He groups these films as a specific genre and reads them as expressions of philosophical investigations. Of course, film as a source of philosophical reflection has some differences in comparison to the traditional textual form, for when we read films we are introduced to a world that philosophical texts sometimes hide for historical and formal reasons. Using films, we make contact with a context richer in details than philosophers usually present in their examples, and to characters whose psychological complexity is more troubling than the commonly used first-person standpoint. Although film's fantasy world is somewhat dependent on the *mise en scène*, the studio technology, the editing and the director's choices, there should be some common features in both philosophical texts and films that produce in the audience the capacity to experience a sort of reflection upon human problems.¹ We must also acknowledge that there are a few pieces of information a text is unable to convey. The textual form is cognitively different from the audiovisual form – while philosophical texts usually work using conceptual edifications, arguments and more rigid linguistic constructions, films develop narratives and touch our more spontaneous visual and emotional capacities. Acknowledging these differences and following these steps, my first task in this paper is to show how Cavell's philosophical project echoes through other film genres, more specifically film noir. In second place, I hope my analysis of Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* – a film that was forbidden in 1945 due to its violence and picturing of a failing justice system – can convince my readers that the *film noir* genre is the perfect soil for some specific seeds to bloom, where the fusion of

¹Robert Pippin, *Fatalism in American Film Noir: Some Cinematic Philosophy*, 2012, p. 20.

elements can help us to understand not only skepticism, but also the constitution of gender identity.

I structured this paper by firstly presenting an account of *film noir*. I try first to understand what its main subjects are, what is the historical context of its emergence and what influences are in play in this genre. The second part is meant to give an account of *Scarlet Street's* plot in such a way that I hope it will be useful for my further theoretical development. In the third part, I present the main subjects that structure the film according to Adrian Martin's analysis. In his opinion, time and repetition, irony and hierarchy, and art and perspective are the fundamental subjects explored in *Scarlet Street*. Then, I try to articulate in a fourth part all these subjects into a single point. My goal is to show how art, perspective, time, repetition, irony and hierarchy are articulated in the main character's gender identity. Finally, I try to give an account of Cavell's understanding of gender and agency. There I agree with Cavell that our common understanding of masculine as the gender that corresponds to activity and feminine as the one that corresponds to passivity is a conceptual association based on a misconception about the very nature of gender and agency.

1. *Noir*

Following Pippin, we can say that *film noir* constitutes a genre in the same way Cavell says melodramas and comedies do, for *noir* films explore conventions, adding or compensating features in an internal dialogue with each other, just as comedies and melodramas do. Some of the defining aspects of *noir* are external to film: the post-war moment changed the degree to which violence was acceptable; it also changed the relations between men and women and between women and work. Not only did Europe have to find another way, but America changed too: cities became bigger, immigrants from Europe arrived with different sensibilities and traditions, complex social phenomena emerged – such as the war widows or men who felt guilty for being alive. These issues are

so deeply absorbed by *film noir* directors that the genre should be acknowledged as an expression of these changes in American society.²

A reflection of this situation in *noir films* is frequently visible in the characters' construction, for multiple determinants will be present in their incapacity to control their lives. In *noir films*, human actions are frequently confusing, as explored by Pippin:

[...] many noirs open up onto questions of action, agency, and action explanation that are extraordinarily complex.

[...] given how unstable, provisional, and often self-deceived are their claims to self-knowledge, and given how little in control they are of their criteria for deliberation, how absurd it is to expect them to be able to “step back,” as it is said, from their commitments and desires and goals and reflectively deliberate about what they ought to do. But this feature, too, is not unique to noirs, film, or aesthetic objects. It is a limitation of which any attempt at action explanation “in life” must also take account.³

Pippin's account of action and agency as it is present in *noir* movies is brought to light under the concept of fatalism. Most of the characters in *film noir* seem to have a destiny, for even if they don't succumb to elements external to their wants, their passions, lust, envy, jealousy, all sorts of feelings forcefully trap them in an uncontrolled fate. Women and men cannot be accommodated in an ordinary life (as shown in the *meta-noir* *The Man Who Wasn't There*). Some innermost forces combating their social volitions make space for the emergence of uncontrolled actions and desires they can barely acknowledge as theirs. As Pippin says,

Noir heroes are endlessly reluctant to act, and when they do, they are mostly responsive and often halfhearted. [...] The standard picture is of people “trapped” either (somewhat paradoxically) by themselves (by who they have become), or by an anonymous and autonomous social order or

² It is also important to note that Western movies also reflect a specific moment in American society. Westerns explore moral conduct from another point of view, mainly the change from a pre-law moment to an institutional and law-ordered life. As a post-war reflection, Western movies symbolize a moment in which new identities within American civilization have to be absorbed.

