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OLD TROPES, NEW HOPES? POSTMODERN PREOCCUPATIONS IN *MAGICAL GIRL*

¿Viejos tropos, nuevas esperanzas?
Preocupaciones posmodernas en *Magical Girl*

Morgan F. Smith, Ph. D.
Miami University of Ohio
Correo electrónico: smithmf9@MiamiOH.edu

Abstract

The femme fatale synthesizes the narrative expectations of the thriller/film noir because she quells the very anxieties that she produces. Traditionally, her containment and corresponding destruction signal the prospect of hope by restoring the symbolic order. However, Carlos Vermut's neo-noir thriller, *Magical Girl* (2014), complicates this conventional portrayal through its postmodern sensibility. Backdropped by the Spanish crisis resulting from 21st-century neoliberal failures and overconsumption, the film celebrates liminality and the fracturing of the human condition and meaning systems. Bárbara, the film's femme fatale, acts as a site of confluence whereby the dark underbelly of Madrid and the human psyche surface. The sociocultural anxieties in Spain stemming from the crisis along with those provoked by Bárbara converge, challenging the order of a world in crisis, while interrogating our role as spectators in this process.

Keywords: crisis, consumption, neo-noir/thriller, femme fatale, postmodernism

Resumen

La *femme fatale* sintetiza las expectativas narrativas del *thriller*/cine negro al resolver las mismas ansiedades que ella produce. Tradicionalmente, su contención y subsiguiente destrucción anuncian cierto tipo de esperanza al restaurar el orden simbólico. Sin embargo, la película neo-

noir *Magical Girl* (2014) de Carlos Vermut, complica este proceso al emplear una sensibilidad posmoderna. La crisis española causada por el fracaso neoliberal y el sobreconsumo del siglo XXI sirve como trasfondo del filme que celebra la liminalidad, la fractura de la condición humana y los sistemas de significado. Bárbara, la femme fatale de la película, actúa como un sitio de confluencia a través del cual el lado oscuro de Madrid y la psique humana surgen. Las angustias socioculturales de España derivadas de la crisis y las provocadas por Bárbara convergen, desafiando el orden de un mundo en crisis e interrogando nuestro papel como espectadores en este proceso.

Palabras clave: crisis, consumo, neo-*noir*/*thriller*, femme fatale, posmodernismo

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"Good luck and bad luck create each other
And it is difficult to foresee their change".

Huainanzi, chapter 18

Acclaimed Spanish actor, José Sacristán explains that in Carlos Vermut's film, *Magical Girl* (2014), «de todo encaja hasta la pieza que no encaja» («Magical Girl» 00:35 - 00:39). Referring to the final piece of a near-completed puzzle his character, Damián, frantically searches for to no avail, the actor highlights both the symbolic import of this missing piece and its metonymic relationship to the film: the signifying chain has holes. Nevertheless, as Sacristán's paradoxical utterance indicates, there is also an excess of signification («todo encaja») which coexists alongside these fissures. This polarized coupling produces an epistemological shock which generates ontological uncertainty that ultimately subverts the neatly demarcated classifications of modernity. Instead, what is good and what is bad give way in the film to a series of moral paradoxes that, according to Vermut, arise from a mixture of «lo abyecto y lo sublime» («Carlos Vermut» 04:38-04:47).

At the center of this cinematic crucible is Bárbara (Bárbara Lennie). Shrouded in a material and divine orientalism seen also in her 19th-century

ancestor, she is the film's enigmatic femme fatale. However, at a difference to her fin-de-siècle counterpart who responded to anxieties resulting from "the confluence of modernity, urbanization, Freudian psychoanalysis and new technologies of production and reproduction" (Doann 1), Bárbara emerges in response to new sociocultural anxieties in Spain provoked by 21st-century neoliberal failures and overconsumption. By situating *Magical Girl* in this socio-cultural context of crisis and recurring to the generic conventions of neo-noir and the thriller, the film takes the dark underbelly of Madrid and the human psyche and brings them topside. To this end, Vermut operates within a postmodern sensibility that focuses on the blurring and fracturing of the human condition and meaning systems. In this world-as-crisis, Bárbara exacerbates anxieties surrounding the breakdown in meaning which becomes, like herself, illegible and obscured.

Thus, the world that is reflected in *Magical Girl* is a world where meaning is uncertain. That is not to say that meaning is unknowable, but rather meaning as we know it enters a grey area which is similarly reflected in the cinematic backdrop of Spain-in-crisis. In borrowing Primo Levi's term, Scott Boehm highlights the film's dramatization of the "grey zone produced by *la crisis*" and its connection to noir especially as it relates to the moral ambiguity of onscreen characters.[1] This moral ambiguity is intensified by the interplay of the thriller and neo-noir genres, given that they themselves resist straightforward definition and provoke "psychological and moral disorientation" (Naremore 28). Journeying further down Vermut's rabbit hole, Bárbara appears.

Mary Ann Doane explains that one of the most salient characteristics of the femme fatale is that "she never really is what she seems to be" (1). Like the genres she populates, the femme fatale is ambiguous because she hovers in and between oversignification and a lack thereof. Doane positions the figure as a cultural barometer that indicated "the extent of the fears and anxieties prompted by shifts in the understanding of sexual difference in the late nineteenth century" (2). Turning to film noir, Julie Grossman similarly concludes that "the 'femme fatale' is a projection of postwar male anxiety about changing or ambiguous gender roles" (2).

