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Seeing with One's Eyes Closed

A Formal and Stylistic Analysis of THE GODDESS OF 1967
by Stacey DeWolfe



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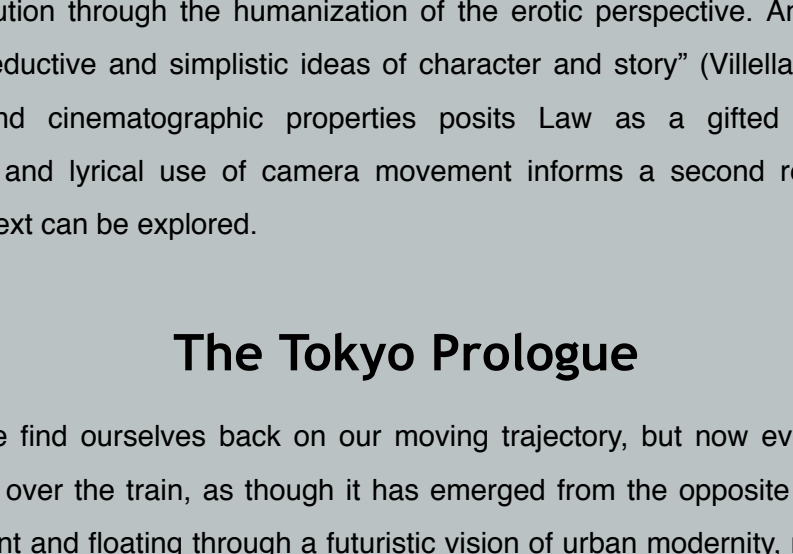
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Clara Law, as *THE GODDESS OF 1967* demonstrates, is one of contemporary cinema's most accomplished visual stylists, but unfortunately this aspect of her work has rarely been acknowledged in detail as her oeuvre tends to be addressed only in terms of discourses of a feminist or national cinema nature. Stacey DeWolfe's analysis confronts this oversight and develops a case for *GODDESS*' place in the history of film style.

The opening sequence of Clara Law's *THE GODDESS OF 1967* begins on a black screen with the low rumble of machines underneath. As the sound increases and starts to take shape, silvery credits glide into view and shimmer ephemerally before fading away. That these words skate horizontally across the frame anticipates the forward motion of the formal structure, but does little to prepare us for the coming rupture, as the film cuts abruptly to a speeding commuter train, hurtling down the tracks. With its front-mounted camera, the film cuts into the surrounding scenery as nothing more than a blur of red and white streaks in the night sky and propels the spectator into the narrative with a dizzying boldness, like a time machine, sucking us out of this reality and into another time and place, the metallic dissonance now contextualized as the grinding of brakes and the shriek of wheels scraping against tracks.



A detailed analysis of *GODDESS*' formal structure and visual style requires several viewings, and it's only in undertaking this systematic process that the work begins to resonate on a deeper level. What impresses on a first screening are the obvious surface elements of the work: the stuning use of colour, the striking performance by Rose Byrne in the lead role, and the cinematic exuberance of the dance sequence – the focal set piece whose double articulation conjoins the present to its historical parallel, while concurrently bending toward the central characters' resolution through the humanization of the erotic perspective. And while critics have been disappointed with the "reductive and simplistic ideas of character and story" (Vilella 4), a careful study of the film's mise-en-scène and cinematographic properties posits Law as a gifted *metteur-en-scène* whose compositional approach and lyrical use of camera movement informs a second reading through which the themes layered into the text can be explored.

