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## Vindicating the Femme Fatale in Manuel Antín's 'Circe'

### Abstract / Resumen

*Vindicating the Femme Fatale in Manuel Antín's Circe*

The present article analyzes a classic Argentine film noir, *Circe*, to explore its representation of a powerful, autonomous female protagonist ahead of the historical moment of 1964. The director Manuel Antín creates a film adaptation that departs from the source text by Julio Cortázar by focalizing the motivations and actions of a female character that flouts societal expectations and mores. The article is theoretically grounded in feminist, subjectivity and film adaptation theory. The article contributes to the fields of Latin American Studies, Global Film and Media Studies, Argentine Cultural and Literary Studies, and Gender Studies.

### Keywords / Palabras clave

Feminism, Subjectivity, Film Noir, Manuel Antín, Julio Cortázar, Film Adaptation, Femme Fatale, Focalization

### Cover Page Footnote / Si quiere que su cubierta contenga una nota al pie de página...

For all the femmes fatales and not so fatale, and the people that appreciate and support them. And for Manuel Antín, a visionary in Argentine film.

## Vindicating the Femme Fatale in Manuel Antín's Circe

In an interview with Manuel Antín in February of 2013, the legendary Argentine director told me he perceived the female protagonist of his film, Circe, as a psychologically ill figure. His view of her intrigued me because I had seen a powerful, if maligned, subject position in the figure of the femme fatale, both in Antín's film and in the source text by the seminal Argentine writer, Julio Cortázar. This study springs from a love of Cortázar's short prose narratives and a curiosity about their adaptation to film. I do not focus on the fidelity of the rewriting of short story to movie, but rather on the striking differences that appear in juxtaposing the two art forms. This is in following what Dudley Andrew terms the "fertility" of film adaptation and what Robert Stam celebrates as the "multileveled negotiation of intertexts" (67). The femme fatale in both the narrative and the film is engaging, strong and scary. Antín's Circe vindicates the femme fatale by representing her survival as a sign of independence and rejection of the modern western societal norms of marriage and domestic bliss.

The source text of my study is Julio Cortázar's short story "Circe" written in 1951 as part of the anthology, Bestiario. In 1964 Manuel Antín directed the film version of the same name, having written the film's screenplay with Héctor Grossi and with input from Cortázar himself. The film and the short story present the figure of the femme fatale in distinctly rich manners.

To summarize the intertexts, Delia Mañara is a young woman from Buenos Aires with an ignominious past. Her first two fiancés died mysteriously, but a third suitor, Mario, is smitten

with Delia, and he refuses to believe the rumors that circulate about “la muchacha que había matado a sus dos novios” (92). (...the young woman who had killed her two suitors) (All translations are mine.) Delia appears haunted by her mournful memories, but she seems to brighten up when baking strange confections of candies and liquors. Mario brings her ingredients for her baking hobby in an effort to get closer to her and to pull her out of her sullen moods. When he agrees to be Delia’s taste tester, she finally accepts his official courtship. One day Delia bakes a special candy for Mario; he breaks it open and sees that she planned to poison him with cockroach parts in the bonbon! In a purposefully open ending, Mario puts his hands around Delia’s neck, trying to quell her screaming and panting. Cortázar’s narrator adds that Mario seems sorry that he could not put an end to her parents’ suffering. (116). (Emphasis mine). Mario is not as concerned with Delia’s feelings in the short story. The persistent rumors surrounding Delia’s beaux alert the reader to societal expectations and curiosity about someone who defies social norms.

In the source text, the femme fatale is evoked in the title, epigraph, and main character, Delia Mañara. As Patricio Goyalde Palacios has discussed, the title figure, Circe, recalls the siren of Homer’s *Odyssey* that poisons Odysseus’ soldiers by magically turning them into animals and who unsuccessfully tries to do the same with Odysseus (114). In addition to the title, Cortázar’s text evokes another dangerous female temptress in its epigraph-- an excerpt of the prose piece, The Orchard Pit, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Rossetti’s main character lures men into hell with poison apples. Thus the title and the paratext orient the reader to expect a story centered on the figure of the femme fatale. Palacios adds that Rossetti’s character ultimately summons her lover with three meaningful commands: "Come to Love", "Come to

Life", "Come to Death", which Palacios sees as Cortázar's constant preoccupation with love and death (115). This paratext is not referenced in the film adaptation.