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[1] I am particularly grateful to Dr. Scott Boehm and Dr. Diana Aramburu, the former for graciously sharing his forthcoming article with me, and the latter for her challenging graduate seminar which introduced me to *Magical Girl* and Professor Boehm's analysis of the film.

Bárbara's 19th and mid-20th century precursors are sexually-charged figures that exploited the known designations between male/female; masculine/feminine; public/private. Bárbara shares, to a degree, this genealogical trait in that she renders familiar knowns, unknown, much like the crises that backdrops the film's action.

The connection between crisis and the femme fatale resides in their ability to undermine the stability of forms, the result of which is a liquefaction that weakens the rigidity of modalities of signification. This connection is reinforced in the fluidity of cultural referents in the film which blend the Spanish and the Orient.[2] The processes of globalism and consumerism make this blending possible. Conversely, they are also two of several key factors responsible for triggering the Spanish economic fallout in 2008. The economic precarity of this fallout sparked emotional precarity which was amplified by the insecurity of systematic failures. Like the crisis, Bárbara elicits an emotional response rooted in uncertainty because she complicates the knowable version of the world we inhabit thus provoking failures in systems of meaning. Vermut clarifies that this response implicates viewers stating, «[e]l espectador debe completar la historia y participar emocionalmente en la misma» (Vermut). This is no easy task, and several questions emerge with the transference of the narrative reins: what is the point of having control over something beyond our control? What does it mean to contribute meaning to something that is actively deconstructing meaning as we know it?

Reflecting (on) Crisis and Consumption

Magical Girl was released the same year as the purported end of the crisis in Spain, and yet (the) crisis is very much alive and well in the film.[3] The narrative structure revolves around a character triad, Damián, Bárbara, and Luis (Luis Bermejo), entrenched in crisis. The latter has been let go from his job as a literature teacher because of the employment crisis.

[2] For more on the Spanish referents in the film, see Stanley's analysis on the *españolada* and its cultural specificity as a mytheme which she claims is also "[rooted] in universal themes" (89).

[3] The National Statistical Institute (INE) in Spain determined the crisis ended in 2014 based on information collected via the national account systems. Luis de Guindos, the Minister of Economy between 2011 and 2018, shared his optimism for the total recuperation of the Spanish economy, which was strongly criticized by the socialist parties in Spain that claimed the social emergency was far from over.

The tone of the household he inhabits is one of austerity where cream of vegetable soup is a staple meal, and the literary classics that adorn his living room shelf slowly disappear, sold secondhand to make ends meet. His daughter, Alicia (Lucía Pollán), is plagued by a medical crisis. She suffers from an advanced form of Leukemia which we are led to believe will take her life.[4] While not immediately implicated in the effects of the economic crisis, Bárbara is nevertheless presented as constantly on the precipice of a psychological crisis, and is medicated by her psychiatrist husband, Alfredo (Israel Elejalde). Their marriage is in crisis as Alfredo leaves her, taking all his belongings, only to return on the condition that Bárbara not lie to him. Little does he know she has been dragged into a blackmail scheme developed by Luis who is seeking money to purchase a prohibitively expensive Magical Girl dress for his daughter. Bárbara returns to her former professional life as a BDSM sex worker to meet Luis's terms. Despite satisfying his original demand, Luis returns for more money which prompts Bárbara to contact Damián. His is the first voice we hear in the film, and he reenters the narrative structure later as a rehabilitated criminal who has served out his sentence and is cleared to return to society. His crime is unknown, although his desire to remain in prison where he does not stand a chance of seeing Bárbara gives the impression that she was involved somehow in his incarceration. Damián is a man that exemplifies the extremes of logic and order. As a femme fatale, Bárbara acts as a disruptor of logic, representing the immanence of crisis to and for Damián.

While the 2008 economic crisis is neither the central focus of the film nor is it the only type of crisis present, it does anchor the viewer in a specific time and a recognizable setting. Additionally, the upheaval of the Spanish economy reflected in the lives of Spanish citizens is a motor in the film for causality which exposes an underlying characteristic of crisis itself: crisis begets crisis. Under the operating development model and state ideology of neoliberal globalization, the abolition of international barriers to trade and investment facilitated the spread of severe economic decline resulting from the subprime mortgage crisis in the United States beginning in 2007. The global crisis arrived in Spain in 2008 where its own

[4] This is one of the many informational ellipses in the film. While the gravity of her condition is never articulated explicitly, the face of her father, who appears stunned following a conversation with the doctor treating Alicia, her final desire to «[c]umplir 13 años», and Luis's unrelenting pursuit of the Magical Girl dress all hint at a grim prognosis.

housing-bubble collapse and the unsustainable cycle of debt and growth plunged the Spanish economy into a freefall. This economic volatility spawned the employment crisis, of which Luis is a victim.