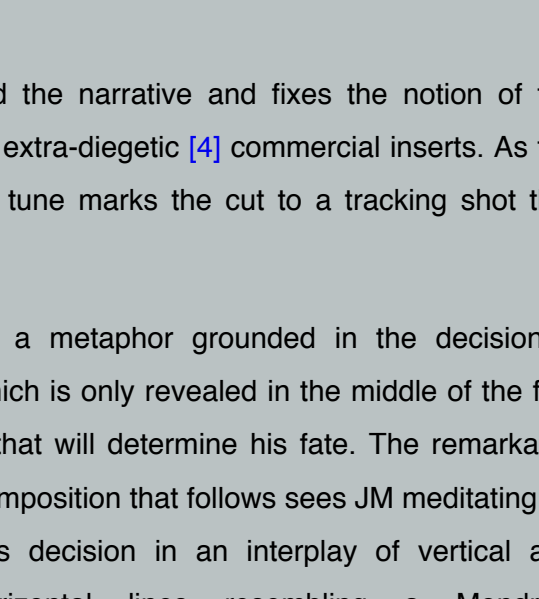
The Tokyo Prologue

Returning to the film, we find ourselves back on our moving trajectory, but now everything has changed. An oneiric quality has fallen over the train, as though it has emerged from the opposite side of the time machine, displaced from the present and floating through a futuristic vision of urban modernity, replete with towering glass structures and the ubiquitous presence of technology. In Law's Tokyo, there are no bright colours and no advertisements, [1] and the alien landscape is washed with pale blues and grays. Here the train moves in slow-motion, revealing the city through a series of jump cuts that transport us through time and space. A cut to the interior announces the existence of human life – including our hero, JM – but what is perhaps of greater import is the emergence of the computer screen, which appears as an insert, disembodied from any causal point of view. Through its written text, the binary of materialism and spirituality [2] is stated – "I want to buy god," then, "I want to buy a goddess."

What follows is an imaginative series of single-shot events, set within the walls of a Tokyo apartment over the course of several days and narrated through diegetic music [3] and text. The sequence is artfully designed and functions on a number of thematic, narrative and stylistic levels: offering insight into JM's detachment, introducing the provocative incident which launches us into the story, and laying the groundwork for the visual motifs which are developed throughout the film. In the interior of the four-room apartment, the narrative is informed by the graphic compositions that play with the shadows of film noir and introduce the motif of fractured space. With the decision to block actors in rooms separate from the camera, and having trimmed the royal blue walls with black, Law is able to construct her shots so that these dominant verticals are always present, creating the sense of a split screen within an otherwise organic single frame.

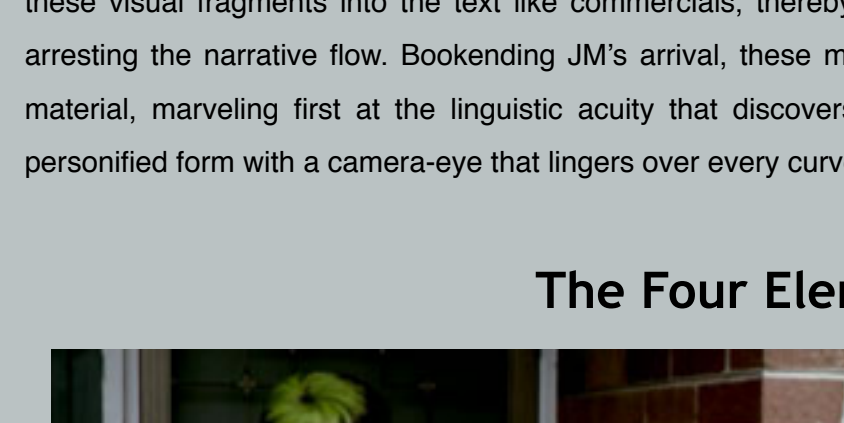
In the first sequence, rock music streams from a visible speaker, drawing attention to its place within the diegesis, and a series of jump cuts carry us into the kitchen where a kettle whistles as JM prepares dinner for his snakes. With a transition made more striking by the shift in sound, the film cuts to a close-up of JM, his face warm against the blue background.

The play between warm and cool colours is kept in constant balance in the film, a lighting design that echoes the principles of Yin and Yang. A piano sonata in a minor key combined with the hissing of the snakes provides accompaniment for this unusual family dinner. Indigenous chanting triggers a shift to JM as he eats a bowl of steaming noodles, framed by the doorway, physically set apart from even this machine-mediated communication, his gaze focused on the monitor in the adjacent room. The tone is serious but the meaning unclear as he types: "how good is she?" The fizzle of a cigarette emphasizes a final jump to JM, framed by the window, and illuminated once again by a warm glow. Latin music throbs from the stereo, symbolic of the human passion waiting to be released by the Goddess.



