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Melancholic femininities in cinema

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Before I started the current research, I went through a long process of observing how fears are represented in cinema, the image of the other, the stranger—I even delved somewhat into the horror genre. However, I then realized that I was actually interested in how depression was represented. I chose to write about the ways melancholy is depicted, trying to avoid, as much as possible, diagnosing the film characters with a disorder like depression. I started from the idea that melancholy involves a reflective side, being more complex and nuanced than clinical depression. The authors of the essay "Melancholy as an Aesthetic Emotion" mentioned in my work note that melancholy can include traces of other feelings—sadness, love, desire, pleasure, and even fear—highlighting the aesthetic dimension of melancholy through the idea that reflexivity can influence creativity, and, conversely, creativity can influence reflexivity.

We could say that the state of melancholy also has a narrative character because it encompasses a complex variety of feelings, and this state can only be reached through a long process that often involves a story the characters tell themselves. Starting from the idea of a story, I concluded that most female characters represented with various symptoms associated with melancholy actually live, to some extent, in a fantasy world, eventually becoming more or less disillusioned with the reality they face. Thus, I began with the questions: How does the portrayal of the melancholic woman change throughout history? How relevant are the dimensions of fantasy, nostalgia, and imagination in shaping this portrait?

I arrived at a rather clear conclusion: the majority of melancholic female characters in cinema are largely constructed based on the bovaric character model. In the first chapters, I explained this concept theorized by the French philosopher Jules de Gautier, starting from the character of Emma Bovary in Gustave Flaubert's novel "Madame Bovary." In his essay "Bovarism," he suggests that the bovaric character suffers from a personality weakness that makes them conceive of themselves as someone other than they are. Most often, they face unsatisfactory realities, whether socially or romantically, and thus they fuel various fantasies about these aspects and are disappointed when they do not materialize. For example, Emma Bovary is bored in her marriage, and the reality she has to face, especially after the birth of her daughter, no longer coincides with the life she imagined for herself. The novels she reads also distort her perception of romantic relationships, so she begins various extramarital affairs, hoping to experience the kind of romantic adventure she finds only in fiction. She becomes unhappy both in her marriage and in her relationships with other men because, of course, these do not fulfill her emotionally.

I started from the premise that the bovaric character is inherently melancholic, identifying these traits in the construction of several female characters throughout the history of cinema: most often, the causes of their dissatisfaction lie in the romantic disappointments they experience. They tend to relate incorrectly to the male characters in their lives, and the distortion they are subjected to is a consequence of the expectations they have, often fueled by external factors, such as literature in the case of Emma Bovary. I observed a recurrence of these character traits perpetuated throughout the history of cinema.

In the first chapters of my work, I theorized the concept of melancholy, going through the history of defining this condition. The theory of the four humors developed in Ancient Greece and theorized by Aristotle defined melancholy as a natural disposition caused by medical reasons—

namely, an excess of black bile, hence the spleen. During the Renaissance, the state of melancholy was associated with genius and attributed to men. Today, depression can again be associated with various neurobiological imbalances, but external factors that can contribute to this condition cannot be ignored, such as aspects of living standards, social issues, or factors related to age or gender of the affected individuals.

I used theoretical works such as Sigmund Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia," where the author highlights the relevance of the feeling of loss, making somewhat of an analogy between the suffering caused by the loss of a loved person or object with the decrease or even total loss of interest in the external world. Furthermore, I analyzed the status of women in society and the ways they are perceived, depending on the stages of life they go through or the roles they assume, starting from Simone de Beauvoir's study "The Second Sex." Then, I integrated into my research the theories and observations of Andrew Solomon in "The Noonday Demon," a study that thoroughly analyzes the categories of population and causes of depression. I thus concluded that, although all studies show that depression is more commonly found in women due to several factors that can influence their condition (such as postpartum depression or other forms of depression that can arise from hormonal imbalances or fluctuations), in cinema these causes are most often represented as consequences of the unfulfilled romantic aspirations of female characters.