³ Robert Pippin, *Op. Cit.*, 2012, p. 18.

societal machine, or by a vast purposeless play of uncontrollable fortune, chance.⁴

Almost no character in *noir* can control their inner desires. They do not fit a reflective model of action and agency, at least not when we consider what is central to the basic plot development.

This fatalistic view is central to my purpose of describing the gender identity of the character Chris Cross in the film *Scarlet Street*. My claim is that if fatalism has to do with our inescapable relation to some of our innermost desires, then Chris Cross is an expression of fatalism that reveals our most primitive form of gender trouble, a bidimensional subject constitution in which our relations with others are experienced as relations with ourselves, in which the other is merely a projection of our desire. To reach these results it will be extremely important to keep in mind Cavell's considerations about gender and skepticism.

2. *Scarlet Street's* plot

Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* touches the problem of agency, as almost every *film noir* does. In these films, characters constantly switch between activity and passivity, between being protagonists or victims of their own histories. This constitutes a feature that is visibly expressed in male characters, for they usually succumb to seduction by women, meaning that *film noir* is an interesting source for exploring the connection between agency and gender constitution. Since in *noir* movies both agency and gender constitution have two main constituents, desire and identity, we can articulate them by acknowledging that agency and *to seduce* are linked on one side, and passivity and *being seduced* are connected on the other. Firstly, I must regard how I seduce the other, how I make myself the agent and what is my mind-body identity in doing so. Secondly, I must regard

⁴ *Ibidem*.

which objects I desire in order to understand what seduces me in the other.⁵ That entails that gender constitution depends on the dynamics between activity/passivity on the one side, and masculine/feminine on the other. I see *Scarlet Street* as a film where these issues can be highlighted to great effect. In order to understand why I see this connection, I will first explore the movie's plot.

First, we must acknowledge that it is hard to describe the movie's plot. As in many *noirs*, multiple perspectives are in conflict, and as we attempt to describe the movie, we are bound to slip into a particular way of seeing things, thus forgetting others. The movie begins in a dinner scene, where men celebrate their friendship singing at the table. This celebration is interrupted by a car's horn and the announcement that a lady waits for Mr. J.J., the boss, in the car that has just arrived. Before he goes, he gives Chris Cross a clock as a token of their friendship and as a way of acknowledging Chris's loyalty at his job. After this, J.J. leaves and his employees run straight to the window to admire their boss's power and capacity to have relations with such a good-looking girl.

A little bit tipsy, Chris begins his journey back home, talking to a colleague to whom he declares his feelings. He says he has never been *loved by a woman like that* in his life. He clearly meant a woman as beautiful as his boss's. Before his friend gets on the bus, he comments, in an unconsciously premonitory way, that some dreams never pan out – this gives us an important clue to understanding Chris's future childish behavior.

After some walking around alone through the streets, when Chris is almost at the train station, our hero sees a scene to which he reacts impulsively. He sees a drunk man beating a girl and, in order to protect her, he runs, raising

⁵ It is important to take into account that the well-known opposition between activity and freedom on the one side and passivity and determinism on the other does not play a role here. To be active means no more than to act upon others, while to be passive is simply to submit to others' wills. *Noir* film circumscribes these concepts to a play of resulting forces that tend to move some bodies in certain directions. No idea of transcendental freedom can be found within *noir* character conception.

his umbrella like a sword, and hits this man, whose identity is still unknown. The man falls unconscious; meanwhile, Chris closes his eyes, afraid of the consequences of his act. Since nothing happens (we only hear a train passing), he lowers his arms and gives a sincere smile to the girl who will, as we will see, turn his world upside down. He runs in order to call the police, but when he comes back, the girl gives wrong information to the policeman concerning which direction the bad guy took, something she does in order to avoid further trouble, for she does not want the newspapers on her back. Chris gently offers to walk her to her place, but when they arrive, he invites her to have a coffee. In the café, their conversation is quite strange. We see Chris trying to impress Kitty, but he does so only by answering her questions and accepting suggestions she makes in trying to guess who he is. The result is that Kitty wrongly takes Chris to be a businessman who paints as a hobby, although we know he is in fact only an honest cashier in an ordinary bank. Kitty is also a complex character, for, as we will see, she is not like the customary *femme fatale* we see in *noir films*. She says she is an actress, but most of the time she is evasive and reticent. At the end of the conversation, she gives Chris a flower, asking him to promise never to forget her.