With a nod to Ozu and Naruse, Law shoots these scenes from every direction, revealing all four walls but never establishing the space, so that it is only after repeated viewings that the layout of the apartment becomes clear. Here we have the sense of JM's transience, made concrete by the sparseness of the furnishings as well as the camera's reluctance to settle into one point-of-view. In the morning the camera begins to move, tracking back from the window to find JM and a girl in bed. JM wears shades to block out the light – his spiritual blindness made manifest. Consistent, but never formulaic in her use of visual motifs, the meaning of the vertical line shifts with each new scene, separating JM and his girl from the speaker in one and cleaving the relationship in another by delineating the domestic from the technological, placing JM and his computer to the right, apart from the girl and her chores to the left. The music turns with every cut – from jazzy big band to Beethoven to 60s style pop – speaking perhaps to a generation defined by a post-modern assemblage of cultural influences, as well as emphasizing the absence of language which finds its resolution at the dinner table where the couple munch on burgers, silently rocking as though in a trance. The lyrics, however, are instructive and obliquely force the back story into the present: "people running don't have much to say."

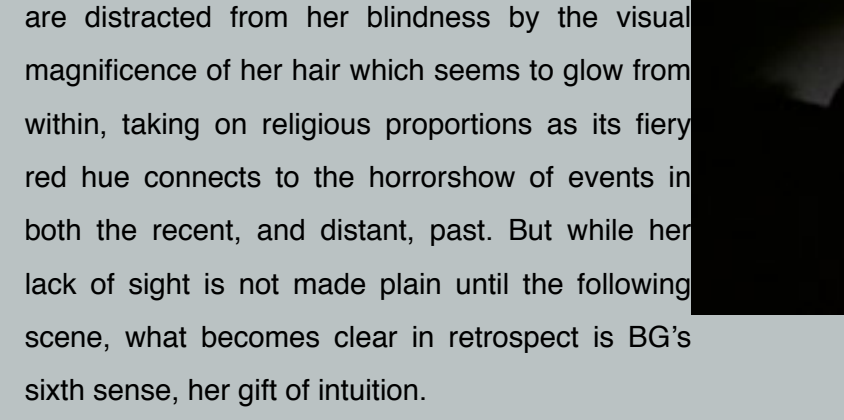
Throughout this sequence, the computer's text continues to build the narrative and fixes the notion of the personified machine whose erotic objectification is evidenced in the extra-diegetic [4] commercial inserts. As the virtual conversation moves into a *material* negotiation, a Klezmer tune marks the cut to a tracking shot that reveals JM on a treadmill. Here *running* acts



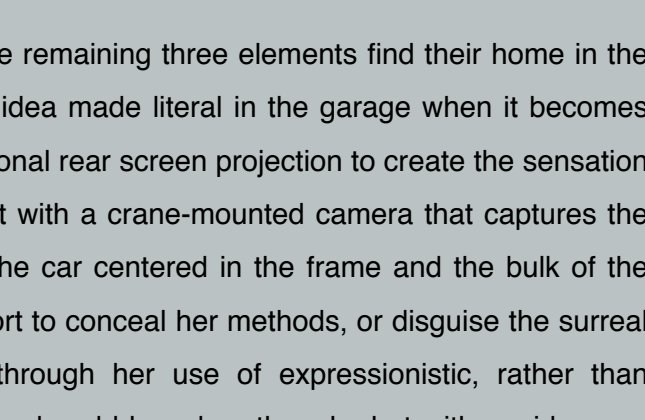
as a metaphor grounded in the decision – which is only revealed in the middle of the film – that will determine his fate. The remarkable composition that follows sees JM meditating on this decision in an interplay of vertical and horizontal lines resembling a Mondrian painting, while at the same time exemplifying characteristics that are, in some sense, characteristically Japanese. Like a Bento Box in which foods are divided into distinct compartments, JM is stationed in a lower quadrant, gazing up at his snakes as he contemplates the future of his life in Japan.