We first encounter his character in a secondhand bookshop that buys used books by the kilo for resale. Luis haggles with the store clerk about the monetary worth of the Spanish literary classic, *La colmena,* in comparison with a DIY manual that weighs the same. The clerk offers Luis 5 euros along with an offhand remark about the worth of literary criticism, and Luis takes the money but decides to keep Cela's novel. The scene changes and we see him ambling along a sidewalk. He stops, bends over, and picks up a puzzle piece. While not immediately noteworthy, this scene reveals the domino effect that crisis potentiates. To generate money, Luis must sell the objects representative of his former employed self. In so doing, he stumbles upon a puzzle piece outside of a jewelry store that he will later try to rob to buy the Magical Girl dress he believes will satisfy his daughter's dying wish. This attempt will be cut short due to a stream of vomit that falls on him from the balcony above. The vomit is Bárbara's. He will have sex with her, blackmail her and she will sick her angel of death, Damián, on him. Prior to the death spree, we will see Damián attempt to complete a puzzle, which will remain incomplete because of a missing piece. The economic crisis (d)evolves into a temporal and systemic crisis in the film as Luis finds a puzzle piece that Damián loses much later (or earlier?), revealing a temporal distortion characteristic of the noir genre. Also, we can consider that what is necessary but lacking to Damián is presented as "surplus" and "frivolous futility" to Luis who tosses the piece aside (Derrida 101). Bárbara interrupts this supplement and lack, as she is sexually consumed by Luis, ultimately leading to his death at the hands of Damián. After hearing that Luis has had consensual sex with Bárbara, Damián shoots him suggesting that it is his desire but inability to consume her that triggers the final death sequence. What Luis has consumed and used to enter consumerist society –Bárbara, uses Damián and is precisely what he lacks. Luis pays for this with his life.

The causal circumstances represented in the microcosm of Vermut's cinematic world reflect the macrocosm of the viewer's world and demonstrate the fundamental network of interconnectedness that belies the fierce individualism of capitalism and consumer society. Yet, this is one of the inherent contradictions of consumption: it has the power to exalt the sub-

ject as an individual while it simultaneously disintegrates the subject through their integration into the consumer collective. Luis Moreno-Caballud comments on the individualist and consumerist interpretation of the Spanish economic crisis and its impacts upon reality as represented by the media. He claims that "at the beginning, the crisis was already a threat to the fulfillment of individual desires in a world of individuals who seek to fulfill their desires" (17). This fulfillment, he contends, is achieved through an imposed reality governed by the "money community" which reproduces a "consumerist 'subjectivity'" (23). The media's focus on individual responses to the collective crisis, and the establishment of a "consumerist 'subjectivity'" within a "money community", present a paradox which Jean Baudrillard simplifies: "[t]he structures of consumption are both very fluid and closed" (85). *Magical Girl* plays with the tension inherent in this paradox expressly through the protagonism of fluids and fluidity in the film.

Tobin Stanley elaborates on the function of fluids in relation to power, especially seen in Bárbara, and the threat her liquidity poses to the hegemonic phallocentric order. She claims that "female fluidity or liquidity is a synecdoche for women themselves" (98). Stanley's gendered reading on the secretion of liquids, specifically Bárbara's "blood, vomit, urine, and tears", leads her to claim that they have the potential to "destabilize order" and yet she avers that Bárbara ultimately succumbs to this very order (94). However, by examining fluidity in a broader sense, especially in relation to consumption, a different set of conclusions emerges. Instead, the underlying indeterminacy exemplified in the film's postmodern aesthetic exhibits the polymorphic potential of fluids and outcomes, which reflects the polyvalence of consumption.

The liquids Stanley mentions are highly significant, and she aptly points to blood as the link between the film's characters. It serves to note however that these fluids she mentions also participate and commingle with the presence of other liquids, stimulating coalescence between characters and presaging a changing of the tides both in the dramatic action and in the symbolic order. In this view, Bárbara allows us to see the consequences of excessive consumption by taking us through the looking glass. After discovering her husband's departure, she presses her face into the living room mirror and the dominos begin to fall. She phones Damián as he is working on the puzzle. He hangs up on her, leaving the phone off

the hook. She puts her phone down and picks up her tumbler glass, avidly drinking and swallowing pills. Luis stands on the sidewalk below with a brick in his raised hand. He is seconds from robbing the jewelry store but is "saved" by the stream of vomit that falls from above. It is important to note that –whether she consumes or is consumed– Bárbara produces. She drinks Sailor Moon liquor, while shedding tears. She consumes copious pills and then vomits on Luis' head. Boehm, in referencing Kristeva's theories on the abject, explains that this scene generates "a reaction of disgust or horror to the threatened breakdown in meaning".[5] It is in this cycle of liquidity that Bárbara initiates the erosion of traditional demarcations between consumer/producer; victim/victimizer; salvation/damnation; good/bad, ultimately generating a "new monstrous disorder that leaves nobody untouched by violence" (Boehm). In other words, her own cycle of consumption/production leads to her consumption, particularly by Luis and later by the clientele of Oliver Zoco. From this consumption, she produces destruction which targets the consumer, Luis, implicating him in the cycle through his own type of production: the secretion of blood.