The next scene gives us an insight into Chris's personality. He lives in a house with a controlling and angry wife, and this is why he cannot have his friend over for chatting. Pippin defines Chris differently from other *noir* protagonists:

Other noir male leads, in however qualified and sometimes weirdly passive ways, are “men of action”—Humphrey Bogart, Robert Mitchum, Dana Andrews, Glenn Ford, Burt Lancaster, Dick Powell, Robert Montgomery, Edmund O'Brien, Richard Widmark—and while Chris does break out of his passivity, he is not like these. Until the very end, his actions, even his painting, the activity that counts in the film as most of all his own, are secret, hidden, disguised, furtive.⁶

Chris is trapped in a marriage without love, in which convenience binds the couple. At first, he paid some sort of rent, then she let him stay, and time

⁶ Robert Pippin, *Op. Cit.*, 2012, p. 18.

slowly established the relationship. Love never grew between them and that lack of a sentimental life is what makes Chris a fully sentimental painter. This is what we see when Chris shows his painting to his friend in the bathroom – a place for intimacy and where his emotions are sublimed through art. Chris's friend asks whether he sees the painted flower when he looks at the real one, for he paints in a very particular way. Obviously here there is a play with words: the word *see* is the key concept for understanding the forthcoming changes in Chris's life, for everything that happens to Chris is caused by his way of seeing things, his lack of perspective.

We still don't know, however, who the girl that Chris saved is. Kitty is in love with Johnny, a pimp who explores her and presses her to take money from Chris. One of the most important things Kitty does with Chris's money is to rent an apartment, suggesting that he should install his studio there. Since his wife said she was going to give his paintings to the garbage man, he sees the opportunity to lie about the destiny of his works. The story develops in a surprising way. Johnny steals Chris's paintings and secretly sells them, but, unexpectedly, they end up becoming famous. After selling them at the flea market to unknown buyers, who turn out to be a critic and a gallery owner, Johnny is found in Kitty's apartment. There he is asked by the buyers, who appreciated the paintings, to present them to the author of such incredible masterpieces. The solution he finds is to present Kitty as the artist. What fascinates the buyer and the art critic is precisely the lack of perspective in the works – the two-dimensional representation of space present in Chris's paintings. One of them says he sees a masculine force in the paintings – suggesting that the painter finds in them a way to express sexual desires or gender identity precisely due to the lack of perspective.

In what follows, Adele, Chris's ill-humored wife, accuses him of plagiarism. She believes Chris's works are bad copies of a famous artist called Katherine March (our above-mentioned Kitty). As we might expect, Chris cannot understand this accusation coming out of nowhere and he decides to run

to Kitty's apartment to figure out what has happened to his paintings. There he listens and believes Kitty's sad story. She tells him she had to sell the paintings because she was out of money. Since she didn't know how to do this, she signed her own name on Chris's works. The good news is that some gallery owners loved his paintings, so they decided to organize an exhibition of other works of his. At this moment, we see Chris happy, for his works of art have been finally acknowledged as good, and he also sees this name-changing as a metaphor for a union he cannot have with his beloved girl – as it happens in his marriage, the infantile cashier resigns himself to merely ideal and symbolic achievements.

Chris's happiness grows when he comes to know that Adele's former husband (called Patch-eye Higgins) – a man she had never forgotten – is still alive. If he is still alive, Chris is therefore not married by force of law. If this is so, he can finally marry Kitty, he believes. But before Chris achieve his dreams, Adele's former husband threatens to destroy their marriage if he does not share the life insurance money she got after her beloved was dead. Cleverly, Chris deceives Patch-eye, suggesting a plan: Patch-eye Higgins should go to Adele's house alone and take the money, for Chris, knowing himself, would not be reliable in telling lies when Adele asked what had happened to her money. His real plan was to fool Adele's husband by pretending that the house was empty for him to steal the insurance money, but since Adele was sleeping in her room, what Chris actually provokes is just a meeting between the two and an opportunity for Chris himself to run away.