Interrupting the prologue, the title zooms across the screen with an audible whoosh that replicates the sound of an automobile passing fast on an empty highway, but it's almost five minutes later before we see the car. There are five of these extra-diegetic car segments woven into the central narrative and each is stylistically related to its particular function. That the middle three are photographed using the techniques of the advertising industry is no coincidence as Law inserts these visual fragments into the text like commercials, thereby rupturing the formal structure and momentarily arresting the narrative flow. Bookending JM's arrival, these mini-films initially appear as his imagination made material, marveling first at the linguistic acuity that discovers "Goddess" within DS and then eroticizing the personified form with a camera-eye that lingers over every curve.

The Four Elements



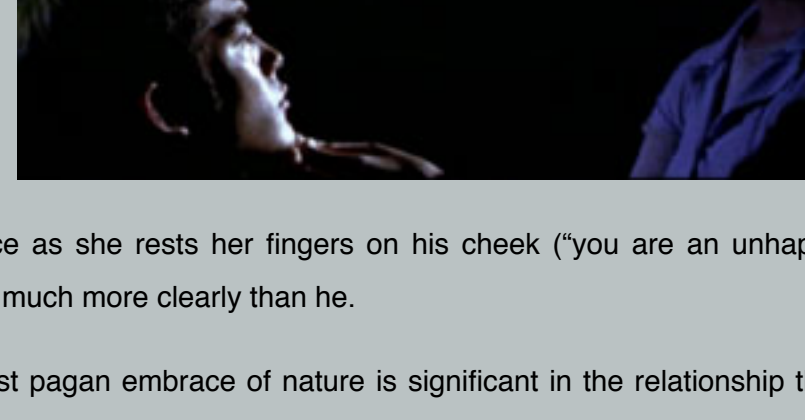
The first thing we notice as JM arrives at the house in Australia is that the crown of his head has been dyed an alarming shade of green. The colour, which acts as a visual reminder of the glowing tanks in the Tokyo apartment, also serves to preface the saturated palette employed in insulating the present from its ever-present past. Here the film stock has been pushed during processing to produce a high-contrast look that brings out the whites and blacks, while at the same time "corrupting" (Millard 5) the colours and giving them an almost metallic sheen. The door frame is stark white, but still functions in the vertical, severing the filmic space and isolating the characters on either side of the frame. As BG leads JM down the hall, we are distracted from her blindness by the visual magnificence of her hair which seems to glow from within, taking on religious proportions as its fiery red hue connects to the horrorshow of events in both the recent, and distant, past. But while her lack of sight is not made plain until the following scene, what becomes clear in retrospect is BG's sixth sense, her gift of intuition.



As fire operates within the narrative on a symbolic level, so the remaining three elements find their home in the film. Law infuses the diegetic scenes of the DS' with air – an idea made literal in the garage when it becomes blown up like a balloon – appropriating the techniques of traditional rear screen projection to create the sensation of flight. The majority of the driving sequences are studio-shot with a crane-mounted camera that captures the passengers in a medium two-shot, with the back window of the car centered in the frame and the bulk of the moving footage projected onto this window. Law makes no effort to conceal her methods, or disguise the surreal quality of the sequences, but rather enhances the effect through her use of expressionistic, rather than naturalistic imagery, that loops and repeats and is often smeared and blurred as though shot with a wide open aperture. The result is that the DS becomes a sort of "personalised vessel travelling in an alternate time-space continuum" (Vilella 2) that serves to suture the present to the past, both within the diegesis – and through the manipulation of classical cinematic mise-en-scène – and within the history of cinema itself. [5]

Visual representations of water are mostly absent in the film, though the first physical encounter between JM and BG is witnessed by a blue light that undulates through the curtain as though reflected off a shimmering lake. Law speaks of the concept of *hai-fen*, a Chinese expression that has no English translation, but which she describes as a "level of understanding" gained through atmosphere and tone, which takes you both inside the situation as well as the character (Millard, 6).

As we move toward the first touch, this idea of *hai-fen* find its expression, starting with a close-up of BG whose face is blue against the stark black background, grounding her to these worldly elements, and then panning across this dark expanse to find JM as he emerges into light. As BG reaches out her hand, the camera circles and she moves into its arc to settle beside him, the colours shifting across her face as she rests her fingers on his cheek ("you are an unhappy human being," she says). She is blind, but sees much more clearly than he.



