

Last Night I Dreamt I Went to *Sleep No More*

Again: Intertextuality and Indeterminacy

at Punchdrunk's McKittrick Hotel

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Abstract

This essay examines *Sleep No More*'s citationality to consider which of its many intertextual references are mere Macguffins and which, by contrast, open up substantive interpretive potential. The essay focuses on the production's appropriation of Hitchcock and of early modern Scottish witch trials, concluding that its most suggestive citation is of *Vertigo*'s McKittrick Hotel, a site which, like the McKittrick frame-fiction of *Sleep No More*, decidedly frustrates hermeneutic closure.

The opening line of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again," posits a ruined English estate as encoded dream content. The line is spoken in voiceover by the unnamed protagonist of the film, the second wife of Maxim de Winter. From guileless young ingénue, Mrs. de Winter develops across the film's narrative first into knowledge, then selfish satisfaction, and finally complicity as she becomes an accessory-after-the-fact in her husband's disposal of his first wife, the eponymous Rebecca. When she returns in her dream to the burnt-out shell of the estate, it is a feral Manderley that has been reforested by wild surrounds, its former civilized beauty and "perfect symmetry" flickering elusively through the thick of nature's "long tenacious fingers," which have "encroached upon the drive" that leads to the house. At once dreamer and analyst, the speaker enters the past by moving beyond the boundary of consciousness to transgress the iron gates of the estate and follow the once-distinct, but now "poor thread" that winds back to the great house: "Like all dreamers," she says, "I was possessed of a sudden with supernatural powers and passed like a spirit through the barrier before me" (Hitchcock 1940). As the flashback narrative of the film unfolds, we come to understand the Manderley of her dream as the architectural expression of lost innocence entangled in a thorny overgrowth of homicidal violence, erotic transgression, and guilt.

Sleep No More likewise takes Manderley for its starting point. From the check-in counter and coatroom, guests of the McKittrick Hotel follow a winding, nearly pitch-dark hallway to the Manderley Bar, where they're greeted by a maître d' whose mannered welcome announces their entrance into the alternative world of the production. The hallway itself proves a crucial transition, like a fall into the fog of sleep or down the rabbit hole. It forces a new way of seeing that will be imperative for the experience to come, dilating the pupils to enable visitors to penetrate the dark and peer into the dimly-lit corners, cubbies, cabinets, and curiosities of the circuitous McKittrick. Unlike *Rebecca*, however, *Sleep No More* does not unfold a linear narrative that discloses the latent content of its Manderley dream. It gestures toward narratives, but its immersive, individualized, largely nonlinear, entirely nonverbal, and disorientingly labyrinthine qualities reproduce the dreamscape itself rather than delivering its coherent analysis. The blackened hallway takes us not into the story of *Rebecca*, but into something more like the unreal abstraction of John Ballantyne's dream in *Spellbound* — that is, the dream before Dr. Petersen's rudimentary psychoanalysis strips it of its wonderful Daliesque obscurity and renders it a conventional, neatly solved murder mystery.

On the first of my two experiences of *Sleep No More*, I knew nothing about *Rebecca* but had a casual viewer's familiarity with many of Hitchcock's later films. I felt confident that this and my knowledge of *Macbeth* would furnish me with what I needed ably to interpret *Sleep No More*. Despite the reductive silliness of Dr. Petersen's dream analysis, I was determined to have *Sleep No More* on the couch in an analytic search for latent content, and I approached the McKittrick's many rooms and artifacts with a meticulous reader's eye. At one point, the performer whom I later understood to be the second Mrs. de Winter took my hand, led me into a lady's prim boudoir, placed a locket around my neck, and said, "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again." She took off my standard-issue mask and kissed me on the cheek, then shoved me through a wardrobe into a red-lit hallway that led me back into the regular flow of the production. My unexpected and, I later learned, somewhat rare "one-on-one" had ended almost as soon as it had begun, and my ignorance of *Rebecca* left me unable to make meaning of it.