I mainly selected a filmography where heterosexual relationships are represented because this type of representation has dominated and continues to dominate cinema, although the image of the melancholic—bovaric character can also be found in other types of relationships. I added, in the first part of the research, a chapter dedicated to the aesthetics of melancholy, where I analyzed works that represented the melancholic state of real or fictional female characters. Through this, I aimed to observe to what extent the portraits of melancholic women appearing in painting art have influenced the image of this typology of women in cinematic art, both aesthetically and thematically. I observed that, while most melancholic male characters are attributed traits related to their intellectual life, female characters are attributed concerns related to the loss or anticipation of a romantic relationship or, more specifically, of a man. Of course, the fantasy dimension, the state of reflection, and a certain nostalgic charge exist in both types of representations.

I began the case studies by examining how female characters are portrayed in silent cinema, in some films where they face various situations that trigger their state of melancholy. For example, in Dimitri Kirsanoff's "Menilmontant," the protagonist first goes through a traumatic event, namely the death of her parents, which prompts her to move to the city with her older sister. There, she meets a man she falls in love with, who gets her pregnant and then leaves her without saying anything. In some scenes, she is depicted daydreaming about the man's appearance or contemplating suicide when she realizes she will have to raise the child alone. In the case of Joan of Arc, in Carl Theodor Dreyer's "The Passion of Joan of Arc," I analyzed the state of melancholy in relation to theories that suggest she might have suffered from a certain form of epilepsy, as well as the moment in her life, namely before her execution. I also analyzed silent films from an aesthetic perspective because, for example, in the case of Joan of Arc, I realized the importance of close-up shots in their ability to capture every micro-expression of the character. The experiences of the character gain a strong narrative dimension, so the story of the

woman in her last days of life can be read solely through her expressiveness. In this case, I introduced some theories proposed by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who says, "we are faced with a reflective or reflecting face as long as the features remain grouped under the control of a fixed or terrible thought, but immutable and without becoming, eternal in a way." This type of face can be identified in Joan of Arc, especially in moments when she learns certain news about her sentence or when she must appeal to memory, remaining fixated on a thought or memories that change her mood, becoming somewhat nostalgic. Although Joan of Arc does not fit the bovaric character typology as analyzed throughout the research, the fantasy dimension is not absent from the construction of this character, and the power of nostalgia and illusion are undoubtedly aspects that shape her portrait in a manner very close to the bovaric character.

I also provided examples from the silent film era, such as D.W. Griffith's "Broken Blossoms," Charlie Chaplin's "A Woman of Paris," or Germaine Dulac's "The Smiling Madame Beudet," noting some directors' tendencies to represent women somewhat emotionally independent from male figures. One of the most relevant examples, considered the first feminist film, "The Smiling Madame Beudet," portrays the protagonist in a state of exasperation towards her husband, who is conveniently constructed as a buffoon, often behaving ridiculously and making jokes that irritate her. She imagines her husband's death and the appearance of a man who would offer her affection and romantic gestures. She differs from other female characters of this period by the fact that she acts by putting a bullet in the gun her husband sometimes pretends to shoot himself with, hoping this time to get rid of him. The woman wishes to escape the domestic situation she is in, but through the fantasies she lives with, we realize that it is not independence she needs, but a replacement for the man who no longer satisfies her romantically. Of course, there is also a certain type of boredom that can be found in the protagonists of the first half of the century. Often, they are portrayed as not having a particular occupation: housewives who spend their time reading, daydreaming, or chatting with other women. Their universe, however much an attempt is made during this period to break away from usual portrayals, revolves around male presences, whether satisfying or unsatisfying.

I dedicated a chapter to the concept of illusion, demonstrating the continuing weight of fantasy, imagination, and the desire to start a new life in the construction of female characters. The most relevant example is David Lean's film "Brief Encounter," where the protagonist, Laura, is in a happy marriage and satisfied with her domestic life but falls in love with another man with whom she has a brief but intense affair. She feels guilty and realizes that she normally should not need such a relationship, but the excitement triggered by the new male presence is incomparable to the predictability at home and her husband, whom she even describes as neither emotional nor delicate. Nostalgia weighs heavily in Laura's construction. Although she does not express any dissatisfaction with her relationship with her husband, she says she relives feelings associated with youth. Returning to the traits of the bovaric character, we can say that if Emma Bovary's dissatisfaction arises from the discrepancy between the image she created about love and the one she discovers in reality, in Laura's case, we are dealing with a more pronounced dissatisfaction with her own actions in relation to the values she believed she upheld.

She idealizes the romantic relationship but much more timidly than Emma, not expressing dissatisfaction with her marriage.