The protagonism of liquids and the symbolic naming of Alicia (Alice Liddell) and her father Luis (Lewis Carrol), invite viewers into a chaotic Mad Hatter's tea party that exhibits the consequences of consumption while reinforcing the interconnectedness of the characters whose union is commemorated by consumption. Bárbara and her former Madame, Ada (Elisabet Gelabert), drink liquor upon their reuniting. When Bárbara journeys back to Ada's to inquire about the ominous Black Lizard room in the house of Oliver Zoco (Miguel Insua), Ada first demands *churros* and *chocolate* and proceeds to eat while they talk. Alfredo is eating on both occasions when Bárbara and Luis work out the terms of his blackmail scheme. She is taking pills and drinking a glass of water when he calls her the second time to renew his demands. Luis and an old acquaintance that tends bar, Marisol (Marisol Membrillo), drink beer while Luis asks to borrow money to purchase the Magical Girl dress for Alicia. He and Alicia drink gin together, and he and Damián share drinks at a local bar just prior to Damián shooting Luis in the head. In perhaps the most evident display of the "miraculous status of consumption", Alicia laments the

[5] As previously stated, Dr. Scott Boehm's article, "Cinema of Dissensus: Cultural Crisis and the (Re)Emergence of Spanish Neo-Noir," is part of a volume still forthcoming, so no formal page numbers released as of yet.

cream of vegetable soup she has been served for dinner (Baudrillard 31). She slowly swirls her spoon around in the liquid food while Luis tells her that this time it has a special ingredient. Alicia finds a message in her soup that leads her to the Magical Girl dress.

This dress is a key piece in the narrative structure as it represents the "*magical thinking*" of consumption which is championed over other forms of reasoning (Baudrillard 31). In the case of Luis, he turns to the power of his "consumerist 'subjectivity'" to obtain the dress and as a result, he repeatedly fails to hear what Alicia wishes to tell him. After he has taken her to the hospital at the start of the film, we see him engaged in a conversation with her doctor. Luis returns to his daughter's bedside, his face bewildered at the news of her health. He is unable to respond to her repeated attempts at catching his attention. This happens again in the next scene where the two are seated at the table and Alicia calls out to him twice before he acknowledges she is speaking to him. Later, after Luis has discovered Alicia's dairy and her three wishes, Alicia sits in the kitchen listening to the radio, while Luis makes his way out of the house to sell more books to purchase the dress. She asks him to wait. He does so impatiently, and she reminds him not to forget his phone.[6] As he exits the house, we hear a voice on the radio begin to dictate a letter from a young girl with leukemia named Alicia to her father. Neither the spectators, nor Luis hear what Alicia wants to tell him. Finally, while Alicia stirs her soup, she is on the verge again of telling him something but is interrupted by the message she finds at the bottom of her bowl that leads her to the dress.

The breakdown in communication between father and daughter results from Luis's surrender to the power and rewards of consumption whereby he rejects "his powerlessness as a parent to remedy his daughter's leukemia and isolation" (Stanley 100). By purchasing the dress and scepter, he initiates Alicia's transition into Yukiko allowing her to temporarily escape her leukemia ridden body. This has the corresponding effect of producing scars on Bárbara's body given that she submits to physical domination in exchange for the money Luis has demanded of her. However, Luis's

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[6] Luis also forgets his phone on his final foray out to the neighborhood bar where Damián kills him. After an unsuccessful search for it, Damián returns to Luis's house where he discovers Alicia in full Magical Girl getup. He takes the phone and kills her as well. This chain of causality signals the consequences of Luis's surrender to the seductive power of consumption rather than listening to his daughter.

rejection of impotence and attempt at restoring control in his life, out of control because of the economic crisis and his daughter's medical crisis, is undermined by Bárbara whom he uses as a means to an end. The same voracity with which he pursued the object(s) of his desire, is turned on him and instead Bárbara, through Damián, becomes the means to Luis's end. Thus, for as magical as consumption is, both Luis's and Alicia's murders at the close of the film exhibit the dangers integral in the process itself and the liquid that magically unveiled the dress is replaced by their shed blood.

Liquids then, participate in the paradox of consumption because they are a feature of the collective, bringing individuals into contact with one another while also conveying individual desires and tastes. We see this in the case of Luis who upgrades from beer to *liquor café* while Damián orders a Rioja wine, despite choosing to drink milk in the comfort of his home.[7] We have an apparent choice in what we consume, the objects that we chose to desire and acquire, which contributes to the construction of the self and our "consumer 'subjectivity'". Yet, this concept is problematized by the fluid phenomenon of cultural liquidity, which is reinforced by globalism and neoliberal globalization. These processes challenge the foundation of subjectivity in that the outside (the Other) seeps in, enhancing the collective cultural crucible from which we drink. In this melting pot of cultural referents, it becomes difficult to distinguish what is ours from theirs, what is mine from yours. Japanese influences enter the film through this cultural liquidity.

Jacqueline Venet Gutiérrez teases out the Japanese intertextuality in *Magical Girl* and claims that the «Occidente y Oriente se aproximan engendrando una nueva proposición de la España de hoy, marcada por el pluralismo cultural, donde el individuo se reconoce y construye su identidad particular y nacional» (306). The dialect between Orient and Occident produces a collective cultural pluralism while providing a font of materials for the individual to consume, creating the illusion of a self-determining subjectivity. This is achieved exteriorly through Vermut's cited influences of the Magical Girl genre and Edogawa Rampo's, *The Black Lizard,* which infiltrate the mise-en-scène to become the symbolic allusions at work in the film.