Like a guilty thing, I assumed that my hermeneutic failure was the result of shoddy preparation and determined to do my homework for the second visit. I saw *Rebecca* and *Vertigo* (the source of the McKittrick Hotel and of much of *Sleep No More*'s music), as well as eight other Hitchcock films. Despite *Sleep No More*'s explicit citation of *Rebecca* and *Vertigo*, neither film provided the interpretive key that made meaning of my step through the wardrobe or of the production's other content: its noir mashup of characters from Hitchcock and *Macbeth*; its shopfronts for taxidermist, tailor, confectioner, undertaker, and private eye; its sanitorium, cemetery, witches'

den, and speakeasy. Neither film offers parallels to *Macbeth* in plot or character, nor much in the way of imagery that might create clear intertextual meaning. In most respects, *Rebecca* and *Vertigo* seem to be red herrings, or more aptly, Macguffins, Hitchcock's term for seemingly crucial plot devices that turn out to have no real significance.

If *Sleep No More* has a Hitchcockian unconscious, it is *Psycho* that coincidentally shares a number of topoi with *Macbeth*. Here are just a few points at which *Sleep No More*, *Macbeth*, and *Psycho* converge:

- When he's not disposing of dead women or changing motel sheets, Norman Bates practices taxidermy, preferring birds to other animals. "Only birds look well stuffed," he explains, "because they're rather passive to begin with, most of them." Ironically, the most memorable image from this scene (the conversation in his parlor with the ill-fated Marion Crane) is a low-angle shot looking up at a menacing Norman, a stuffed owl posed over his shoulder with wings spread as though swooping down to snatch its prey. In addition to its taxidermy shop, *Sleep No More* features dozens of stuffed birds, a dominant motif of the production. A page in the program includes three photographs of these birds with a caption from bird-rich *Macbeth*: "all my pretty chickens and their dam / At one fell swoop" (*Macbeth*, 4.3.218-19; Shakespeare 1997). Macduff's metaphor for the murder of his family invokes both the passive birds Norman describes and the fell, swooping chicken-hawk he has repressed.
- Although Marion is murdered in *Psycho*'s famous "shower scene," her dead body ends up slumped over the side of the bathtub, which Norman Bates later swabs with a mop as we watch her watery blood swirl down the drain. Like birds, bathtubs feature prominently in *Sleep No More*, some empty and others full of bloodied water. At least two of these "incarnadine" bathtubs function as sites of failed ablution from the *Macbeth* murders, ablution that is fulfilled — at least visually — in *Psycho*. In a shot over his shoulder looking down into the bathroom sink, Norman washes his hands of Marion's blood with an efficacy that Lady Macbeth and her *Sleep No More* *doppelgangers* would envy.
- One of the largest, most fully realized spaces in *Sleep No More* is the King James Sanatorium (to whose name I will return later), the mental hospital in which many of the bathtubs appear. In addition to its bathing room, the sanatorium includes a reception office, dental/torture/interrogation room, infirmary, laundry, sleeping quarters, and padded cell with straightjacket. (Macbeth's wet pajamas, washed in a bathtub by a sanatorium orderly, were hung up like a dark, headless scarecrow among the white sheets of the laundry, and at one point during my first visit a nude Lady Macbeth sat scrubbing

herself feverishly in another tub of the asylum.) The specter of the madhouse lingers over *Psycho*. Marion Crane's suggestion that Norman might fare better if he put his mother "someplace" provokes an angered and revealing response: "An institution? A madhouse? People always refer to a madhouse as 'someplace' [. . .] Have you ever seen one of those places? Inside? Laughing and tears and cruel eyes studying you." Norman's response suggests that he has been cruelly studied in just such a place, and it is to just such a place that he seems destined at the end of the film — or in which he already images himself as he intones in the voice of his now-dominant mother, "They're probably watching me."

· The plot of *Psycho* is driven by Norman's guilt. He is not merely trying to keep his mother alive; he is trying to keep her alive because he feels guilty about having murdered her. However, Norman does not experience on a conscious level either this guilt or the guilt for his subsequent murders of troublingly desirable women. As the psychiatrist explains at the end of the film, Norman projects his guilt onto the figure of his mother, who has become a component of himself. In his essay on *Macbeth*, Freud argues that Lady Macbeth is best understood as a component of Macbeth, the component who bears the signs of guilt that he, despite his qualms after murdering Duncan, does not in fact experience. Both *Psycho* and Freud's reading of *Macbeth* imagine the murderer's guilt expressing itself through the refraction of personality into individually named and seemingly autonomous people (although there are important ways in which the two are not analogous: one murder is a matricide, the other a symbolic parricide; one split in character is a psychotic break and the other a playwright's representational idiom). As the madhouse and bathtubs suggest, *Sleep No More* is similarly interested in the psychology of guilt, representing at simultaneous moments in the performance multiple Macbeths and Lady Macbeths who encounter one another in the surreal banquet scene that is the culmination of the production's "plot."

