The Films of Jess Franco

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She Kills in Ecstasy and Drives at Dangerously High Speeds
The Death Cult Stardom of Soledad Miranda

Xavier Mendik

> And so began the "dead star" phenomenon, a complex series of events and circumstances that is crystallized in certain images and in certain films, many of which have subsequently attracted a cult audience. . . . In certain exemplary "cursed" movies . . . images and dialogue both reflect and illuminate all the issues surrounding the death of the human body.
>
> —Mikita Brottman
>
> The story comes to an end with dismaying abruptness: Mrs. Johnson steers her car into the sea, her dead husband strapped in at her side. The scene may be crude but it has terrible tragic resonance, prefiguring as it does the fate that would soon befall the film's intensely talented young star. . . .
>
> —Stephen Thrower

Following her violent death in 1970, the actress Soledad Miranda posthumously established herself as a leading "dark star" of European exploitation cinema. Although she appeared in a variety of popular Spanish coproductions, from musicals and melodramas to muscleman movies, she is now best remembered for titles such as *Eugenie* (*Eugenie de Sade*, 1974), *Les Cauchemars naissent la nuit* (*Nightmares Come at Night*, 1970), *Sie Tötete in Ekstase* (*She Killed in Ecstasy*, 1971) and *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971). These paired her talents with the surreal creations of the maverick Spanish horror director Jesús "Jess" Franco, whose wider output remains the key subject of this volume. In their collaborations, Miranda was cast as either an undead, dying, or death-driven heroine who recounts past transgressions involving sex, violence, and incest-bound retribution.

For a woman whose most significant on-screen career was devoted to these macabre acts and frenzied performances, perhaps such a dramatic and violent demise—met speeding along a Lisbon highway—seems inevitable. Miranda's real-life death on 18 August 1970 as a result of a car crash was made even more unnerving by virtue of the fact that it was cruelly prefigured by the ending of one of her final films for Franco: *She Killed in Ecstasy*. This narrative, in which she is cast as the vengeful Mrs. Johnson, closes on the image of the actress fatally driving the corpse of her dead husband over a cliff. The scene carries unsettling echoes of Soledad Miranda's own death, especially as she was accompanied in this tragic last journey by her own husband (who was, in fact, a race car driver). In this respect, the repetition of real-life and fictional fatality surrounding Soledad Miranda relegates her to that

class of personality whose macabre performances would appear to prefigure an actual and untimely end. To this extent, she resigns in the category of "cursed" cult film icon comparable with the phenomenon of dead stars identified by Mikita Brottman's opening citation. Here, the actress's ill-fated performativity, gestures, and attributes confirm a near mythical belief that some stars operate at the axes of "cinema, psychosis, celebrity and death" (Brottman 105), which allows inflections of their impending doom to be retroactively deduced from their final performances.

Writing in the study "Star Cults/Cult Stars: Cinema, Psychosis, Celebrity, Death," Brottman offers a convincing consideration of the cultural and psychic traumas of those American stars whose very public deaths provoke not only mourning in their followers but also the endless quest to uncover "clues" to a future fate within their most celebrated final fictions. For instance, in her case study of Nicholas Ray's *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), Brottman maps the near identical demises of not only James Dean but also other leading cast members whose deaths mirror key scenes of threat and potential annihilation within the narrative. By guaranteeing the burnout of its key players, *Rebel without a Cause* remains "Unique in the annals of Hollywood's 'cursed movies'" (112). The search for impending tragedy becomes even more pronounced for fatal stars such as Marilyn Monroe, whose final feature, *The Misfits* (John Huston, 1960), can be read as a morbid precursor of her own impending death: "Today's cult of Marilyn Monroe sees her as full of tragic consciousness, a quality so at odds with her movie roles that, to the modern viewer, the contradictions threaten almost to fragment the image altogether" (106). Arguably, it is a similar death cult that surrounds the legendary reputation of Soledad Miranda, to the extent that her final performances replicate what Brottman would term as an example of the "celebrity death rattle" (109). It has ensured that she is best remembered not for her beauty (namely as a former model during the mid-1960s) or her creative abilities (appearing in over thirty films in various genres between 1960 and 1970),[1] or even her musical abilities (as evidenced by the recording of two Spanish pop albums completed in a parallel career as a singer),[2] but rather for associations with death and violence that tragically transcended her performances for Jess Franco to doom even the star herself. In so doing, the blurring between Soledad Miranda's death-ridden characters and her own real-life demise provides a crucial insight into the key role that this cult film performer had in the creation of Franco's cinema of sexuality, excess, and annihilation. This chapter will therefore explore the evolution of the death cult stardom

within Soledad Miranda's performances for Jess Franco, as well as considering her legacy for the legions of fans who remain fascinated by her menacing and yet enduring image.