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[7] Damián's choice of Rioja wine is the sole explicit reference to a Spanish manufactured product in the whole of the film. The other brands of consumed liquids are conspicuously absent or updated to dialogue with the Oriental flavor at work in *Magical Girl*, as is the case of the Sailor Moon liquor Bárbara consumes.

The Magical Girl (*mahō shōjo*) genre is a type of fantasy produced across a variety of media which emerged in Japan in the 1960's. *Sally the Witch* is often cited as the first Magical Girl series and cements the genre's connection to the (benevolent) western witch. The American sitcom *Bewitched*, which features a domesticated Samantha whose powers are inhibited by her husband, served as a source of inspiration for the Japanese elaboration of a new cultural trope that becomes the Magical Girl.[8] This genre epitomizes the cultural liquidity similarly embraced by Vermut and entrenches us deeper in the labyrinth of cultural exchange: a western trope impacts upon an eastern genre which returns to impact upon western subjectivity. Commenting on this interplay, Akiko Sugawa Shimada explains how the Magical Girl genre, and more specifically witch-texts, allowed young girls to absorb both normative Japanese values and western imagery in the process of self-construction: "they served as sites in which female audiences took pleasure in constructing an ideal 'self' and self-assertion through negotiating, resonating and reconciling with Western-oriented fashionable female protagonists and their lifestyle" (8). The film engages this exchange of cultural circularity in Alicia. She is a western girl in the process of constructing an ideal self through eastern-oriented female protagonists and practices.

The genre's link to witches and the West as well as its impact upon girlhood subjectivity is acutely articulated in the series *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (2011), which illustrates the dark reality of being a Magical Girl. Initially presented as a glamorized path of community service fighting the ills of the world that take the form of witches, we learn that for Magical Girls, damnation and salvation are inextricably linked. This is because the very forces of evil, the witches, are former Magical Girls whose souls have been drained of hope. They spread despair and are only vanquished by girls who, through a wish, become Magical Girls and fight against the very fate that awaits them. This series, like the film, stresses the inherent circularity and fluid exchange between these seemingly opposed categories: Magical Girl/witch; hope/despair; good/bad. The film plays with this exchange by

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[8] The domesticated housewife whose unconventional potential is curtailed by her husband is also evident in Luis Buñuel's, *Belle de Jour* (1967). Vermut has cited Buñuel and Catherine Deneuve's eponymous character as notable influences in *Magical Girl.* Her insatiable appetite for sadomasochistic sexual encounters appears in the relationship between Alfredo and Bárbara and her forays to Oliver Zoco's house.

entangling the identity of the witch and Magical Girl, as it is Alicia who shares her wish to become king and proclaims, «queridos españoles, me llena de orgullo que matéis al resto de españoles» (*Magical Girl*). This wish most acutely presages the film's denouement and her death. Yet, it is Bárbara and her seduction of Damián that execute this wish, reminding us, as a poster for the film indicates: «[t]en cuidado con lo que deseas». The sematic potential of the verb «desear» suggests, especially as it concerns Bárbara, that the *what* desired is as equally deadly as the *who*.

The cultural importation of the crime fiction genre to Japan at the close of the 19th century exhibits a parallel fluidity of cultural exchange, specifically in the case of Edogawa Rampo, *nom de plume* of Japanese mystery writer Hirai Tarō. Mark Schreiber insists that Rampo is "the 'mastermind' who played the key role in transforming Japanese mystery fiction –from foreign translations to an obscure subgenre, which eventually sprouted into a full-blown category of popular literature" (XVIII). In recurring to several western authors' guiding principles and rules for constructing mystery fiction, Rampo put Japan's iteration of the genre on the map.[9] Like the Magical Girl genre, Rampo's fiction and his influence seeps into *Magical Girl.* Of representational import, the ominous symbol of the Black Lizard references his 1934 classic, *The Black Lizard*. This *novella* features a sadomasochist femme fatale that "possesses tremendous magical powers" (Rampo 30) and is ultimately thwarted by the adept detective hero, Kogo Akechi. Logic triumphs over magic, and the world is right once more. Conversely, *Magical Girl*'s femme fatale unravels the processes of logic and the restoration of order that the crime fiction genre traditionally employs. Instead, she problematizes this restoration in favor of the chaotic confluence of fluid exchange and binary coalescence where meaning enters a state of crisis and viewers are situated in suspenseful uncertainty.

New Noir, New Femme fatale: Revisiting Orientalism

Reinhart Koselleck hints at the polyvalence attached to the signification of crisis stating that its "inflationary usage covers almost all aspects of life" (*The Practice* 236). Such is the case of *Magical Girl*, where the

[9] Schriber specifies that Howard Haycraft's essay "Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Time of the Detective Story", and Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" along with authors S.S. Van Dyne, Raymond Chandler, and Earl Stanley Gardner had a profound impact on Rampo and his contributions to the genre.

mingling of the thriller and noir genres renders a portrayal of crisis as multifaceted in both representation and effect. Speaking to modalities of representation, Boehm declares that the noir genre "is the cinematic mode *par excellence* for representing cultural upheaval and ideological crisis". Vicente Rodríguez Ortega's elaboration of the thriller genre in Spain stresses the overlap between the genres and reinforces Boehm's idea clarifying that the thriller "may be understood as an ideological canvas through which behavioral practices and social formations are evaluated morally in the context of the crime film" (266). In other words, *Magical Girl*'s ideological canvas displays the ideological crisis at work in Spain which is directly related to the economic crisis, and the processes of consumerism and globalization.