After this, Chris arrives late in the night at Kitty's place to celebrate and, surprisingly, he sees Johnny coming out of her room to stop a broken record repeating the song *My Melancholy Baby*. After that, he slams the door and escapes, but is desperately followed by Johnny, who wants to try to convince him (again) that nothing is happening between him and Kitty. The scene is cut, and we suddenly see Kitty telling stories of love and hate to her friend on the telephone. Calmly, Chris enters the room to give her his understanding of the situation. He still does not believe she loves Johnny, for in his opinion what they

have cannot be called love. He explains that now they can marry because Adele's husband is still alive. Kitty suddenly lies face down and starts laughing at Chris, though he thinks she is crying. Frightfully, Kitty rises from the bed, showing an evil smile. As she stands up, she begins a long speech that humiliates Chris, telling him all she thinks about him: she tells him straight to his face that he is old, stupid and ugly. She says she will never marry him. To this, Chris's reaction is shocking. He takes an ice pick and, possessed by jealousy, rage and chagrin, he kills Kitty.

The final scenes present Johnny's trial and execution. Since he arrives at Kitty's apartment just after Chris, he leaves his fingerprints on the objects. Meanwhile, Chris is (partially) unmasked, for his boss discovers that he has stolen money. He does not indict Chris, but fires his best employee from his job. From then on, Chris lives an abandoned life, tormented by his memories from the past – Kitty's and Johnny's sweet words return as voices in his head, the music he listened to when arriving at Kitty's apartment and every mistake he made in the past weigh unceasingly on his mind for the rest of his life.

3. The film's structure

Scarlet Street prompts many questions, but I believe most of them can be articulated in a single one: *What does the other's desire mean to me (in a first-person perspective)?* With this question, I believe we can understand Chris's enclosed standpoint and his incapacity to acknowledge the other's desire for a third person, say, Johnny or any person different from Chris himself. To scrutinize this hypothesis, we must keep in mind the clue Adrian Martin gives when he says that the film has four particular domains that constitute its structure. In the tight thematic (one could even say architectural) construction of the film, four particular domains – time, hierarchy, art, and money – constitute the large logical structures which the characters see only intermittently, and which Lang is at pains to reveal to us as viewers. Our gradual unfolding perception of these

structures is built through the devices of repetition, irony, perspective and deduction. It is from this multilayered construction that the film acquires its special force, tone and significance.⁷

Time, repetition, the irony that structures hierarchy, and the lack of perspective in Chris's art are the fundamental features I consider in my reading of this film. Let us take a closer look at these points:

A. Time and Repetition: Repetition is presented mainly through sound: in the song *My Melancholy Baby*, which is repeated many times during the film, in Kitty's and Johnny's voices inside Chris's head, in the unconscious and involuntary predictions of the future in many dialogues, we can hear many repetitions through sound. Repetition is of symbolic importance to understand every relevant character and their fundamental position in the dynamic of desires. Chris's love for Kitty is a repetition of his childish desires – desires that “never pan out”, in his words, and, as a kid, he repeats many times a passive position similar to that of a boy who falls in love with an older woman. Kitty is hooked in a violent love for Johnny, who only exploits her. She seems to believe that love is essentially violent, and the way she accepts it reveals a demand for someone who can teach her rules, limits and about her finitude. In Freudian words, she waits for someone who will put her in a passive position of castration. She constantly repeats a passive and masochistic behavior in relation to Johnny.

B. Irony and Hierarchy: Irony is present in the organization of hierarchical relationships. Love dependency is converted into economic power. In one hierarchy, we have Chris, who is dependent on Kitty's love, who, in her turn, is dependent on Johnny's love for her. In another hierarchy, we have Johnny depending on Kitty's money, who turns out to be dependent on Chris's money. This inversion is certainly ironic, for it makes all characters at the very same time powerful and powerless under different aspects.

⁷ Adrian Martin, *Guess-Work: Scarlet Street*, 2011, p. 3.

