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Female Representation in Max Ophüls's Film Noir:
*A Study of *The Reckless Moment*.*

Author

Eva María Navarro Pena

Supervisor

Celestino Sigifredo Deleyto Alcalá

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
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RESUMEN

El propósito de este trabajo es analizar la representación femenina en las películas de cine negro del director Max Ophüls entre la década de 1940. Para ello el análisis se centra en *The Reckless Moment*, un largometraje de 1949 que ofrece una crítica de la familia patriarcal estadounidense del momento. Se propone un análisis formal de tres escenas clave que ejemplifican las diversas obligaciones sociales impuestas tanto a hombres como a mujeres. La segunda parte se centra en el análisis de la interpretación de Joan Bennett, quien interpreta a Lucia Harper en la película, el impacto de sus anteriores papeles en el cine negro de los años 40 en la construcción de su personaje, y la transición que este papel supone hacia comedias posteriores como *Father of the Bride*.

CONCEPTOS CLAVE: Cine negro, Max Ophüls, Joan Bennett, *The Reckless Moment*, feminismo.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyse the representation of women in the noir films of director Max Ophüls between the 1940s and 1950s. To such purpose, the analysis focuses on *The Reckless Moment*, a 1949 film that offers a critique of the patriarchal American family of the time. A formal analysis is proposed of three key scenes that exemplify the various social demands imposed on both men and women. The second part focuses on an analysis of the performance of Joan Bennett, who plays Lucia Harper in the film, the impact of her previous roles in 1940s film noir on the construction of her character, and the transition of this role to later comedies such as *Father of the Bride*.

KEY CONCEPTS: Film noir, Max Ophüls, Joan Bennett, *The Reckless Moment*, feminism.

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Introduction

During the final years of the 1920s, Hollywood faced tough decades of censorship of its films while new technologies provided opportunities to dodge the Production Code's strict regulations. Sound was now being used in cinema, helping producers to achieve a greater degree of realism that would allow them to create the basis for, among other "new genres", romantic comedies. Everyday life dialogues, flirting and seduction attracted audiences that were used to silent movies (Grindon 27-28). Then World War II came, with its dire consequences for the families that made up Hollywood audiences. Filmmakers started to use cinema as a way of distracting people from the horrors of the war and the subsequent crisis. Studios created an illusion that made audiences forget their concerns and feel as if they were part of a high social class with lightweight plots and luxurious theatres (Kaufman). However, some years later, during the 40s, the public had changed and despite having enjoyed romantic comedies, they were ready to face the harsh reality. Consequently, filmmakers abandoned their previous aim and started to portray society as truthfully as possible with movies that portrayed the cruelty of the war (Schatz 3). It was time to rethink filmmaking and for the cinema industry to develop as society did.

Those social changes were represented not only in the plots but also in the technical aspects of the movies. Directors and producers explored visual depth, voice-over, flashbacks and different points of view to add psychological dimensions to storytelling and achieve a greater degree of realism. People now witnessed how characters went through different states of claustrophobia, anxiety, fear and even paranoia (Naifeh 26). These innovations were possible thanks to several technological developments. Filmmakers now used low-key lighting which created high contrast and powerful

shadows. Such an opposition hints at the inner feelings of the characters. Most of the time, the main characters stand in the shadows to show their hopelessness and lighting creates unusual shapes to portray instability. Thanks to such a contrast in lighting, movies acquired a mysterious touch. That is how Film Noir was born, a series of movies that set the American worldview of the 40s and early 50s, a period in cinema history in which movies shared a tone and mood that constituted a vision of a country overwhelmed by criminality, pessimism and alienation (Schrader 8).

It was not until around the second half of the 1940s that international audiences were able to watch American films and discover the turnaround in the movies made during the war. Many filmmakers had already moved to the United States before military conflict arose and tried to find their place in the hopelessness of Hollywood. International filmmakers introduced their touch and way of creating movies to the American cinematographic panorama. Max Ophüls, a German filmmaker who arrived in the US in 1941 with his family is one of the international filmmakers whose impact in American cinema opened up conversations. Despite being overlooked for many years, his camera movements raised several debates among critics about the relationship between aesthetics and ethics (Morgan 130). Like many others, he arrived in Hollywood during one of the most complicated times for the Hollywood community, with society divided by the war and with movie theatres hitting a rock-bottom number of audiences (Bacher 50). However, despite the dreadful sociopolitical events and having people in the industry looking down their noses at him, Ophüls managed to create movies that have gone down in history as icons of film noir, among the great variety of modes and genres that can be seen in his career. His style clashed with classical Hollywood producers and he engaged in numerous arguments with them. The director loved to use trolleys and dollies when shooting long takes that allowed him to introduce characters, places and feelings rather