The tenuous signification evident in the term crisis exists similarly in the genres themselves. Andrew Spicer identifies difficulties in delimiting the characteristics of film noir explaining that attempts that view the genre as possessing "a set of 'essential' or 'irreducible' formal components –stylistic, narratological or thematic – [tend] to be reductive and even misleading" (2). This problem is aggravated in the generic update to neo-noir and its amorphous qualities, to use Robert Arnett's terminology, that both links and severs its connection to its predecessor. Similarly, Rodríguez Ortega points out that the thriller is a genre "that is easier to identify than to define with precision, since its contours are typically liminal: it exists in a crisscross of generic categories" (265). Transnational cultural liquidity teams up with this generic crisscrossing to make defining the confines of the thriller more problematic. The rendered ideological canvas is difficult to decipher, then, because of the mixture of dispersal and confluence, merger and fragmentation underway in the themes and the generic conventions employed in the film. Bárbara muddles this further.

One of the key, and arguably the most potent, features of the femme fatale is her unknowability. Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe expand upon this attribute stating that the femme fatale is "both entrenched cultural stereotype and yet never quite fully known: she is always beyond definition" (1). She slips, much like the genres she inhabits, between neatly demarcated categories, making a mess of modernity's structural system which organizes meaning (75). Mario Praz claims that fatal women are "more numerous during times in which the springs of inspiration [are] troubled" (216). Thus, returning to Koselleck and noting that "the modern

period since the turn of the nineteenth century can be called the age of crisis", it follows that the modern period also witnessed a marked proliferation of femme fatales ("Crisis" 381). The boom begins in the 19th century with the abundance of literary and artistic representations circulating throughout Europe. Representations of the femme fatale spike again in the 1940's in film noir which responds to the shifting sociocultural climate marked by the moral dejection following WWII. This pattern repeats following the Cold War which yields a new type of noir with new iterations of the femme fatale. Thus, as a cultural trope, she is old but constantly renewed, and persists as a symbolic apparatus for synthesizing cultural anxieties and paradigmatic shifts. Previously, her erasure or containment represented a way to mitigate those anxieties while reinforcing the primacy of the symbolic order. As a result, her relationship to crisis is both descriptive and curative: she makes anxieties evident while also providing a corrective route to remedy them. Contemporary femme fatales, however, are responding to the "permanence" of crisis by refusing to die ("Crisis" 358). In other words, she still functions in her descriptive role, however she has abandoned her restorative function and instead aggravates the return to normal.

In the case of Bárbara, Boehm states that she "should be historicized in the Spanish context as the cinematic return of a powerful literary trope that always already signifies anxieties tied to cultural crisis". To understand Vermut's updates to this trope, it is necessary to return to her 19th century predecessor and the European orientalization of Spain underway at the turn of the century as seen in Prosper Mérimée's publication, *Carmen* (1845). José Colmeiro and Joseba Gabilondo both speak to Spain's position of liminality in contrast to the centrality of modern Northern Europe. The imperial decadence of Spain at the close of the 19th century retrograded its entry into modernity and resulted in ideological and economic crises, much like those of 2008. For the northern European, Spain served as a point of confluence between the Orient with its Moorish past and gypsy population and the Occident with its Christian history and decadent colonial might.

Colmeiro contends that Spain straddled the us/them binary reifying the cultural hegemony of Northern Europeans who characterized Spain and "Spanish culture as sensual and exuberant with the exotic oriental accent of the other" (131). Gabilondo echoes this idea through the polarity

of "inclusion and exclusion" where Spain is feminized and "the femme fatale, in her orientalist and Spanish embodiment, becomes the discursive subject that defines –in advance, in negative, before– what bourgeois sexuality becomes at home: a discursive apparatus always on the brink of psychotic crisis" (35). As the first European femme fatale, the gypsy Carmen synthesizes geopolitical, sexual, racial, and class tensions. She stimulates disgust and desire in her *macho* pursuer, don José, "a proud man of honor and reason" that "has lost both to Carmen's magic spell" (Colmeiro 138). Their deaths at the end of the story reinstate the supremacy of the northern European male subject and his operative ordering systems. In other words, Carmen's disruptive, sexually exotic allure is corrected. Her otherness is suppressed, and her castrating potential is contained. She can no longer produce ambiguous feelings in response to her overt sexuality or enigmatic subjectivity.