C. Art and Perspective: The film's most significant metaphor is present in Chris's relation to art and Kitty's stealing of authority over his works. Chris's paintings become famous for a unique characteristic: his two-dimensional representation of reality, which is, in fact, a result of his incapacity to represent three-dimensional spaces using the technique of perspective. His paintings, as we discussed earlier, are tied to a two-dimensional perspective. If this is not an accidental feature of the character, then we should consider it fundamental to understand Chris's mind and its projection into the world of love and power.

4. Time, space and gender

Now I will try to give an account of how these three features can be articulated into a single question: How can time and space be an expression of Chris's gender identity? First, let us link the idea of time repetition to eschatology. Then, we will see why, specifically, this form of eschatology is a representation of Chris's two-dimensional space representation. Pippin presents the relation between the repetition of music and being in love, and then explains why being in love means to be stuck in time:

When Kitty and Johnny first plot to make money off Chris, the song "Melancholy Baby" plays in the background and becomes in effect the film's theme song and will show up again later. Here, we first hear it from a record that is stuck in a groove, and we get a rather straightforward image about how being in love can be like being stuck, like having a destiny that always returns, cannot be escaped.⁸

The song *My Melancholy Baby* keeps repeating the phrase "in love", suggesting that love can hold us, can stop us. Since being in love means to be stuck in a given position in relation to another person, we can analyze Kitty's love and willingness to forgive Johnny's aggressive behavior, Chris's acceptance of Kitty's demand for an apartment, her selling the paintings under her own

⁸ Robert Pippin, *Op. Cit.*, 2012, p. 147.

name, and Chris's blindness to her cheating on him as different representations of the same structure.

If we understand that the repetition of music in *Scarlet Street* is a representation of what structures Chris and Kitty's lives, this enables us to believe that the repetition of time is an element that depicts their fate. If someone has a fate, this person has his/her life determined in terms of time and future history. Future time will confirm a given fate, and a person cannot escape any unwanted outcome. Theories of time development are also known as eschatologies. We can say that Chris and Kitty are involved in some sort of eschatology, since repetition structures their lives. But we must also acknowledge that the film plays with some Christian metaphors, that it seems to never affirm them, but to contradict or misrepresent Christian faith instead. Seated in a bar, Chris sadly listens to a preacher who affirms that we are all sinners and that someday we will all find peace in heaven. This scene suggests we are dealing with a Christian notion of fate, but, as Pippin says, Lang is probably not endorsing this point of view.

The Christian notion of eschatological time suggests both that there is this radical revolutionary possibility in historical time, such that everything is different, full of new possibilities, after the Incarnation, and that an individual can be born again, decisively become almost literally a different person, free of the burden of the past, forgiven, after having been saved. Lang's irony about this assumption is absolutely withering. The "baby" of real relevance is not the baby Jesus but, the music reveals, our melancholy baby. The aspiration for such revolutionary change is paired musically with the reality of the stuck-in-time, repetitive melancholy baby. And that means not only "melancholy" because this tempting Christian way of thinking about time is naïve, but because melancholy is melancholy, not mourning in Freud's famous sense.⁹

Scarlet Street's eschatology is present in the idea of time repetition and damnation. The repetition of music, voices and events symbolizes a different eschatology from the Christian one. If, on the one hand, Christian eschatology suggests a linear time and promises a future time free of the burden of the past, on the other, the movie suggests a cyclical and repetitive understanding of time.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

Christianity does not endorse the idea of continual repetition of time, for in a given moment we will all be free and forgiven. But if this is so, who is the melancholy baby stuck-in-time as a broken record? My answer is that the baby is Chris, whose melancholy structures the repetition of time. In order to understand this, we shall consider some lines of Freud's account of melancholy:

When we lose some beloved person [...] the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object.

In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him. This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.¹⁰

Let us first state that mourning and melancholia are Freudian concepts that play an important role in the description of the patient's reaction to the death of a beloved person. Freud's understanding of the psychic apparatus includes an economic conception, for he believes feelings are the expressions of our libido, and the latter can relate to others varying in intensity and aspect. For example, as he says in *Civilization and its Discontents*, love and hate are feelings connected to our capacity to find ourselves in the other. Love is the expression of our Eros, of our capacity of aggregation and, psychologically speaking, it is the expression of finding a place for the other within oneself. Hate is the expression of our Thanatos, our capacity to destroy ourselves and our relation to others. Both feelings can have the same economic intensity, but they represent a change of aspect in the libido. For instance, if I am in love with somebody and I discover that this person has been cheating on me, the love can change into hate, for the libido can change its aspect. Hence, Eros can morph into Thanatos. The economic

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholy* (1917), 1973, p. 244.

process needs to find equilibrium and to achieve this, our psyche should either repress love or change love into hate or into some negative emotion.