· The splitting of personality in both *Psycho* and *Macbeth* (at least by Freud's reading) divides the guilty party into both genders, and each text explores the relationship between gender and homicidal violence. In his layered expressions of guilt and jealousy, Norman Bates imagines that his dead mother is as jealous of him as he is of her, and it is the fantasy of her jealousy that drives him (as her) to kill Marion Crane. Homicide is a feminine domain; in contrast to his murderous mother, Norman is the dutiful son and mild-mannered, domesticated swabber and sheet changer, though this gendered division of labors is ultimately collapsed by Norman's sole responsibility. More ambiguously, *Macbeth* locates prophetic power in the bearded-lady witches, locates political and

dynastic violence in brutal masculine warfare, and locates the instigation for regicide in an unsexed, maternal, and barren Lady Macbeth. *Sleep No More* picks up these gender questions through one of its most seductive figures, a bare-breasted actress/dancer with a shaved head and androgynous features who seems at times to represent Hecate, Lady Macbeth, both, or possibly someone else altogether, depending on what snippets of her performance cycle the viewer happens to catch.

I could go on.

What does such an explication of intertextual echoes yield? Not very much, it turns out, particularly since much of what I've mapped here is merely the common representational vocabulary for a psychoanalytic understanding of guilt, gender, identity, and desire — an understanding anticipated by *Macbeth*, articulated by Freud, literalized by *Psycho*, and deployed by *Sleep No More*. While it may offer more precise analogues than *Rebecca* or *Vertigo*, for the project of interpreting or describing what happens in *Sleep No More*, *Psycho* is for the most part another Macguffin.

But wait; there's more. *Sleep No More* now offers a \$20 souvenir program for purchase as one exits the McKittrick Hotel. Surely this will explain everything, I thought. And indeed, the program does suggest interpretive frames for *Sleep No More* that are not available to the more frugally minded visitor. Among its standard cast photos and interviews with the production team, the program reprints the Confession of Agnes Sampson (the "Wise Wife of Keith") from the 1591 *Newes from Scotland*. The Confession describes the demonically led efforts of a coven of Scottish witches to obstruct King James's marriage to Anne of Denmark by creating a tempest at sea (Souvenir Program 2011). Perhaps inspired by Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World* chapter on *Macbeth*, the program suggests a subtext for *Sleep No More* by invoking historical events roughly contemporary with the composition of *Macbeth*: the attempted obstruction by demonic women of Scottish regal power, the personal oversight of the North Berwick witch trials by King James, and the publication of the King's 1597 tract on witchcraft, *Daemonologie*. Unlike Greenblatt's book, however, the *Sleep No More* program makes no claims about what Shakespeare saw, knew, thought, or felt about these events as he wrote *Macbeth*. In fact, it makes no claims at all about the relationship of the North Berwick witch trials to the play, merely reprinting the Confession with two brief, explanatory footnotes about King James's interests in the trial. The only observable trace of this material in the production itself is the name of its fictitious King James Sanitorium.

By contrast, the program's Relationship Diagram, a sketchy sort of character map, claims explicit connections between *Sleep No More* and Scottish witches. But it is the Paisley witch trials