That BG finds her spiritual strength in an almost pagan embrace of nature is significant in the relationship that she shares with her mother, Marie. In the second flashback, we cut abruptly to a wide shot of the desert horizon, where a red-hued dust storm rages in the distance. However it is not the beauty of nature that draws Marie into the frame, but the fury of God under whose eyes she will transform her shame into a sort of radical devolour. Hiding in the DS to escape from the storm, BG yearns to understand what is going on and rolls down the window to feel the wind against her face, embracing the storm's violent energy. Building to the sequence's fiery conclusion, these early scenes are coloured with reds, not the warm reds of the sun, but the deep reds of earth and fire, and in the embers of a cigarette, or the red of a shirt, they foreshadow Marie's tragic end.

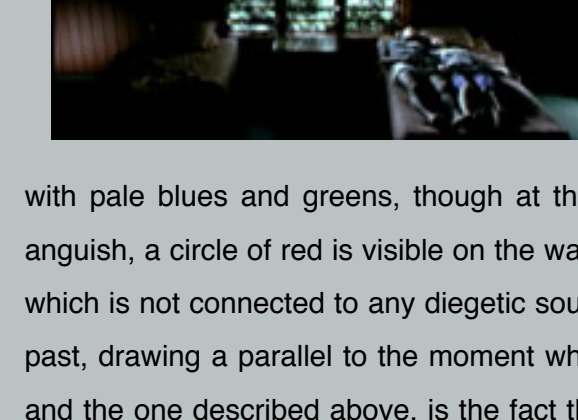
Throughout the film, the mise-en-scène continues to illustrate the divergent religious convictions of the three characters. Vertical lines maintain their role in marking the spiritual isolation of the characters, and as if to reinforce the imminent danger, Grandpa is restrained by two solid blocks which separate him from the two girls.

Moments later, his perverted appropriation of Romantic individualism is revealed by a disembodied shot of a violent purple sunset – that is seen as though from his mind's eye –, providing the backdrop which supports his acts. In the morning, Marie walks out into a gentle sunrise of pale pinks and purples, captured in a vast wide shot that signifies her small place in God's world, but she becomes enraged when her gaze falls upon BG who is clinging to a tree – the same tree that she returns to after her encounter with the boxer and that grounds her to the earth and offers her solace.

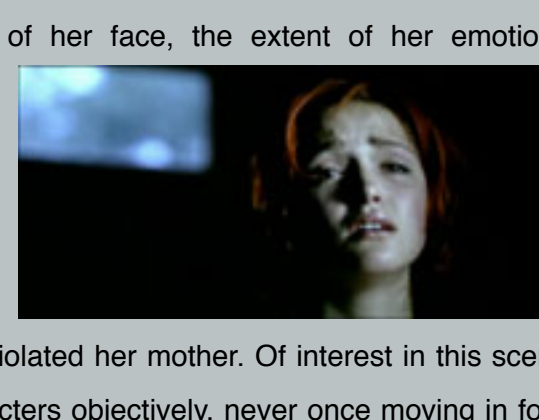


The Together of the Past

When for the second time BG and JM come together physically, there is an increased sense of balance and light in the mise-en-scène. In a room – that in its symmetry reflects a Japanese aesthetic – two beds are positioned on either side of a large window. A series of jump cuts moves us toward the touch, which in keeping with the formal design of opposites and parallels, comes this time from JM. From an overhead shot of their respective beds, we cut to them lying side by