Returning to the plot of *Scarlet Street*, we can say that melancholy is a good concept to explain Chris's eschatology. He is the baby stuck-in-time who cannot acknowledge Kitty as independent (separate from his enclosed perspective), who projects his own feelings onto her as he does to his painted flowers, and who has a two-dimensional relationship with his beloved girl. He is blind, he cannot see Kitty's interest in Johnny, and he sees her as surface, pure and trustful.¹¹ Since, as the story goes, he kills Kitty, his projective identification with Kitty results in a melancholic relation with the lost object, for he kills an extension of his own self, the other pole of his projective relations. The consequence is the loss of part of his identity. As with Freud's melancholic patients, Chris tries suicide, abandons himself to the streets and expects punishment in order to reach justice. He believes he must die as his love object did. With regard to what Freud says about melancholy, we can say Chris knows he has lost Kitty, but what he does not know is the meaning Kitty had for his life. To wrap this up, his fate is to be stuck-in-time in a two-dimensional world. But why is this two-dimensional representation so important?

The two-dimensional painting is a metaphor for Chris's relation to others. First, let us remember that Chris cannot paint in three dimensions, in the way we represent solids, but only in two dimensions – the dimensions of plane surfaces. If, as he confesses to Kitty, painting is like a love affair, then his limitations in painting will be expressed in relation to Kitty, for she is his love affair. And if we take this analogy between painting and love seriously as a mode of understanding Chris's relations with others, we can say that he sees no internal complexity in the other. He believes Kitty is like a plane surface, showing all of herself at once with no inner soul disconnected from her outer

¹¹ Skepticism about others' minds is a fundamental source to understand Chris's mind. His idea of the body as pure surface with no internal complexity reminds us of Descartes' second meditation, where he casts doubts on the existence of other minds in the bodies of the people walking on the street. Descartes considers the possibility of being alone among automata.

bodily behavior. The other cannot hide anything and he can know all about the other. This perspective, or lack of perspective to use Lang's words, is only possible if we do not acknowledge the other's independence and capacity to dissimulate and fool us. We cannot know everything the other feels and knows; to deny this is the same as not admitting our separation. This fantasy of total knowledge is only credible if I don't recognize my view of the other as an extension of my own mind – as if I projected my soul upon the other.

This is very much like the projective mechanism that Freud identifies as a psychological defense. In the dictionary written by Laplanche and Pontalis, we see the following definition:

an operation whereby qualities, feelings, wishes or even 'objects', which the subject refuses to recognize or rejects in himself, are expelled from the self and located in another person or thing. Projection so understood is a defense of very primitive origin which may be seen at work specially in paranoia, but also in normal modes of thought as superstition.¹²

With regard to this definition, we can understand Chris's relation with Kitty as one of projection of feelings and wants, a two-dimensional relation in which the other is hidden under his expanded self.

But what does Chris miss with this projective attitude? He fails to acknowledge Kitty's love for Johnny. He is unable to see the real girl he loves; Kitty is like an extension of his never-ending self, in whom Chris sees only his own desires as existing and all possible contradiction to his projective self is denied. The acknowledgment of the other's desire by him is fundamental to overcome a two-dimensional relationship. Since in a two-dimensional relationship the two people involved are one and the same, in order to have an *I* and a *you* independent of projection, there must be a third element in the relation – in terms of pronouns, it is to say that there must be a *he* or a *she*. So, in order to produce an independent *I* and an independent *you*, I have to acknowledge at least the possibility of your desire for another, a third element

¹² Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, 1974, p. 349.

in my relationship with you.¹³ In sum, we can say, according to Freudian theory, that individuals are produced within a triangular relationship – and this is the *perspective* Chris cannot step into. If the subject does not see himself in a tridimensional structure of desire, the other (the only possible other) will be a projection of his mind, with no autonomy, no immanence and no responsibility. The other will be a projection of his world, of his mind, hence no autonomy can be recognized in the other. Here is where we place Chris's childish behavior – a dreamlike passivity that contrasts with an activity that always emerges in secret, disguised and in furtive contexts. He cannot constitute himself as a man like his boss, independent, free and autonomous in real situations – although he too sees himself as a victim of women's fatal attraction. He is just like a pre-Oedipal boy, caught in a world filled with wishful thinking.