In their excellently detailed 2008 study, "El eterno retorno de la femme fatale, 'Circe', de Julio Cortázar," Houvenaghel and Monballieu trace the origins of the femme fatale figure and its archetypal constitution in art and history, antiquity and modernity, in the Bible and pagan lore, and in American and European legend. They affirm, "Cortázar created this fatal woman in line with the theory of the Eternal Return. She appears in all epochs and is both identical to and different from Circe, Eve, Diana, the Siren, the Spider Woman" (853). In other words, the femme fatale lures, entraps, haunts, kills, confounds, and the cycle never ends. As I see it, the short story is an exploration of society's reception of the femme fatal and its consequent reactions: the temptress is maligned, shunned, and condemned. She is ultimately marginalized by society's confusion about her power to seduce and her will to be alone.

The short story hypertext represents the image of Delia through an unreliable twelve-year-old narrator who insists he does not remember either Mario, the latest suitor, or Delia, very well. As the story progresses, however, the narrator seems ever more certain, almost omniscient with regard to Mario's feelings and motives. "Mario creyó un tiempo que la gracia de Delia y sus vestidos apoyaban el odio de la gente" (92). (Mario believed for a while that Delia's grace and attire inspired the neighborhood's hatred.) The narrator also recounts the town gossip that condemns Delia and the effects of the rumors on Mario. The narrative is focalized through the male protagonist, as we read to find out what happened to him in relation to Delia. The narrative line jumps from the present to the past to the present in a

series of flashbacks and returns to the present. The narrative zigzagging aligns with the mythic time/space of Circe, the eternal femme fatale.

In the short story Delia matches the archetypal femme fatale in appearance and talents. She is blond, beautiful, and skilled in the culinary arts, elements that Houvenaghel and Monballieu assert symbolize the sweet part of her nature. The critics also note the innate cruelty of the femme fatale, which paradoxically combines sweetness with malevolence (855). In the source text, however, this cruelty is judged by the narrator, Mario, and in the persistent rumors of the neighborhood. The reader sees only one act of blatant cruelty by Delia and exterior perspectives frame all of Delia's actions. The film, in contrast, provides a window into Delia's motivations and feelings.

The film Circe updates the short story by changing the time period from 1920s Buenos Aires to the early 1960s in the Argentine capital. Mariana Sández notes that Manuel Antín grounds his cinema in a firm love of literature (11). In aesthetic terms, Antín's text exhibits classic film noir techniques and style to portray the image of the femme fatale. In the hypotext, Delia is no longer blond. She is a brooding, brunette beauty in keeping with a noir standard that contrasts the malicious femme fatale to the fair-haired girl-next-door. Consequently, Antín's film inserts the character of Raquel to serve as a foil to Delia. The film also allows Mario to interact with more characters in different environs.

Mario meets Raquel at a party, dances with her, and has sexual relations with her. Rachel is lighter in spirit and actions than Delia. She even calls herself a normal, typical girl (Antín Circe). Mario, however, returns to Delia, drawn obsessively to her darkness and withdrawn nature. Antín interestingly sets up the alternative female girlfriend for Mario to combat

Delia's seductive powers. Mario waffles between the ease of the carefree Raquel and the challenge of the darker, manipulative Delia. Raquel's easy-going nature is at first glance quite modern in exposition, but the spectator comes to understand that Delia's independence in the film represents a much more modern and innovative female protagonist than her light-hearted foil. Antín's Circe is sullen, but she remains determined to be the mistress of her own destiny. Her modern identity is shaped by a refusal to succumb to her boyfriends' and family's demands.