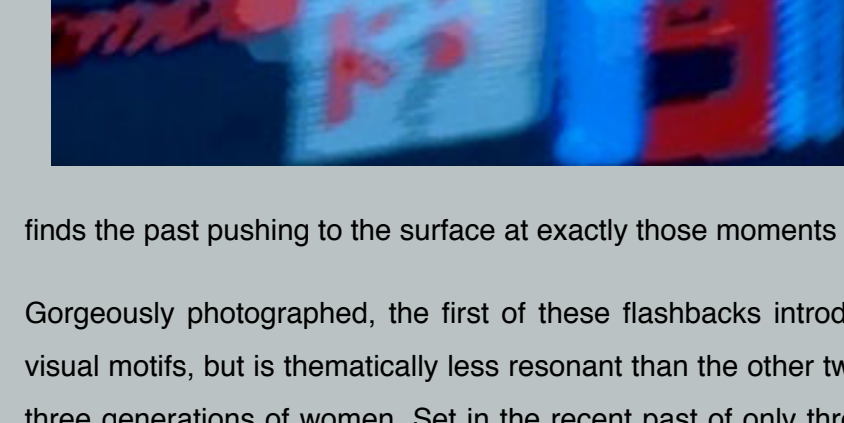


side, not touching and staring up at the ceiling. A third shot finds them naked and entwined, and a fourth finds BG sitting atop JM, where, in a close-up of her face, the extent of her emotional torment is revealed.



The scene is shaded with pale blues and greens, though at the instant of her greatest anguish, a circle of red is visible on the wall behind her. The colour, which is not connected to any diegetic source, finds its origin in the past, drawing a parallel to the moment when her grandfather first violated her mother. Of interest in this scene, and the one described above, is the fact that Law shoots her characters objectively, never once moving in for a subjective point of view. As JM begins to make love to BG, a series of extreme close-ups reveal his tenderness for the first time and provide a visual echo back to the original transfer of the keys, a cue which informs the present and suggests the beginning of the transference of JM's affection from the DS to BG.

In addition to BG's flashbacks, two cinematic detours to Tokyo are woven into the film. The second, more conventionally structured, is triggered by JM's sudden fear of abandonment and provides the back story to his trouble with the police and the possible reasons for his emotional shut-down. The first is a more expressionistic voyage, wrapped in a nostalgia that is better understood once we realize that JM can never go home. Opening on the face of a glass skyscraper, it calls to mind the opening of WONTON SOUP and AUTUMN MOON with its treatment of modern space, but then returns to the motion of the emblematic train, though here the image is broken down to its essence, the grains defined as though in a Pointillist painting.



From these dream-like images of modern day Tokyo, we make a radical shift to the harsh realities of the parallel past. What is sometimes problematic in these intrusions is that they are "random" and "work against the rhythms of the car journey" (3), but while Law may have chosen not to impose a narratological structure on their form, there is an emotional logic that finds the past juxtaposed at exactly those moments when BG is experiencing happiness.

Gordges photographed, the first of these flashbacks introduces a different colour palette, and several new visual motifs, but is thematically less resonant than the other two, which create meaningful parallels between the three generations of women. Set in the recent past of only three years earlier, BG has gathered the strength to leave home and is searching for a decent person to transport her to the city. Here, in the driving scenes, the rear projection is more realistic, with recognizable details like bushes and plants, underscoring the distinction between this more physical journey and its psychological double on the return home. The moments leading up to the attempted rape are shot with a long lens, which emphasizes her blindness by removing the external world and focusing our attention onto that which is immediately present – that which she can feel and touch and smell. As the sun drops behind the horizon and the blistering oranges fade to black, Law uses single source lighting to mimic nature, as though representing a full but exaggerated moon, so that the objects and people seem to glow from within and are lit up against the sky in brilliant pinks and greens.

The effect of this high-contrast design is similar to that which was used in David Lynch's *WILD AT HEART*, particularly in the car crash scene, which in its oneiric surrealism bears a striking resemblance to the portrayal of BG's escape from the drunken boxer. [6] When we come across BG again, she is curled into the fetal position around the trunk of that tree, protected by a pack of wild dingoes. What becomes clear in this image is BG's connection to the element of earth, nature and its creatures, with which she has an unspoken dialogue.