than using the usual shot-reverse shot or, as he called it, the “rabbit shot” (Bacher 50). Ophüls, like other filmmakers, was in constant debate with executive producers for his decisions on camera movements to the point that actor James Mason who worked in two movies with him wrote the following poem while filming *Caught* (1949) (Morgan 132):

I think I know the reason why
Producers tend to make him cry.
Inevitably they demand
Some stationary set-ups, and
A shot that does not call for tracks
Is agony for poor dear Max
Who, separated from his dolly,
Is wrapped in deepest melancholy.
Once, when they took away his crane,
I thought he'd never smile again.

Aside from his camera movements and personal style, which will be further analysed later on, Ophüls was also controversial –although modern filmmakers and critics considered him advanced for his time– for how he presented women in his movies (White 4-5). He empathized with them to the point that some experts ironically said that the director had “espoused the cause of women” (White 24). Feminist theorists have found two different manners of female representation in cinema throughout history. Women are either blamed in the narrative as guilty of a crime or of a conspiracy that shows how they cannot be trusted or are constructed as a sexual threat –commonly known as *femme fatale*– used to criticise independent women (White 34). Both archetypes appear in Ophüls movies. Throughout his career, the director used static frames to create a still image of the female characters. For instance, in *Le Plaisir* (1952), the artist paints his lover obsessively, which serves as a metaphor for how infatuated he is with the idea of

controlling and selling her (White 37). In his best-known noir movie, *The Reckless Moment* (1949), Ophüls inverts the image of the dangerous femme fatale. Lucia Harper, played by Joan Bennett, embodies the usual authorities, private investigators and other male noir heroes whereas Donnelly (James Manson) is the personification of the dangers and threats characteristic of a femme fatale. Lucia does not use female sexuality as a source of power and strength to manipulate men, she rather lacks any of it. Her character smokes obsessively due to her psychological stress and is seen often at her desk ready to solve every problem in her family, she is determined and strong (Lang 3).

The central goal of this essay is the representation of women in the 1940s and 1950s in Max Ophüls' noir films. The chosen film is *The Reckless Moment* which critiques the patriarchal family at a moment of history in which American women were forced to believe that motherhood was the source of their happiness. Female workers were very much needed in the work field –and, in some households, the only providers– but men believed they were taking away their jobs and their role as breadwinners (Krissoff Boehm). The analysis of the movie is divided into two parts. The first part is a study of the movie's formal aspects, focusing on three scenes that will help exemplify the demands imposed on both men and women. The second will focus on Joan Bennett's role as Lucia Harper and aspects of her film career, taking into account her first roles as a femme fatale and her radical turn around the time she starred in *The Reckless Moment*, after which she continued to embody the role of a housewife in a series of early 1950s films, including *Father of the Bride* (1950) but switched the noir melodramatic mode for a comedic one.

The Reckless Moment

1 Women and Finances

The first scene chosen for this analysis covers Lucia visiting two different places to get a loan that would allow her to pay the blackmailers and preserve her household's stability. Her first visit is to the family's regular bank. There, the action starts in media res, with Lucia and the banker having a conversation that is assumed to start off-screen. This ellipsis is a form of time manipulation that breaks with the linear plot construction. Consequently, viewers start to think about the plot. The director plays with the chronological order of the narration which could be interpreted as a portrayal of the hopelessness Lucia is feeling (Schrader 5). Schrader stated that this technique served as a reinforcement of the following noir ideal: "The how is always more important than the what". Ophüls uses a tracking shot that shows her appearing on screen while walking down the stairs as the banker states she is not suitable for the loan she wishes for. The director uses double framing with heavy bars that evoke that Lucia is and feels trapped (Figure 1) which, together with Lucia's restricted point of view, is used to allow the audience to feel the anxiety she suffers during the film. She is denied the loan because she needs her husband's signature. Lucia does not even argue with the banker.