The dark house that Delia shares with her parents is meticulously drawn in the film. Antín uses a chiaroscuro setting to build a space of unease and tragedy in the Mañara home. In Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir, J.P. Tellot explains that the plays of shadow and light in noir films "give external shape and substance to inner, subjective experiences, feelings and attitudes, in effect turning the psyche inside out" (17). The film's insistence on focalizing Delia's psychic experience contrasts with the short story's positing of Mario and Argentine society as the focalizers. In the story we know of the Mañaras' alienation by their having been forced to move from one neighborhood to another to escape society's judgments of their daughter. Mario notes that no one visits the family. Yet the physical space of the home does not play as pivotal and reflective a role in Cortázar's source text as it does in the film.

The tone of psychological thriller based on the inner turmoil of the femme fatale is achieved in the film through the careful insertion of a series of flashbacks that probe the dark subconscious of Delia. Tellot explains that noir films "deploy the darkest imagery to sketch starkly disconcerting assessments of the human and social condition" (2). In Circe, the film, the representation of Delia is one of a mourning, tortured and alienated young woman. The

causes of her withdrawal and sadness are underscored in her memories, represented as repeated flashbacks to the ugly deaths of her first boyfriends. Images of the visual movements of the young suitors-- one falling dead from a heart attack and one jumping off a bridge-- serve as entries into the femme fatale's disturbed psyche. We see the horror on Delia's face in the film, and we also see the smallest suggestion of a smile after some of the memory sequences.



The tortured, enigmatic smile of Delia Mañara taunts the spectator and the males in Antín's film. (Antín, Circe)

Graciela Borges superbly evokes this hint of a smile in recalling the deaths of her previous beaux in Antín's film. Her seductive nature is at once haunting and attractive. The film

focalizes the suitors' deaths through Delia, however, in stark contrast to the short story that focalizes Mario's journey.

Goyalde Palacios reminds us that the deaths of Héctor and Rolo are the narrative equivalents of the dead white faces of Dante Rosetti's Orchard Pit (15). It is important to note that they are communicated to Mario in the short story by the rumors and innuendos of the neighborhood. In the film Delia remembers the dying suitors.



Delia recalls her suitor, Rolo, immediately before his suicide. (Antín, Circe)

Her vision supplies the images of the crushed men. The visual repetitions of her beaus lend the film its mythic sense of time and space. The representations of memory and, by extension, inner angst, make Antín's film stand out as ahead of its time.

Delia's body, as represented by Graciela Borges, is explicitly engaging in the film version of Circe. Antín's femme fatale belies the object position she occupies in the Cortázar short story. Jorge Cuoto notes the physicality of Antín's protagonist in contrast to the figure of the

source text and the “nuevas realidades” (new realities) of what he calls “Antín’s Venus” (6). He does not, however, highlight the unique position of power embodied by Antín’s Delia. In the film adaptation, the body of the femme fatale is powerful in its autoerotic subjectivity.

Delia’s self-reliance gives way to a persistent morose preoccupation apparent in Antín’s representation of the femme fatale. How does Delia feel about the deaths of her first two boyfriends? Is she haunted by a sense of guilt? Does the heavy weight of past losses bear down on Delia, torturing her current state of mind? Is the pain mixed with relief? The film complicates Delia’s burden by match-cutting Mario’s dialogue with Delia into several of the flashback sequences. The effect is suspenseful and eerie and it draws the spectator into the inner struggle of the femme fatale through an exploration of memory and identity. The repetitive nature of Delia’s remembrances make the viewer suspect history will repeat itself, but the film twists that convention by intertwining the male protagonist’s exterior world -- what will happen-- and the female protagonist’s interior world --what has already happened and why. In the short story the male character provides the answers. In the film the femme fatale reveals more. The focus on Delia as the subject of desire, rather than the object of desire, marks Antín’s film as original and innovative in perspective. The femme fatale’s subjectivity becomes salient in the film adaptation of Circe.