They Filmed in Ecstasy: Soledad Miranda and Jess Franco

What needs to be stated from the outset is that Soledad Miranda's chilling and potentially "cursed" screen presence was entirely constructed via her work with Jess Franco, a factor that warrants further investigation. Indeed, it could be argued that even the director's formative releases provided a transgressive template that would later be perfected through his collaborations with the actress. Writing in her 2004 study of "Gender and Spanish Horror Film," Tatjana Pavlović has argued that the director consistently challenged the boundaries of "legitimate" Spanish cinema via moments of outrageous generic excess, which frequently gave rise to atypical representations of female sexuality of the kind he exploited with Miranda. In particular, his frequent conflation of erotic and horrific imagery created a series of iconic and deadly heroines who convey their sexual power by wreaking havoc on the ineffectual men that populate these often challenging texts.

Pavlović's study seeks to explore how the director's gender representations added to his marginalization from official discourses of Spanish film culture, while simultaneously unpacking how this unwieldly body of work subverted the ideological constraints of General Francisco Franco's Fascist regime.[3]

As she notes:

> Jesús Franco's interest in horror, in pornography, in the pulp imagery of superspies and musclemen, can be seen as an effort to represent all that the Fascist government had officially repressed Jesús Franco's films enact a return of Fascism's repressed, the playing out of the delirium from which that political order drew its energy, but had to disavow in the name of normality, Catholic morality, and political and familial order. (146)

If Franco's work utilizes images of female sexuality as a key element of this repressed ideological struggle, then it seems relevant that these tensions were present in his first feature film *Tenemos 18 años* (1961). The film proved transgressive at the time of its release for promoting tropes of female bonding outside of the domestic sphere, while its cross-genre fusion of road movie and paternal horror traumas also disoriented contemporary reviewers.

As the *ABC* newspaper review commented at the time of its release: "what could have been a gentle but distracted film becomes confused, losing all naturalness and grace in the process" (qtd. in Thrower: 51). The film details the plight of two girls who leave the security of the family home for a trip that culminates in a monstrous encounter with the dark "father figure" of Lord Marian. For Pavlović, this confrontation conflates the psychosexual with the socially horrific, fusing "elements of the thriller and horror films," with a "focus on incestuous fears and desires" (138). The film's more unsettling elements also convey a set of historical inferences to Spain, where a "focus on paternal authority could also be read as an implicit reference to Francisco Franco, the dictator" (138).

While Pavlović identifies this early cross-genre production as a template for later Franco works, *Tenemos 18 años* also initiated the important theme of perverse paternal intent breeding female transgression that he would explore in a more explicit manner with Soledad Miranda in titles such as *Eugenie de Sade*. Here, the focus is on an interregional rail and plane expedition that facilitates a sexually charged killing spree by the perverse stepfather Albert de Franval (Paul Muller) and his brooding female offspring Eugenie (Miranda). In addition, another early template for future controversial pairings that the director would perfect with Soledad Miranda can be found in Pavlović's analysis of *Miss Muerte* (*The Diabolical Dr. Z*, 1966). This film uses a motif of female doubling in a story that revolves around a vengeful daughter enacting revenge on the medical board who spurned the scientific advances of her late father, Dr. Zimmer. Using the process of "mind manipulation" perfected by the late patriarch, Zimmer's daughter seizes psychic control of an alluring cabaret performer, Miss Muerte, whose seductive appearance is used to lure the surgeon's former oppressors to their doom. In her analysis of the film, Pavlović notes the preponderance of castrative imagery that permeates proceedings, with the performer's key destructive powers deriving from her poisoned fingernails, which she uses to blind, gash, and tear at her intended male victims. Confirming the vengeful power of the film's dark heroine, the author notes:

> *Miss Muerte* explores female sexuality as monstrous . . . and illuminates anxieties about uncontrollable female power. The beautiful, sexually active woman is not the victim—she is the killer. At the same time we see Nadia's victims, professional men, coded as powerful and masterful, screaming, fleeing and dying. ("Gender" 139)