The second location is a loan company that allegedly does not have red tape. In short, Lucia should not be asked any questions. However, when the worker assists her, she is interrogated. Again, framing is used in this second location to evoke the same claustrophobic feeling as the previously mentioned instance but in two different ways. First, Lucia is framed with a family and a man situated at the desks next to hers (Figure 2). Ophüls uses this as a critique of the economic situation after the war that pushed the average American society to trust a new economic system that was failing them (Nye 4).

Secondly, she is independently trapped by the woman assisting her when denying her the loan since, as a housewife, she has no personal income (Figure 3). Despite trying to argue with the clerk there is this general feeling, common in film noir, that her future has already been written. No matter her efforts, she will not be granted that loan to pay her debt. The repression she is feeling in this scene is presented through chiaroscuro and low-key lighting, an influence of German expressionists, which serves to portray the complexity of her mind but also to enhance the drama required in such a moment (Schrader 10) (Figure 4).



Fig 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

It is common in Ophüls's films to see women deprived of their freedom. Female characters tend to have a desperate need to free themselves from a psychological prison provoked by an incident that suffocates them and disrupts their lives. These women fail almost a hundred per cent of the time to do so. Society is the perpetrator of this psychic cage. Still, in Ophüls's works, an added element contributes to the impossibility of achieving their freedom. The director portrays women who have already interiorised cultural, political and societal rules that shape their behaviour and a world that fails to provide them with tools to navigate their problems (Morgan 137). Lucia is trying to have everything under control, including her finances. She wears a mink coat to both banks but, despite her intention to demonstrate her social class, she is denied help due to her gender. There must be a man who grants her permission to be in control. Ophüls does not conform to the portrayal of women as victims; he uses his films as tools to teach the audience that, regardless of the social class they come from, all women suffer the consequences of a patriarchal capitalist system (White 6).

2 The Allure of Noir

The second scene to be analysed narrates a trip to a real estate agency in Los Angeles. This is the second time Lucia and Donnelly have seen each other. Previously, Donnelly had threatened Lucia, that she must give him five thousand dollars to keep her daughter's love letters a secret. Lucia and Donnelly are inside his car the entire scene. There is no change in the location but three specific shot variations and a frame movement. Each of them is delimited to a shot of the trajectory of the car. First, we see her closer to the camera while Donnelly enters the vehicle (fig. 5). She asks to go to the drugstore next to the agency to make a call that no one in her family can hear. Then, we get the reverse shot of the conversation with Donnelly closer to the frame with an impassive expression on his face as we see her smoke cigarette after cigarette (fig. 6). Until here, the sequence

consists of a series of classic shot/reverse shots that moves from one axis of action to the other. That is to say that each shot has been framed either from a position closer to Lucia or Donnelly. Nevertheless, the third variation is an exception. The filmmaker uses a jump cut that frames Lucia closer and leaves Donnelly –almost entirely– offscreen (fig. 7). The result allows the audience to pay special attention to Lucia’s feelings, suffering and worry. Afterwards, the camera pulls out until the actors are seen from outside the car. Ophüls chooses to do what is known as reframing. The original frame is adapted to include both actors inside the car and also, as another car pulls up to theirs, Mike –the man who will fix her roof– reminding her to call him (fig. 8). She simply answers that such a matter will be handled when her husband returns home and, without hesitation, Mike leaves. This instance serves as an example of those moments in Lucia’s life when the noir universe and the family universe collide. The final change goes back to the first shot of the sequence, with a more balanced composition but still with Lucia closer to the frame (fig. 9). This sequence of shots is structured around the goal of bringing the audience closer to both of their perspectives. Thanks to it, is possible to see that both characters are not as different as they seem. Donnelly is allowed to enjoy a freedom that is not available to Lucia but he is trapped in a noir universe just like her and can empathize with her despair.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Despite being alone with Donnelly inside his car and moving away from her hectic domestic life, her family is still there as an all-powerful presence. She cannot imagine the world without them. They are linked as if she was trapped with them for her entire lifetime. Now the noir melodramatic universe has taken over her life. Lucia is coerced into handing over thousands of dollars to avoid having her daughter implicated in an alleged murder. However, what truly worries her in this scene is the pressure her family and society put on her. She continuously mentions her family and worries about having to answer their questions about her whereabouts. There is nothing she can do without their supervision; she must justify every move. Lucia portrays the reality of many women during the after-war years who were not allowed to have their own private life, let alone personal freedom. All the conversational fragments in the scene can also be read as a