The dialogue between Delia and Mario proves to be psychological in nature and much more direct in the film than in the short story. Mario actually names the boyfriends that seem ever present in the Mañara home, and he tells Delia to shout their names in order to liberate herself from her past. Marcelo Damiani stresses the inherent struggles between interior and exterior time as related to Delia’s interior fight with her past and her exterior struggle with her present. Damiani sees Antín’s protagonist as an example of a modern Circe figure

grounded in mythic time. For Damiani, Antín provides the answers to the mystery of Cortázar's Delia (Damiani Blog). Interiority, in this view, distinguishes the film from the source story. The mythical time lived by Delia in repeated scenes of memory and psychological depth corresponds to a more nonlinear time and space typical of the female time theorized by Julia Kristeva (Jardine 5). Antín's Circe dwells in a female space that rejects male linearity and forced subjugation. Delia's power resides in her refusal to succumb to societal pressures. If she is uncomfortable in her role, it is due to her nonconformity to cultural mores and expectations.

Antín explores Delia's psychological depth through a representation of her sullen character and her independent moments. In both the tale and the film Mario sees his love of Delia as the vehicle to free her from her mourning. The film expands on the allusion to liberation through the power of love, as Delia initially likes the idea of being born anew suggested by Mario. Quickly, however, she recalls that all rebirths lead to the same "asco" – disgust or ennui. The film follows Delia as she rejects Mario's sexual advances and psychological counseling and escapes back into her house and her private bedroom.

Though the short story alludes to Delia's sensuality, the film represents it explicitly. In the bedroom scene Delia touches her own hand in a mirror, undresses, and returns to the mirror, kissing her own mouth. She lastly goes to bed to pleasure herself. The camera shots are clear and lingering. The filmic femme fatale does not need any man to satisfy her. She is independent and she refuses to capitulate to society's sexual norms and social institutions. For a film of the early 1960s, the autoerotic charge of the images is striking. Antín explained to me that this scene was very challenging to get past the film censors of the time. He persisted, however, to considerable success.



Antín's film posits a female subject at once independent and autoerotic. (Antín, Circe)

The images not only represent the narcissism of the femme fatale, they also show her self-awareness, autonomy and self-satisfaction. The film focalizes a female protagonist at once strong and self-centered. Antín's Delia seduces her male suitors, the audience, and herself. Her power resides in her refusal to subjugate herself to societal expectations of subservience to man, marriage, and docility.

In the scene following the mirrored eroticism, Delia recalls her rejection of Rolo and Hector in flashbacks of her pushing the suitors away. Circe, the film, opens a window into the femme fatale's motivations and desires not seen in the short story. The flashback devices following the autoerotic images support a fascination with the human psyche that is characteristic of classic film noir and integral to the hypotext. The combination sensuality/memory serves in the film to show Delia's alienation from her family and friends as a function of her own independent soul, rather than through the skewed view of

outsiders. The interior focalization of the film draws the spectator into Delia's journey in a way not found in the source short story. The power of the visual images to convey another level of psychological motivation is key to the originality of the film adaptation. Antín's text shows Delia from a distinct point of view--her own. The film allows the spectator to glean the femme fatale's struggles and subjectivity in greater detail and proximity. The first-hand perspective of the femme fatale represented in Antín's Circe underscores Delia's autonomy and strength. This focus on the femme fatale is different than the third person account relayed in Cortázar's short story. Antín's Circe pushes the spectator to note the strident independence of the femme fatale.

The film facilitates society's view of marriage as the ultimate goal of a woman in, predictably, the voice of her parents. Delia's mother warns her to stop "playing around" because Mario really loves her and wants to marry her. The father sees an end to neighborhood marginalization of the family in the marriage of Mario and Delia. Antín's femme fatale, as others before her, only temporarily bows to societal pressure. Delia tells Mario that she will marry him and appeases her parents with the announcement of their engagement. To celebrate the impending nuptials, Delia bakes candies for her new fiancé. The parents, hoping that their daughter really does intend to go through with marriage this time around, leave the young couple alone.

Again the short story and film diverge. The ending of the short story focuses on Mario's pity for Delia's parents more than for Delia. He throws the poison candy in her face and grabs her neck in an attempt to quiet her convulsive gasps.