Stanley proposes viewing Bárbara "as a permutated version of the Carmen myth or type [whose] sexuality (or supposed inescapable allure) leads to the perdition of three men" (103). Tracing her archetypal lineage to Carmen is useful because it allows us to track the hereditary quality of disruption manifest in the figure of the femme fatale and the link to the exoticized Orient. Yet, unlike Carmen whose death at the close of the story reinstates the symbolic order, I differ from Stanley's interpretation of the consequences of Bárbara's fatality and the final scene in the film which sees her in a full body cast with one eye exposed. Instead of viewing her as succumbing to the phallocentric order, Bárbara not only retains her power as she is still able to manipulate Damián into killing Luis via her broken body, but she remains alluring precisely because of the influence of eastern practices in the film, in this case, Kegadoru ("injured idol"). Like a Japanese sexual fetish where women wrap themselves up in white bandages as if they were injured, Bárbara is again a fetishized sexual object in her abject state who defines herself as a subject through bending Damián to her will. Bárbara paradoxically self-constructs through self-deconstructing. As a site of this contradictory process which undergirds the narrative structure of the film, she submerges the opposing binary framework into a swamp of overlapping, imbricated meanings that become increasingly difficult to delineate.

While Luis's blackmail scheme is the plot protagonist of the first half of the movie, Bárbara's revenge scheme takes over in the second half.

Both drive the plot onward saturating the film with a noir sensibility that problematizes our perception of who and what is good and bad. This polarity and ensuing confluence extend their influence in the film to the black lizard symbol. In the West, the lizard is charged with ominous overtones. However, in eastern traditions, the lizard is a symbol of rebirth as it, like the snake, sheds its skin. Similarly, Bárbara sheds her housewife clothes upon arriving at Zoco's house. After she enters the Black Lizard room, through the violence inflicted on her body, she sheds her skin and is reborn deformed and monstrous. In a world where the abject is prized as beautiful, however, Bárbara emerges from the Black Lizard room more broken and more powerful than before. She uses this open and leaking body to seduce Damián. In her victimhood she becomes a victimizer convincing him that Luis is responsible for her current state. Here, binaries converge, and blend. Venet Gutiérrez comments on this convergence stating, «[l]a alta y la baja cultura se funden en un todo indivisible donde el Bien y el Mal, lo pop y lo tradicional, Oriente y Occidente concomitan armoniosamente» (305). And yet the onscreen harmony produces disquiet. As spectators we are suspended in the alternation of hope and despair that saturates the film. The hope that Luis can obtain the Magical Girl dress comingles with our contradictory hope that Bárbara's plan for revenge against Luis works. While we despair at Luis's abject poverty and his daughter's illness, we likewise despair at Bárbara's need to break her body to procure the funds Luis is demanding. The result of this is a world where uncertainty reigns and solid signification is liquified, mingling what we conceive it to be with what it is not.

This is underway from the first scene where Damián's voice overlays the opening credits. He welcomes his students to class with a discourse explaining the absolute truth of life,

> Si Federico García Lorca no hubiese nacido y no hubiese escrito un solo verso, dos más dos seguirían siendo cuatro. Si Napoleón hubiese invadido España hace 200 años y ahora estuviésemos aquí dando esta clase en francés, dos más dos por supuesto seguirían siendo cuatro. Quiero que entendáis esto. Quiero que entendáis que la única verdad absoluta, lo único que seguirá siempre igual es que dos más dos son cuatro. (*Magical Girl*)

The speech stops and the camera shows a medium close-up shot of Damián who stands to the right side of a window. He addresses the giggles rippling through the class, asking one of the students, a 12-year-old Bárbara (Marina Andruix), to approach his desk. The shot remains fixed, and Bárbara enters from the left side where she stands opposite Damián with a note in her hand. The camera flashes to an overhead shot of Damián's desk which is organized with a "meticulousness [that] could be considered obsessive compulsive" (Stanley 92). The scene alternates from the symmetry of the two characters facing one another, to the symmetry of the desk. Damián asks Bárbara to read the note aloud, which she does and then folds it three times in her hand. Her closed fist opposes his outstretched, open hand and Damián demands (three times) that she give him the note. She tells him she cannot. He asks her why not, and she responds, «porque no la tengo» (*Magical Girl*). The symmetry is reinstated on screen as her closed fist opens to reveal an empty hand which mirrors Damián's.

Onscreen symmetry is integral to the film's aesthetic and contrasts with the intricate plot, which is a signature feature of noir films. Bárbara magically counters the absolute order Damián introduces. However, acting as her guardian angel, and angel of death, Damián abandons the old order in favor of the new. In the same way a young Bárbara makes the note disappear, in the final scene, Damián cannot give her Luis's cellphone with the recording of their sexual congress, «porque no lo [tiene]». Damián enters Bárbara's world of magical nonsense, displacing the world of logic where $2 + 2 = 4$. This final circularity emphasizes the tension between the onscreen symmetry and thematic chaos, which replicates the binary friction in the film. Bárbara's former profession as a renowned BDSM sex worker introduces a series of these oppositions which also enter into tension: bondage/discipline; domination/submission; sadism/masochism.