Both in its focus on male wounding, as well as its theme of a vengeful female taking revenge on medical authorities responsible for the death/humiliation of a loved one, *The Diabolical Dr. Z* draws a parity with later Franco/Miranda collaborations such as *She Killed in Ecstasy*. This casts the actress as Mrs. Johnson, a vengeful bride who orchestrates a campaign of seduction, entrapment, and castration against the male-dominated medical board that wrecked her husband's career and provoked his suicide. As part of her murderous quest, Mrs. Johnson makes elaborate use of costumes and disguise to conceal her identity, thus replicating the notion of the doubled or split woman that Pavlović identifies in her analysis of *The Diabolical Dr. Z*. Beyond these similarities, both *The Diabolical Dr. Z* and the later production of *She Killed in Ecstasy* also highlight another feature that would be foregrounded in Franco's work with Soledad Miranda, namely the traumatic reduction of male power embodied by a radical loss of visual control. In the case of *The Diabolical Dr. Z*, "the focus shifts from the scientific, voyeuristic gaze of all three men (victims) to their threatened, frightened eyes" (Pavlović 139). This alteration between female sexual dominance and faltering male vision became even more marked in Franco/Miranda pairings such as *Eugenie de Sade*, *She Killed in Ecstasy*, and *Vampyros Lesbos*, which repeatedly used objects, obtuse angles, and even the actress's own hands thrust violently into the camera lens to connect the idea of sexually charged looking with impending punishment.

As well as sharing central elements expressed in his foundational film work, Soledad Miranda's work with Jess Franco also fits within more general trends that critics and theorists of the director have identified within his output between the 1960s and the 1970s. For instance, in her earlier *Despotic Bodies and Transgressive Bodies* study published in 2003, Pavlović situates these subversive representations of gender and sexuality against three specific phases of Franco's career: the "Pop Art Body" as well as the "Horrific Body" and "Pornographic Body" stages. The author defines the first period of the director's work through the concept of the "Pop Art Body," which broadly correlates to his early to mid-1960s output. Here, narratives center on a range of superhero, detective fiction, and topical spy creations, which reveal the director's fascination with pulp novels and European cult comics. Corporeality in these pop art creations is marked via a process of "hyper-masculine subversion," which denigrates dominant codes of nationally defined virility (via repeated connection of the masculine to the comedic), while also casting female performers in more potent roles as investigators and detectives (Pavlović, *Despotic Bodies* 111). This emphasis

on strident female agency thriving outside of traditional familial and social bonds continues in the later "Horror" and "Pornographic Body" narratives that Pavlović analyzes. Here, Franco's output responded to loosening censorship constraints across Europe via a series of terror/titillation hybrids that include the iconic fictions he completed with Soledad Miranda.

For Pavlović, Franco's early to midcareer phase remains his most radical, with the pop art/horror stages containing "his most interesting and innovative features such as blending horror and eroticism" ("Gender" 140). Her conclusion that his later productions "rapidly dissipat[ed] into soft porn and, eventually, into hard-core pornography" seems complicated by the period in which the director worked with Soledad Miranda (140). Firstly, this position is in many ways complicated by the extensive and ultimately unique manner in which Franco worked, with projects frequently initiated only to be deferred or diverted into alternative versions that were often released several years after their inception. Via this complex system of cinema creation, divisions between generic, thematic, or even "good" vs. "bad" Franco periods is rendered problematic. As Stephen Thrower has argued, "Franco's work is best seen as a borderless continuum rippling with recurring themes, individual films less important than the wider trends and currents passing through" (15). While Franco's exhaustive back catalog does render traditional filmic distinctions difficult, Pavlović's distinction between "body" phases seems a more appropriate mechanism for his interpretation. However, as Thrower contends, all modes of physiology in Franco revert to the erotic, with: "films re-edited, and redubbed, recast and reshuffled, more sex, no sex, hardcore sex .....Franco's chief hallmark is sex, often perverse or sadistic, but his films are only occasionally 'porno films' per se" (15). As a result, the collaborations between Franco and Miranda not only conflate the "Pop," "Horror," and "Pornographic" stages outlined by Pavlović but the resultant productions also contain a series of features that added further complexity to the director's oeuvre. In particular, I would highlight three distinct tropes that provide further insight into the collaborations between the director and the female performer. These three features revolve around Soledad's associations with death and her manipulation of male-ordered systems of vision, as well as the frequent strategies of doubling that accompany her image.

Soledad Miranda: The Female Performer as a Symbol of Death

While earlier titles such as *Tenemos 18 años* and *The Diabolical Dr. Z* highlight Jess Franco's interest in the rebellious and potentially destructive female spirit, his later work with Soledad Miranda creates a more distinct and perverse embodiment for these tropes. This was achieved by conflating the performer's allure with an overwhelming sense of impending doom and tragedy, which subsequently cemented the "death cult" status that surrounded her demise. She is a "pinup" performer who exudes a very peculiar sex appeal that appears to unravel as soon as she disrobes. Despite slinky titles such as *Vampyros Lesbos* and *Sex Charade* (1972), Miranda's erotic scenes for Jess Franco remain curiously alienating, as if her gestures of desire are being delivered with the passion of a woman who has just expired. Her corpse-like bouts of copulation have been described by Cathal Tohill and Pete Tombs as "lobster-like . . . where one body lies limply on another" (102).