critique of the patriarchal family prevalent in the United States during those years. Lucia's exhaustion transforms her blackmailer into her confidant. She complains to Donnelly - almost as a reproval- that he does not "know how a family can surround you at times," followed by the confession that she never gets away from her family (Lawrence 156). A man is not expected to take care of the wellbeing of the family or worry about the needs of each member. Men only had to worry about bringing economic stability to the household and being the authority figure. This can also be seen in Mr. Harper's absence. Lucia's husband is thousands of miles away at work, completely unaware of the turmoil affecting his family. However, his influence overpowers her. Despite being the most active character, society demands from her that she seeks the supervision and approval of an absent husband. The family is used in noir movies as the personification of the established norm in society. The American family unit could be interpreted here as functioning as the ultimate law. Lucia's role as a mother must be her source of happiness but the noir universe brings darkness and transgression in.

In this scene, Donnelly's character serves as an anchor to both universes. Ophüls uses his character to question, judge and criticize the notion and basis of the American family. Donnelly is a blackmailer and a gangster whose one concern is to comply with the orders he has been given. He is the "male fatal" who disrupts Lucia's stability and the outsider who gives her a taste of the freedom she desperately craves but will never get (Lawrence 159). It is worth mentioning that in this scene his personality evolves and there is a hint that shows his vulnerability, which positions him in a certain maternal role in his relationship with her, almost imitating her "maternal heroism" (White 104). Donnelly worries about her frenetic habit of smoking, listens to her when no one else does and even pities her when she is struggling to obtain the loan (White 104). As they spend more time together, she is condemned to dream about that impossible life and this is

shown through different noir conventions. Ophüls plays with dark lighting, shadows, close-ups and low-angle framings to create this threatening but alluring noir universe.

3 Stairs, Time and Veiled Vulnerability

The final chosen scene depicts the minutes of agony that Lucia feels after the fateful incident in which Donnelly is pushed to kill his partner, Nagel, to save her. She is worried, afraid and scared of what will happen next. It is evident that her torment at that specific moment comes from Donnelly getting hurt and the fact that he has become linked to another murder since the consequences could finally destroy the stability she has been desperately trying to maintain for her family. However, we can also see through her suffering the attraction that has been developing between the two. Ophüls uses the noir *mise en scène* to indirectly introduce the nature of their relationship to the spectators. Donnelly has shown her what her life might be like without her family and her role as a mother and wife in her middle-class life. During her time with him, she grasps a freedom that she believed impossible to exist, an illusion (Lawrence 159). Lucia goes to get a first aid kit to cure him but by the time she returns, he is leaving in the car with the corpse of his partner. The drive will end in an accident that will incriminate him and save Lucia. Ophüls shows how the noir temptation, the stranger, sacrifices himself to return Lucia to her role as a housewife, to her position inside the “domestic space” (Lawrence 163). Donnelly represents a fantasy of escape; a dream she knows will never come true no matter how close she comes to the edge of middle-class respectability.

The narration of the scene takes place both inside and outside Lucia’s house. There is hardly any dialogue except for a few exchanges between Lucia and Sybil, the maid. The director uses every detail to create tension and a need for the viewer to know more. Inside the house, the sound of the clock increases the feeling of suffocation, of lack of

time. On the outside, the silence is interrupted by a strong wind that manages to move the lamp and shake the trees. Then, she becomes metaphorically trapped by the shadows of thousands of leaves and trees that are accentuated again with an intense chiaroscuro (fig. 10). These latter elements contribute to the idea that the exterior is full of dangers and that the household should be a safe space (Lawrence 160).