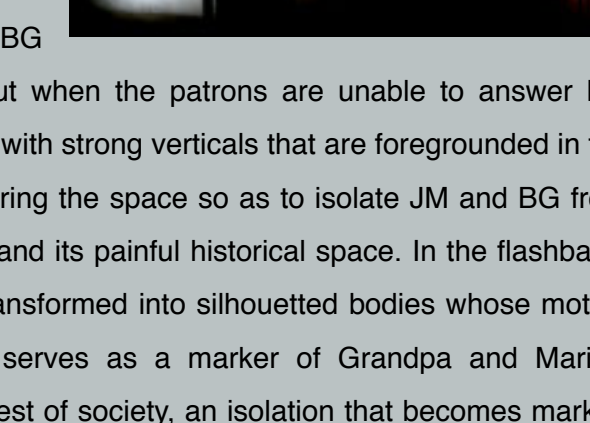
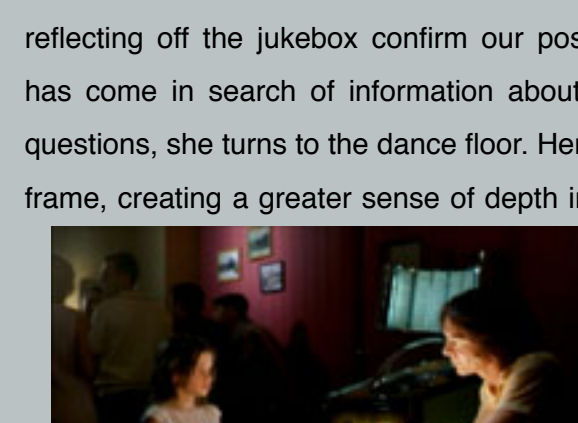
An extensive tracking shot through the dense underbrush is dirty with foregrounded twigs and bushes and echoes the mysterious river shots in Jim Jarmusch's *DOWN BY LAW*. Carrying us into the third flashback, the movement transports us into an environment that seems to brim with life until we arrive at the abandoned DS and discover that it is the location of a death. Here we are introduced to Grandpa as a kinder man who has been shattered by the death of his wife, and though Law never condones his abusive behaviour in the present, the balanced portrait offered in this sequence comes as something of a surprise, especially in light of Fiona Vilella's article in *Sense of Cinema* in which she states that, "the most unsatisfying part of Goddess is the... treatment of the Grandpa character... [which] is overly heavy-handed and one-dimensional" (4). But in the distant past, his character is more eccentric than evil, secluded in his barnyard laboratory trying to recreate the perfect *Châteauneuf-du-Pape* and not yet in possession of his vision for the future.



That this father is transformed into a Kurtz-like monster portrayed in the climactic scene owes more to the combination of isolation and grief than it does to any sort of malignant intent. In a scene that Law is trying to say about this character is difficult to discern. But an exacty what Law is as tender and as pure as the spectator can accept, knowing the transgressions that have since occurred, the camera cranes down slowly toward the pair as they rest in the grass staring up at the stars. Marie lies on top of her father, her head resting against his chest, in a shot that informs the emotions which later drive her to bring about her own death. After spending the evening star-gazing with BG, she realizes that she loves both her daughter and BG. The following morning, this new family unit makes a fresh start by painting their house with a virginal coat of white paint. That night, as he stands by her bed, he is bathed in that circle of red light that comes back to haunt BG thirty years later.

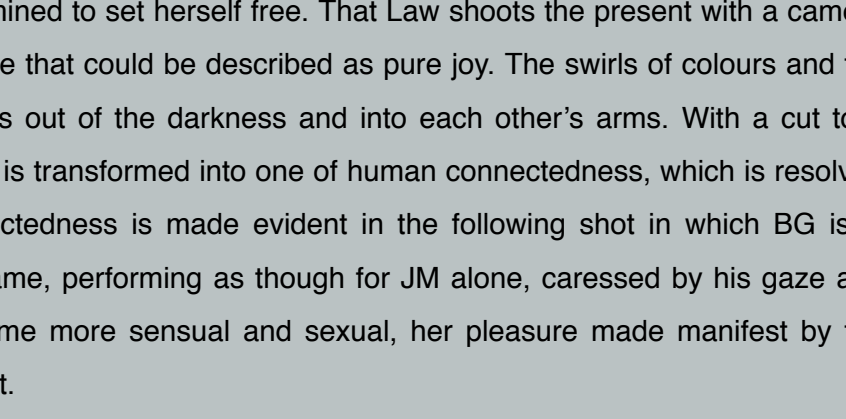
Early in the third sequence, Marie goes looking for her father at the hotel bar where her mother used to dance – the same bar that BG seeks out in an attempt to connect with her grandmother. The sequences are designed as parallels, yet the epiphanies of the present become deformed and debased by the past.