5. Gender and Agency

There are many scenes in which Chris is seen in a passive position. He does not have a space for his activities in the apartment where he lives (as women did not have at that time), for Adele annoys him about the use of the bathroom. She continuously humiliates him, remembering her former husband as a *real man*. Finally, Chris has to do the dishes using an apron as if he were a housemaid. All of these scenes suggest Chris is in an allegedly passive feminine position, lacking responsiveness and attitude.

¹³ This is the very structure of the Oedipus complex. Here, I take only the pronominal form of the Freudian account of the sexual development, since the recognition of a father interfering in a baby-mom relation is the source of the triad I-you vs he. In *The Dissolution of the Oedipus complex*, Freud states that the emergence of adult sexuality has to do with the formation of the superego (a third element taken as moral instance) and the latency period. Even though this text recognizes its speculative nature, Freud presents interesting assumptions concerning the identity resulting from the repression of the complex. In his opinion, it is here that psychism give birth to a properly masculine or feminine identity. In my analysis, Chris's two-dimensional and non-perspectival world are the signs that show that he hasn't overcome the Oedipus Complex. He is trapped in a condition that is prior to any possible autonomous identification.

On the other side, there are other scenes in which Chris is clearly assuming an active position. The first one happens when he is cutting a liver with a knife and the other is when he kills Kitty using an ice pick. Pippin has something important to say about these metaphors:

Chris is handling a knife in one hand and a piece of flaccid liver in the other, and the suggestion seems to be that he is trying to decide either which gender he wants to be (especially since, besides the knife-liver contrast, he is wearing the clothes of both, a suit covered by a frilly apron), or how much of a real man he is (knifelike or flaccid). That duality continues throughout the scene, as he first approaches Adele in a vaguely threatening way with the knife, but then, as the impact of what she has said sinks in, he drops the knife. As Tom Gunning points out, it drops at just the upright angle which the dissolve then reveals Johnny to be occupying in the next scene.¹⁴

The knife and the ice pick are the two instruments Chris uses to express his gender identification and both are used to threaten women. As I try to argue, we must understand him as a boy, a pre-oedipal one. In the scene, his aggressiveness is the way he finds to express his drives. In *The Economic Problem of Masochism*, Freud argues that sadistic behavior can be seen when the death instinct, or Thanatos, seeks to divert outwards. In this case, the tendency our organism has to die and to destroy itself changes direction and meets the external world. Freud says the instinct of mastery and will to power have their origins in the reversion of masochism, hence in sadistic tendencies. He also believes the dissolution of the Oedipus complex brings about a period of longing, weakness and mourning. Therefore, it is precisely in this moment that the sense of destruction can take place in someone's personhood. My argument here is that his gender identification is produced by means of his handling many objects, but no other object can translate Chris' mind better than the paintbrush. Pippin, however, forgets this other instrument Chris uses to express his gender, and it is so obvious that we tend to forget. Chris uses his paintbrushes as sexual instruments. He becomes *active* when he handles them.

¹⁴ Robert Pippin, *Op. Cit.*, 2012, p. 147.

But things are not so easy to understand. Although Chris's gender identity is expressed in his paintings, his masculinity projects a woman in need of protection and assumes a womanish representation when he paints a self-portrait (we see his masculine painter's expression assuming a feminine self-representation). This mixture is precisely what makes Chris Cross such an intriguing protagonist, for he oscillates between masculine and feminine forms of expression of him/herself in his paintings.