Fig. 10

Furthermore, during this scene, the audience comes across a characteristic and peculiar shot that perfectly exemplifies the above-mentioned Ophüls's trait. The director uses a long take that lasts from 1:15:44 to 1:16:16 and which is complemented by a camera movement that follows Lucia up (fig. 11) and down the stairs (fig. 12). This combination allows the viewer to follow the development of her feelings: the concern, the confusion when she finds that Donnelly is not there and the final desperation to know what is happening. During this sequence, we can see one of the few moments in which Lucia allows herself to cry when she is alone. She hides behind the cabinet doors and cries silently, covering her mouth to make sure that no one discovers her feelings (fig. 13). This moment is broken by the aforementioned sound of the clock that reminds her that her time to be herself and pause is over, she has to return to her "ordinary", respectable, middle-class self. The time for her short-lived dream of freedom has run out. She gets up to go to the bottom of the stairs, trapped in the shot within the door frame (fig. 14) where she waits desperately, as time runs, for Sybil to bring her what she needs. The expectator may notice

overuse of staircases in this scene. This element is often used by filmmakers to portray a sense of motion, anxiety and “incomplete trajectories” (Lawrence 157). A place where that is used to create a metaphor for the internal debate characters have, their hesitation and uncertainty about choosing between family expectations and personal ambitions (Lawrence 157). This is ostensibly Lucia’s case at this moment.



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

The Reckless Moment is an in-depth analysis and critique of American patriarchal suburban family life. Ophüls deconstructs the social ideals that deprived women of

freedom and forced them to find happiness within their role as mothers and wives. The suffocation, agony and despair these elements produce are shown through the noir elements of *mise en scène*. The lighting, shots and framing contribute to this sense of entrapment which, together with the development of the plot, shows the perfect blend of film noir and family melodrama. In this hybrid generic world, Lucia is played by the actor Joan Bennett, who was ready for a change in her career and accepted the role without hesitation (Kellow 331). She described the film as the perfect fusion of “actress and role” (Kellow 334). Joan gifted the audience with a subtle performance that allowed her to merge into Lucia and integrate her obsession with having everything under control (Kellow 334-335).

Joan Bennett: Actress, Mother, Woman

Despite the unquestionable desire to have a boy after two girls, the third child of the marriage between Richard Bennett and Adrienne Morrison was a girl. Joan Geraldine Bennet was born on February 27, 1910, in the family home in New Jersey. Due to her parents' difficult divorce, Joan always showed a need for control. She had to have everything in order and feel stable to find psychological peace (Kellow 86). Her first marriage accentuated this. On September 15, 1926, she married Jack Fox, a man ten years older than her and an alcoholic. They had a daughter but, in the end, Joan had to request a restraining order that he soon violated (Kellow 105-110). After the divorce, she had to sell everything to support her daughter and was forced to accept her father's help, thus beginning her first moments in the theatre. Critics congratulated her on her first performances, but the only thing that mattered to Joan was the money she had to earn to support her daughter (Kellow 112-114). In the 1930s, she signed a contract with *Fox Films* that granted her weekly paychecks even if she did not appear in a movie. The studio got her roles of every kind, and eventually she got important roles in movies as *Little Women*. By the 1940s, Joan was on her third marriage to producer Walter Wanger, expecting her third baby. At the same time, American cinema was transitioning, introducing new techniques and ushering in noir films. Joan began to consolidate her career as one of the most recognizable femme fatales of all time with noir movies such as *The Woman in the Window* (1944) (Kellow 273).

The film was directed by Fritz Lang and released in 1944. Joan plays Alice Reed, a mysterious and seductive woman. Her character is constructed entirely as a sexual threat to Wanley (Edward G. Robinson), the protagonist. But if there is one thing that stands out about her performance, it is the first time we meet Alice. Her character is introduced, as if she was coming out of the painting, looking decisively at Wanley through the window

reflection and being the living image of a dream –a woman out of this world (Kellow 275 - 276). Her profession remains an enigma, although there are various indications that Alice is a mistress. The way her flat is decorated with sculpted bodies (fig. 15) and how different frames and shots hint at the bedroom (fig. 16) suggest an active sexual life. Furthermore, she talks about men who visit her frequently but about whom she knows nothing. This ambiguity regarding her career was made purposefully so the audience could decide for themselves at a time when censorship was strict (Klevan 16). Joan Bennet explains how her character is built around delicacy rather than extremes like the rest of the film. She does not embellish Alice's movements but shows her as modest and careful (Klevan 18).