I further analyzed some films whose protagonists seem to diverge from the construction of the bovaric character through their intentions, interests, and needs. Karin, the protagonist in "Stromboli," prefers in the end to escape from the island where she lives with the father of her unborn child, even if this escape implies her death – as she attempts to leave the island, the nearby volcano erupts, and the final scene suggests that she meets a tragic end. What differentiates her from certain characters built on the bovaric model is the lack of a fantastical dimension. She is aware of the unhappiness she would experience living on the island with a man she cannot understand, in a mini-society where she feels discriminated against and excluded. She prefers to leave, without clinging to any male figure except for the practical purpose of leaving the island. In this sense, I also exemplified with prominent female characters such as Cabiria from Fellini's "Nights of Cabiria" or Monika from Bergman's "Summer with Monika." However, it can be observed that at least until the mid-century, the traits of the bovaric character persist in the construction of this type of character. Even the independent Monika from Bergman's film falls under this umbrella, as she is disappointed by the image of the life awaiting her if she stays with her boyfriend and the child she would have to raise, from her perspective at an inappropriate moment in life. She continually seeks new beginnings in relationships, any form of attachment that would "domesticate" her, creating repulsion and the desire to escape.

In the chapter dedicated to the transitions of the bovaric character, I focused on female characters who no longer exhibit such traits and increasingly diverge from the typologies we have been accustomed to throughout cinema history. Jeanne Dielman from Chantal Akerman's film does not seem to suffer from melancholy, although there are a few scenes that capture her in a reflective state. With no access to the protagonist's inner world, it is difficult to decipher her emotions, and the mechanical way she completes her activities makes her seem devoid of any sentimental dimension typically encompassed in films where the main characters are female. "Akerman takes time to clarify that characters like Jeanne Dielman do not fit the typology of Emma Bovary. Dielman is not a figure seeking pity, largely because she doesn't even understand that she is pitiful. We don't cry for her, because her pain does not make her helpless. She is not even ready to use the word 'pain' to describe her life." – essay by Joseph Earp on melancholy in Chantal Akerman's cinema. Jeanne Dielman seems to have no needs, desires, or fantasies related to any aspect of life and the micro-universe in which she lives, placing her in opposition to the bovaric character type. The object of her love seems to be the household objects and the space in which she lives. In this case, the desire or need to have a man in her life no longer seems to matter for the heroine's emotional well-being, and the final murder underscores this aspect, already demonstrated throughout the entire plot.

I concluded the section dedicated to case studies by mentioning Lars von Trier's "Depression Trilogy," summarizing with an analysis of the film "Melancholia," where a severe form of depression is perhaps most evidently represented to date. It should be noted that, although Justine is one of the most representative melancholic characters in cinema, the melancholy she suffers from does not constitute any dimension of the bovaric portrait. We could say that, from certain points of view, she even adopts an inverted Bovary-like portrait because she does not project any expectations onto the people who appear in her life, she does not live her life fueled by any fantasy, and she does not live with nostalgia. Her state is not due to any failure that we could say she might have suffered romantically. At the end, I also analyzed the portrait of the melancholic character in a film classified in the coming-of-age subgenre. There is also a fantastical dimension

in Joachim Trier's Thelma: at one point, she imagines an intimate moment with the friend she falls in love with over the course of the film, and the fact that she wishes for certain things to happen triggers a sort of telekinetic power that allows her to make people appear or disappear based on her needs. In the case of this type of film, I question why screenwriters-directors resort to introducing supernatural power. This can be interpreted as questioning the real capabilities of young women to free themselves from a certain situation or to discover themselves without the help of an external force.

I concluded by specifying that melancholic female characters no longer identify as much with the Bovary-like portrait found especially in the first half of the 20th century and even later in cinema. However, we can still observe traits of this portrait in certain constructions of female characters, but they begin to have increasingly diverse concerns, and fantasies related to the image of the ideal partner or ideal romantic life seem to fade in the new narratives. Thus, there are some indications that the Bovary-like portrait may receive new dimensions. A good recent example is Yorgos Lanthimos' Poor Things, in which social stratification and injustices become new sources of frustration and sadness for the protagonist, who begins to question the values of the world she lives in and various existential problems. In this case, the need for a romantic partner and stability from this point of view seems to be very low on the protagonist's list of priorities, and a fantastical dimension is out of the question, even though we are dealing with a type of character who could easily fall prey to illusions.