Upon journeying to Ada's to procure a job that will meet Luis's blackmail demands, we discover that Bárbara is a legend in this line of work. The poolside actress, Sónica is left speechless after Bárbara tells her her full name. Later, upon her arrival to Oliver Zoco's house, he confesses to having heard of Bárbara long before Ada arranged their meeting. Bárbara is dressed in this scene much in the same way she is throughout the film: in a kimono-like tunic that reveals nothing of what lies underneath. Her appearance, which deviates from the glamorized femme fatales of Hollywood noir, is characterized by simplicity. She wears no makeup. She

bears no skin, and her wardrobe is composed of a matted color palette. Nevertheless, upon her arrival to Zoco's house, which marks the halfway point in the film, a series of unveilings take place. Firstly, Zoco describes the reason why Spain and Spaniards are trapped in an eternal conflict, reminiscent of the eternal Magical Girl/witch cycle. As opposed to the rational Nordic countries, and the emotional Arabs and Latinos, Spaniards find themselves suspended between reason and passion, between the intellectual and the emotional. This ideological reveal is followed by Zoco asking Bárbara to disrobe. In her analysis of *Gilda*, Doane states that the "[s]triptease provides the perfect iconography for film noir, economically embodying the complex dialectic of concealing and revealing which structures it at all levels" (106). The unconventional striptease unveils Bárbara's body covered with scars which is proof of her professional prowess. Zoco tells her she is very beautiful. The exaltation of the abject is echoed previously by Ada who tells Bárbara that she likes her new scar that sits centered between her eyebrows.

Bárbara's scarred torso and the open wound on her head reveal a body which is cyclically opened and closed, much like the paradox of consumption. This is a feature of her violent profession as well as a characteristic of her archetypal representation. She is a sadomasochist who leaves the demarcation between domination and submission unclear in as much as she complicates our understanding of the abject and the sublime, the consumer and the consumed, the victim and the victimizer. Jennifer Hedgecock attributes this to the liminality of the femme fatale and her ability to "[cross] boundaries without immediate discovery, blending one perception of her into yet another" (23). In this case, Bárbara's scarred body alludes to her position as a sub in sexual matters. Nevertheless, during the film she dominates the life of the men around her. Her husband, Alfredo, attempts to control her with medication, which she does not take. He discovers this while they entertain guests, one of which encourages Bárbara to hold her baby. Bárbara begins giggling with the baby in arms and upon being asked the cause of her laughter explains, «[e]s que no puedo dejar de pensar en la cara que pondríais si lanzo el bebé por la ventana» (*Magical Girl*). This violent utterance leads Alfredo to drug her, causing her to wake up in an empty house devoid of her husband and his possessions. While her husband medicates her to control her fearful behaviors, Damián also fears her to the point of wishing to remain in prison.

Luis is the third man to come into physical cont(r)act with Bárbara but does so without understanding her destructive power which is let loose as she thrusts her head through the mirror on her living room wall. Her masochistic journey through the looking glass opens her forehead and her third eye unleashing chaos into a world wrecked by the chaos of crisis. She, like the Hindu goddess Kali, devours all things, herself included. She "conveys death, destruction, terror, the all-consuming aspect of reality . . . [she] breaks the model of the subdued, controlled, obedient wife, mother, or daughter. She suggests energy out of control to the point of self-destruction" (Kinsley 78-80). Yet from this chaos, creation must follow as the Law of Cycles and the figure of Kali dictate: destruction paves the way for creation. What then, is produced from this all-consuming destruction?

Meaning, Melancholia, and Mirth

Thought by many film critics to be a necessary ingredient for creating a suspenseful cinematic experience, uncertainty is celebrated and affectively generated at every turn in *Magical Girl*. Uncertainty is the result of Bárbara's destruction as she complicates the known ways of ordering and making sense of the world, much like the financial, medical, and ideological crises that also appear in the film. Hanson and O'Rawe identify the femme fatale as a "perennial site of uncertainty, raising challenging questions and inviting further investigation" (1). Yet she, like the genres she inhabits and the effects she produces, are both beyond definition and saturated with signification. This suspension between excess and lack, good and bad, rational and emotional, generates suspense for viewers because it neither clarifies nor unravels the contradictions it exposes. In other words, it does not resolve outcomes but rather celebrates the plurality and deficiency of potential responses. Noël Carroll comments on the relationship between suspense and uncertainty stating that "suspense, in general, is an emotional state. It is the emotional response that one has to situations in which an outcome that concerns one is uncertain" (84). By employing genres that evade definition and revel in the fault lines of demarcated categories, by incorporating crisis and consumerism which expose the interplay between determinism and indeterminism, *Magical Girl* "seeks to grasp what escapes these processes of definition and celebrates what resists or disrupts them" (Malpas 4).

To return to our initial questions which problematize making sense of nonsense: what is the point of having control over something beyond our control? What does it mean to contribute meaning to something that is actively deconstructing meaning as we know it? The postmodern sensibility that characterizes this film tells us that there are no clear answers to these questions, or rather the answers are uncertain, plural, beyond. The only definite conclusion we can arrive at is that in this world marked by crisis, conclusions themselves are indefinite. In the face of these porous genres, this slippery trope, these uncertain socio-cultural processes which are seemingly unending, meaning as we know it begins to disappear. Baudrillard contends that this makes us melancholic.[10] I believe, however, that in the paradox of chaotic circularity that runs its course through the film, exhibiting how unpredictable our interconnected world is, a new type of signification thrives. It does not seek to clarify, but rather disturbs, agitates, and resists the totalizing and absolutist principles which consume us all. In this murky bottomless pool, the sublime and the abject, hope and despair, melancholia and mirth coalesce, commingle, and converge to erode the rigid demarcations of the modern, self-certain subject who is rendered both opened and closed –like consumption, like the narrative structure of the film, like Bárbara's body, like the puzzle that is complete precisely because it is incomplete.

[10] See: Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp. 162.

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