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

A year after the success of the film and the creation of her own production company – Diana Productions–, together with her husband, Walter Wanger and Fritz Lang they produced *Scarlet Street*. This time Joan Bennett plays Kitty, an astute woman. The first encounter between the actress and the camera is much less dreamy than in *The Woman in the Window* but in both films, the male protagonist (again, Edward G. Robinson) falls in

love with her immediately as if by love at first sight. We see her from afar, through an extremely long shot, having a violent dispute with her boyfriend (fig. 17). However, when aid comes her way, she refuses it, completely throwing off the idea of a damsel in distress. Kitty is a woman driven by money and the need to please her boyfriend. She uses her sensuality to get what she wants and even changes her tone of voice depending on who she is talking to. All this earned Joan great critical acclaim. We can see how Bennet managed to build Kitty's character on the basis of the personal and artistic confidence she had gained over the years. She made this character her own by creating a sexy and powerful woman who used her weapons to manipulate and win (Kellow 286).



Fig. 17

The 1950s was the decade Joan Bennett left behind her period as a femme fatale actress. At that time, she had just turned 40, her daughter Diana had a child of her own and the media even went so far as to call Joan “Hollywood’s most glamorous grandmother”. When an actress reached their thirties, their career began to be in jeopardy, they were considered old and not suitable for those younger roles. Even director Joseph Leo Mankiewicz commented that whenever female actors agreed to play the role of mother and housewife, they had to say goodbye to being a young leading lady again (Kellow 330-331). In any case, Joan was convinced that it was time to turn her career around and

embraced change without fear. Her first attempt at a housewife role was *The Reckless Moment* by Max Ophüls.

The Reckless Moment, therefore, served as a bridge between the different films noirs Joan had played before, particularly the two mentioned above, and the comedy films she started to appear in- This was a drastic transition between two antagonistic female types. The result was an extraordinary performance. In *The Reckless Moment*, as the noir universe and family melodrama overtake Lucia's life, the narration moves from one extreme to the other. One minute we see her dragging bodies and drowning them in the lake and the next we see her reminding her son to put on a T-shirt or giving advice to her daughter (Kellow 335). For mid-20th century American audiences, it was difficult to conceive of a housewife as a woman capable of conspiring in crime and "working" with blackmailers, let alone being romantically interested in one. It is those moments of ambiguity in which the audience can find glimpses of her role as Alice or Kitty. That mystery, willpower and the ability to do the whatever is necessary to get what she wants –despite the classic film noir fatalistic ending– brings to mind those femme fatales. Perhaps without being fully conscious of it, Joan constructed a maternal character that was partly the product of the classic darkness of her previous characters. This darkness, always kept under the surface, makes Lucia a more complex character and alerts contemporary spectators of a contradictory type of femininity that uses stereotypes in order to transcend them.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the actress accurately described this film as the perfect fusion of "actress and role" (Kellow 334). In Lucia we can see glimpses of Joan: her need to control every part of her life so she can protect her household's peace and stability. Joan did not have to deal with blackmailers but she did have to deal with abusive, jealous and alcoholic husbands. She always put her children first in the most

critical moments of her life and did her best to provide for them financially. Knowing what it is like to be alone in raising her children allows her to create a truthful performance. The audience follows Lucia's emotions, her building anxiety, and her endless cigarettes. Alongside of the allure of noir, Lucia is a middle-class woman who suffers the consequences of a patriarchal state that does not allow her to take out a loan without her husband's permission; and an absent husband, working outside the home, on whom she cannot count on for help or moral support. Lucia is alone, imprisoned in a world where her personal life is non-existent and where only her role as a mother matters. She is reduced to her gender norms while ignoring her personal desires, manners or dreams. Bennett's performance distinctively combines vulnerability and strength, capturing the layers of a character who is both a victim of American society and a powerful woman. It may be said that this "perfect fit" between actress and role is made more culturally relevant by the noir darkness that Bennett's star persona, as constructed in the 1940s, brings to the role: the film shows that ultimately femme fatale and committed middle-class housewife can indeed coexist in the same character.