If Chris' paintings are the expression of his gender, what does it mean to accept the task of painting a self-portrait assuming the identity of a woman? This is also an important metaphor. To make it clear, we shall discuss a distinction that Stanley Cavell presents in his contribution to the debate on feminist theory. The value of the idea that masculine/feminine oscillation may be studied by mapping it onto active/passive oscillation depends on how good a map you have of the active and the passive.¹⁵

For Cavell, gender problems are the expression of positions in action. Passivity, Activity, Transcendence and Immanence, autonomy and heteronomy, are understood as positions men and women can occupy, but there's no *necessary* identification of men and women with any of these predicates. Men and women can occupy both feminine and masculine positions, for our map of feminine and masculine is surrogate to a wider map of activity and passivity. For instance, the figure of the *femme fatale* is certainly an image of an active woman; hence we may acknowledge that our association between masculinity and activity on the one side, and femininity and passivity on the other, is merely contingent.

Here I would like to mention more recent studies that agree with the denial of a fixed and static identification of these predicates about gender. Jessica Benjamin criticizes the Oedipal gender polarity. She believes that the characterization of masculinity as the rational and autonomous side of the

¹⁵ Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, 1994, p. 339.

relation and of femininity as the irrational and undifferentiated self is a cultural inheritance that entails the impossibility of mutual recognition in society as a whole. She states that “[...] psychoanalysis unselfconsciously took the Oedipal boy as its standard – the male as the model of the individual – much of modern thought claims to speak for the neuter subject, gender-free and universal.”¹⁶

Hence, Benjamin agrees with Cavell as she debates the unconscious assumptions made in psychoanalytic arguments. Her argument goes far beyond the mere criticism of the traditional view on the Oedipus complex, although this is obviously where she departs from. She claims that modernity rationalizes the social world, transforming every possible being into an object of exchange, submitted to future projections and calculations¹⁷, and, in this vein, all sorts of desires and sexual drives are rationalized as well. She believes that the modern subject fears becoming fully identical with the world he controls, thus he avoids identification with the objects over which his mastery has always reaffirmed his independence. According to Benjamin, our society has developed total consciousness that this model has reached its limits, given that objects have enslaved agency and desire, resulting in a loss of freedom and in a never-ceasing failure in mutual recognition between men and women. To wrap this up: We lost our capacity to desire freely, because objects have isolated and controlled our supposedly autonomous will.

Back to Chris’s paintings, if we assume Cavell’s and Benjamin’s criticism to static positions concerning gender identity, we can say both the feminine and the masculine are expressed in Chris’s paintings because what really counts is his active, immanent and free self-expression. It is wrong to identify activity, autonomy and rationality with masculinity and passivity, heteronomy and

¹⁶ Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, 2013, p. 183.

¹⁷ Jessica Benjamin’s book has three main heroes – Hegel, due to his theory of recognition; Freud, since her book is all about love and its role in social bonds; and Max Weber. The final chapter, which is about gender and domination, is based on Max Weber’s analysis of the capitalist society and this is where she directs her criticism to the idea of masculine and feminine as rigid identifications.

irrationality with femininity, for if we do this, we will miss this two-aspect feature of Chris's paintings that makes him neither one nor the other. In his paintings, the masculine and the feminine are all at once expressed as active sides of the human soul. Perhaps this can be visualized if we pay attention to his paintings, for two of his masterpieces assume Kitty's possible standpoint. The first work represents a man with an umbrella, painted from what would have been Kitty's perspective if she had seen Chris coming the first time they met under the train station. The second painting is the self-portrait, where once again Chris assumes Kitty's own perspective and paints a serious, powerful and distant woman. I claim that Chris's paintings are an expression of activity and that both masculine and feminine genders can occupy the painter's perspective; we can say that *Scarlet Street* is a movie where we can see both masculinity and femininity constituting Chris's agency.

6. Conclusion

I hope my reading of *Scarlet Street* has somehow served to the purpose of exploring some points about gender and fatalism. On the side of fatalism, my fundamental idea is that Chris Cross remains trapped in his childish desires for an active woman and that will determine his behavior during the movie. On the side of his gender constitution, I take his paintings as a metaphor for his sexuality, for they express his feelings, his inner perspective and are the fundamental place where we can visualize his feminine and masculine identifications.

Of course, his violence against women and his melancholic madness are rejections of loss, so both are forms of retaining an active and masculine position. These other aspects are of so much complexity that it will take another article to address them.

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Referência para citação deste artigo

CARLUCCI, Fernando. Gender & Perspective in *Scarlet Street*. **Revista PHILIA | Filosofia, Literatura & Arte**, Porto Alegre, volume 1, número 2, p. 297 - 318, outubro de 2019.