When BG and JM arrive at the "oldest hotel in the outback," the mise-en-scène is immediately instructive. A close-up of a red wall with black and white photographs connects us to the past, but as we pull back to a wide shot of the room, the metallic colours reflecting off the jukebox confirm our position in the present. BG has come in search of information about her grandmother, but when the patrons are unable to answer her questions, she turns to the dance floor. Here the room is divided with strong verticals that are foregrounded in the frame, creating a greater sense of depth in the room and fracturing the space so as to isolate JM and BG from the rest of the bar and its painful historical space. In the flashback, these pillars are transformed into silhouetted bodies whose motion across the frame serves as a marker of Grandpa and Marie's isolation from the rest of society, an isolation that becomes marked in the present by the emptiness of the frames and the hollow echo of BG's voice on the soundtrack. She calls out into a more human past, seeking information about that past to inform the present.



From an overhead shot of the dancing begins, as we look down on JM and BG with a wide-angle lens, and her raised hands come to brush against the frame, creating a dizzying effect which moves the spectator into her subjective experience. In an effort to teach her how to dance, JM puts his hands on BG's shoulders and moves her from side to side, the background behind them a shock of white, pink and blue. Grandpa repeats this same action in the flashback, which Law recalls with a matched framing, but his passion and pain overtake him as he grabs Marie and swings her violently into the air. [7]

What is clear in a comparison between the two time frames is that BG is her grandmother's daughter in spirit, [8] finding happiness where she can and determined to set herself free. That Law shoots the present with a camera that is often in motion creates an atmosphere that could be described as pure joy. The swirls of colours and the use of the spotlight draw the two characters out of the darkness and into each other's arms. With a cut to a close-up and a sudden kiss, the relationship is transformed into one of human connectedness, which is resolved in its later consummation. Here that connectedness is made evident in the following shot in which BG is lit against the black background in medium frame, performing as though for JM alone, caressed by his gaze and responding to it with movements that become more sensual and sexual, her pleasure made manifest by the collision of colour, music, movement and light.



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[1] As opposed to Quentin Tarantino's KILL BILL whose Tokyo landscape is dotted with a plethora of garish signs, which is a nod to the intrusion of America on Japanese culture and to the commodification of culture by technology.

[2] From Vilella's text, "Materialism and Spiritualism in THE GODDESS OF 1967."

[3] With the exception of Beethoven's fifth symphony, most of the recordings in this sequence was created specifically for the film, rather than sourced from pre-existing recordings. Information about the music was culled from the music cue sheet found at the website for Forlissimo Films on December 9, 2003. <http://www.forlissimofilms.nl/catalogue/titel%20filmID=82>.

[4] I am using this term as an alternate to nondiegetic to describe the unique manner in which the story of the Goddess breaks into the film's narrative, while at the same time running parallel to its themes.

[5] As evidenced by the insertion of a shot from Jean-Pierre Melville's *LE SAMOURAI*.

[6] The look of these scenes is also reminiscent of the photographer Gregory Crewdson, though in interviews Law makes no mention of his work.

[7] Though Law states explicitly that she dislikes American films, the character of Grandpa bears a striking resemblance to *TWIN PEAKS*' Leland Palmer, a father who crosses the line from paternal love, to violent incast.

Stacey DeWolfe is a writer, filmmaker and instructor registered in the MA program at Concordia University in Montreal. She is in the process of putting the finishing touches on the feature-length documentary *EVERYTHING'S COMING MY WAY: THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF GORDON THOMAS*, and is working toward the completion of her graduate thesis, "Masochism, Sound & Spectatorship in Three Films by Lars von Trier" for the spring of 2006. Stacey has also written for the independent film journal, *Moving Picture Views*, and is currently writing reviews for Toronto-based *C-Magazine*.

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