“pero él quería que se callara y apretaba para que solamente se callara...Oía jadear a los Mañara, le dieron lástima por tantas cosas, por Delia misma, por dejársela otra

vez y viva. Igual que Héctor y Rolo, se iba y se las dejaba. Tuvo mucha lástima de los Mañaras, que habían estado ahí agazapados y esperando que él—por fin alguno—hiciera callar a Delia que lloraba, hiciera cesar por fin el llanto de Delia (116).

*(But he wanted her to be quiet and he squeezed [her neck] so that she would be silent...He heard the Mañaras breathing; they pitied him for so many things, for Delia herself, for leaving her to them, once more, alive. Just like Hector and Rolo, he was leaving and he left her to them. Mario pitied the Mañaras, that had been there crouched and waiting for him—for anyone—to quiet Delia as she cried, that would make Delia's wailing finally stop.)*

The parents' concern is not for their daughter, but rather for Mario, for themselves, and for society, which cannot control the daughter's independence. Mario pities not his evil beloved, but rather the Mañaras, as he understands their grief, isolation and shame.

Cortázar's text privileges society's norms and marginalizes its deviants. The film, however, treats resistance to societal pressures differently. Antín's text represents a femme fatale defiant and autonomous, despite societal pressures. The protagonist's half smile reveals a relief and sense of self not present in Cortázar's story.

In the film, the ending hinges on an important double focalization. As Delia brings him the notorious poisoned candies, Mario recalls the face of Raquel, the foil to the femme fatale. We hear a persistent phone ringing and growing ever louder. Delia recoils when Mario opens the candies as she flashes back again to her prior fiancés. Her face is stunned, she touches her own neck, and the camera breaks away to Mario answering a phone call from Raquel in his flat. Delia once again flashes back to Rolo and Héctor and the final shot is one of Delia leaning on the wall. The last film image is of Delia, tortured, yet living on. The weak male has escaped to a safer love interest, but the femme fatale endures.

In the short story Mario sympathizes with the parents' dilemma of a daughter that resists society's prescription of her actions. In the film, Delia's plight is more overtly independent and her lethal ways seem more understandable. Film noir techniques provide the backdrop

of the psychic exploration. Delia is forced to kill to avoid social subjugation of her desires. Antín's femme fatale is an active, self-satisfying subject as much as she is the object of Mario's affections. In the adaptation to film, Antín's femme fatale is still fascinating in her dark aura, but she is ultimately less mysterious in motivation. Despite the director's assertion that Delia is an emotionally ill figure that cannot give her self over to love, the femme fatale represented in the film is ahead of her time in independence and self-satisfaction. Perhaps more aligned with a twenty-first century perspective, Antín's femme fatale exhibits strength, cunning and autonomy through her feminine wiles. Her refusal to accept society's pressure to marry and follow the mores of the day is striking.

Although Antín told me he perceived his female protagonist as ill-- the femme fatale as a figure of psychological dis-ease, in more modern terms, Delia's psychological motives are based on a desire to satisfy her own needs and not those of the social order. Her actions show a subject marked by repeated self-determination. Antín's femme fatale exhibits a clear agency, albeit destructive in nature. Her motives are the product of a society that does not understand the independence of a young woman not yearning for marriage. Although the director sees the figure of the Delia, and the females of his other films based on Cortázar stories, as not giving herself over to men or love, her unique subjectivity is impressive for the historical moment. Such an insistence on independence by a female figure was not the cultural norm in Argentina in 1964.

Antín's Circe represents Delia Mañara, the femme fatale, as a radical figure for her time. She is independent, self directed, and strong willed--an anomaly for female figures of that epoch in Argentine film and culture. This female protagonist represents a subject of desire surprisingly ahead of her time. Her occupation of a subject position of power and self

determination as well as her domination of a more mythical, nonlinear time, make her an independent and stunningly modern femme fatale. Manuel Antín vindicates the subjectivity of the Circe figure in representing her self-satisfying and powerful autonomy in a classic Argentine film noir.

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