In 1950, Joan was cast to play Ellie Banks in the comic movie *The Father of the Bride*. With this movie, she was able to demonstrate her versatility as a performer by taking on a comical and lovable character after several dark and intense roles. Contrary to Alice or Kitty, Ellie is a caring and loving mother who wants the best for her daughter. She is sarcastic and, despite being in the shadow of Kay Banks, played by Elizabeth Taylor, her time on screen does not go unnoticed. She is entertaining and endearing as a woman who loves her husband of 20 years and amuses him with charismatic sarcasm and wit (Kellow 339). Despite this first impression of a housewife who follows the established canon, throughout the film we can see traits of Lucia's role. Consequently, the comedy is slightly affected by the darkness of *The Reckless Moment's* universe and

Lucia's torment. Ellie is a woman who never had the dream wedding she wanted and this continues to sadden her. When the head of the family, Stanley, played by Spencer Tracy, suggests a simple wedding or proposes that his daughter elopes to get married, Ellie is upset. She cleverly introduces her husband to the idea that he should give their daughter the wedding she wants; despite the financial strain this puts on the family. She sneaks around to see what her husband is doing (figs. 18-19) and to understand his mindset in order to lead him where she wants him to be. This, is presented within a comic framework that makes everything lighter and Joan's character is seen as a mother who simply wants to give her daughter what she could never have, and yet the line from Alice to Kitty to Lucia and to Ellie remains an unbroken line, one that reveals different and contradictory features within women that continue to share many features. Alongside her versatility, Joan Bennett's persona remains consistent in her complexity.



Fig. 18



Fig. 19

Conclusion

In *The Reckless Moment*, director Max Ophüls creates a film that analyzes and deconstructs certain social ideals that were prevalent in the American society of the time. Through the use of certain noir techniques –such as chiaroscuro, shadows and the manipulation of space–, the director shows the agony and despair of a housewife desperate for stability. The character of Lucia, who serves as an example and personification of the reality of many women of the moment, allows the audience to see how the role of mother and wife is imposed on them from a young age –a role in which they must find their happiness despite being deprived of their freedom and autonomy.

The mise en scène chosen effectively represents a permanent uneasy sensation: the use of stairs to show movement and restlessness; the contrast of light and shadow evokes a claustrophobic feeling; the sound of the clock shows time running away as if the characters were in a race against life. All this comes together and creates distressing scenes in which the audience can empathize with Lucia and understand her helplessness. Additionally, these techniques also contribute to the denunciation of the barriers women faced in society, illustrated by her failed attempt to obtain a loan. Her restricted point of view and framing portray her despair. In addition, the director's signature camera movements and long takes help capture how the incessant family demands keep her in constant motion, without a moment to breathe and be herself. Society is pressuring her to fit her role and is reassuring her that the allure of noir she was able to grasp with Donnelly is merely that, a dream. Her fate is to be bound to a domestic life.

On the other hand, actress Joan Bennett gives us a performance that, together with the director's talent, results in a masterpiece and a classic of film noir. Her childhood and terrible experiences with men led her to develop a quiet personality that wanted to stay out of the spotlight but was forced to go on stage to support her first daughter as a single

mother. After experiencing with different genres and roles, recognition did not come to her until the 1940s when she began to consolidate her career as a femme fatale with films like *The Woman in the Window* or *Scarlet Street*. Contrary to expectations, Joan did not end her career in her thirties but saw it as an opportunity for change and evolution. Her role as a loving and kind woman in *Father of the Bride* was made possible by her earlier decision to play Lucia in *The Reckless Moment*. Each of these films allowed her to demonstrate her growth as an actress over the years. The characters of Alice, Kitty, Lucia and Ellie feed off each other. Joan Bennett is able to absorb the vulnerability, strength and complexity from each of them and insert them in the next woman she plays. Her ability to adapt to each genre and mimic her roles allowed her to create a successful artistic career and establish her as one of the greatest actresses in the history of Hollywood.

In her role as Lucia, it is possible to see her capacity to merge her personal experiences, traumas and fears. Lucia's obsession with having everything under control and maintaining stability within the household are glimpses of Bennet's past and present. Joan constructs a character who smokes to obtain psychological relief and who opens herself to a platonic relationship with Donnelly as a desperate means to escape from her middle-class life. This authenticity allows the audience to connect with her character, women see themselves in her despair and understand Lucia as if they were the ones inside the screen.

In sum, *The Reckless Moment* is a film that blends film noir and family melodrama to evaluate and point out the importance of changing societal norms and the patriarchal system of the 20th century. The movie denounces the American ideal that forced women to find happiness in motherhood and domesticity which led them to years of despair, loneliness and anxiety. Max Ophüls's techniques and direction blend with Joan Bennet's acting to create a provocative film that continues to amaze contemporary audiences.

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