of 1697, not the North Berwick trials of 1591, that the Relationship Diagram invokes. Ending in the condemnation and death of seven men and women, the Paisley witch trials were set off by the complaint of eleven-year-old Christian Shaw, who accused several townspeople of harassing her through witchcraft. She appears in *Sleep No More* as an adult, Nurse Christian Shaw of the King James Sanitorium, "former prior [*sic*] patient now running the sanitorium." Gallow Green, the spot in Paisley where six of the convicted seven were hanged and burned (the seventh committed suicide in prison), is represented in *Sleep No More* as a street in Glamis comprising the shopfronts mentioned above. The final page of the program features ads for these shops: M. Fulton Tailors is at 16 Gallow Green, Glamis; Bargarran Taxidermy is 15 Gallow Green, and so on. The program's Relationship Diagram tells us that Mr. Fulton, the tailor, is a "cunning man," his name suggesting kinship to Margaret Fulton, one of the accused witches. The taxidermist, Bargarran, also points to a figure in the Paisley trials, the father of the young Christian Shaw. Two of the Paisley witches are themselves characters in *Sleep No More*: Catherine Campbell is "housekeeper at the McKittrick Hotel," and Agnes Naismith "has come to Gallow Green to look for her sister," a wink perhaps at Marion Crane's sister in *Psycho*, who crucially shows up in the vicinity of the Bates Motel attempting to trace Marion's whereabouts (Souvenir Program 2011).

While the Scottish witch lore referenced in the Relationship Diagram would seem to suggest an affinity with elements of *Macbeth*, the production itself links the Paisley witches to Hitchcock. Without purchasing the program, visitors would infer from their appearances and actions that the characters named as Catherine Campbell and Agnes Naismith are *Rebecca*'s second Mrs. de Winter and the creepy Manderley housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers. I found only one hint of the Paisley witches within the production itself (though admittedly there may be many others). On a desk in what appeared to be Duncan's study was an opened letter from Lady Macbeth thanking him for a necklace he had given her as a hostess gift. The envelope was addressed to Duncan Mac Crínaín, The McKittrick Hotel, Gallow Green, Glamis.

This address constellates Hitchcock, *Macbeth*, and the Paisley witches more explicitly than anything else I encountered apart from the program, which I think must be bracketed as a footnote to the production rather than an element of it. While not only *Rebecca* and *Psycho* but the Paisley witches, the North Berwick witches, and even *Macbeth* itself prove to be red herrings, I wish to suggest that the McKittrick is no Macguffin. Unlike its other citations of people, places, and narratives, *Sleep No More*'s invocation of the McKittrick Hotel articulates something fundamental about what it means to experience this production.

The McKittrick appears in only one scene of *Vertigo*. After following her to the florist, graveyard, and art museum, John Ferguson tails Madeleine to a grand Victorian mansion-turned-

hotel. He watches her get out of her car and enter the front door, then sees her a few seconds later looking out from a second-story window. Ferguson then proceeds into the hotel, stopping briefly at the front desk to question the proprietress about the occupant of the room above. She tells him that the room is rented under the name Carlotta Valdes (the woman with whose spirit Madeleine seems to be possessed) but that Carlotta has not been to the hotel in several days. When Ferguson demands to inspect the room from which he has just seen Madeleine looking out, he finds it empty. He looks down to the street from the window in which she had appeared and sees that her car is gone. Was Madeleine/Carlotta really there? Where has she disappeared to, and how? In a film that ultimately explains its supernatural-seeming events through the murder scheme, Ferguson's mysterious visit to the McKittrick resists resolution, leaving an opening for the occult in the film's tidy plot — a haunted house in the middle of an otherwise rationalist San Francisco.

John Ferguson later learns from a keeper of local legend that the McKittrick building was once the home of a tragic figure, the jilted Carlotta Valdes, who went mad with heartbreak and committed suicide. While this origin story of the McKittrick seems at first to be a crucial element of the plot, the story gradually reveals itself to be a Macguffin. What is important to *Vertigo* about the McKittrick Hotel is not its function in the film's narrative or its connection to the narrative of Carlotta but its resistance altogether to narrative — its irreconcilability to the machinery of the film's logical plot.

Sleep No More's McKittrick Hotel is as mysterious as its namesake, leaving its visitors not with an understanding but a haunting. The Hotel is thus more than simply another Hitchcock allusion or a tantalizing invitation to intertextual analysis. It is the place where analysis becomes frustrated, where image and event refuse to constitute plot or allusion. It is where *Vertigo* resists the neatness of *Spellbound* and instead opens into the terrifying opacity of *The Birds*. *Sleep No More's* setting in the McKittrick is an invitation to enter not into specific stories, characters, moods, or even psychological states but into an epistemological mode — a way of seeing more than we expect but less than all that's there.

References

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