Even in her supporting roles for the director, Miranda's connection to the living world is repeatedly rendered ambivalent. For instance, in *Count Dracula* (1970), she is cast as Lucy, one of the count's female victims. Importantly, as soon as Miranda is introduced into the narrative (in a scene where she and Mina visit the deranged Jonathan Harker at Van Helsing's clinic), she falls into a state of deathlike paralysis from which her living body cannot recover. Paradoxically, it is only when the character joins the ranks of the undead that she truly appears animated. Equally, the reassembled "lost" Franco film *Nightmares Come at Night* features the actress on-screen for less than ten minutes, yet continues the tradition of equating her performative style with macabre arousal. In a narrative that focuses on the delusions of a murderous lesbian strip club performer, Soledad Miranda's cameo here functions as a comparative index to her wider performances for the director: she strips, she gazes (aggressively into the camera), and then she dies.

As a result of these paradoxical constructions, the director's camera frequently renders Soledad Miranda's physical form as an unstable entity with the potential to terrify as well as to entice the male victims who become her favored prey. For instance, in *She Killed in Ecstasy,* Miranda is represented as the ultimate threat to phallic potency, playing the vengeful wife who castrates male surgeons at the point of orgasm. The resultant fusion of soft-core iconography with scenes of penile mutilation ensured that *She Killed in Ecstasy* was defined by Tohill and Tombs as "too serious to be entertaining.....Like a lot of Franco's work it's morbidly obsessed with oblivion, a fixation that's out of place in a lusty sex film" (102).

Rather than being an isolated exception, this overlap between erotic and horrific imagery became the dominant motif that circulated around Soledad Miranda's work for the director. If these repeated structures indicate the extent to which female sexuality is viewed as a symbol of death by the logic of these narratives, then its effect is further marked in releases such as *Eugenie de Sade.* The film follows the incestuous adventures of the perverse patriarch Albert de Franval, with Miranda cast as Eugenie, the teenage girl in his charge. The film details how the couple adapts de Sade's work to commit a series of sexualized killings across Europe. Although Eugenie is initially coded as the passive partner in the proceedings, her concealed aggressive nature increasingly comes to the fore during the course of the couple's killing spree. In one memorable scene, the pair travels to Paris in order to commit a sex crime, which culminates in them murdering an erotic cabaret performer. Here, Albert initially appears to orchestrate proceedings, dictating how Eugenie should sensuously interact with the model while he begins to photograph the coupling. However, when he instructs his female accomplice to dispatch their unwitting guest, Eugenie's nihilistic intensions suddenly emerge. She proceeds to strangle the performer with a pair of oversized tongs before emitting a piercing shrill of sexual pleasure, which evokes extremes of suffering and arousal embodied in the wider performative style she developed for the director.

What such unsettling scenes point to is that despite her pinup looks and modeling past, Soledad Miranda carried a very different set of connotations than other Euro-glamour icons of the late 1960s and the 1970s. Frequently, cult icons such as the Italian starlet Edwige Fenech or even Franco's long-term collaborator Lina Romay managed to infuse an air of fun-filled naughtiness into the most gruesome of their horror/exploitation films, often through the manipulation of comic performance styles or elaborate forms of costume. However, when such fanciful and excessive forms of display and decoration were used by Miranda, they failed to detract from the morbid narratives in which she factored. For instance, the opening flashback sequence of *She Killed in Ecstasy* features the actress kitted out in (near futuristic) metallic underwear—complete with cone-shaped breastplates that accentuate the appeal of her near nakedness. In other contexts, this kitsch costuming would provide a point of camp, carnal invitation. However, the fact that the outfit is worn at the point where her character is enthusiastically inspecting her husband's fetus research laboratory serves only to heighten the incongruity between her physical presentation and the morbid scientific concerns that the narrative will then pursue.

<figure 12.1 near here>

Soledad Miranda: Black Stares and the "Interruptive" Porno Gaze

As indicated previously, the fictional characters that Miranda played for Jess Franco were marked by their repeated associations with annihilation, which then became a frame of reference through which to evaluate her untimely death. These unsettling productions were also marked by a disorientating film style, resulting from the ways in which Franco's camera framed and surveyed its star, often with disturbing effect. As Pavlović has noted: "Besides the sexual act per se, Franco's camera angles, lighting, beautiful photography, and mise-en-scène centre on questions of eroticism, voyeurism, fetishism, violence, and power and disempowerment, exploring its connection to bodies, sensations, pleasures, and affects" (*Despotic Bodies* 116–17). The voyeuristic potential that a male director can project upon the body of the actress has long been documented by film critics and feminist theorists alike, and very much provides a starting point of critical reflection for Pavlović's analysis. Here, she draws on Laura Mulvey's now classic account of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which considered the ways in which the cinematic apparatus produces systems of spectatorship that privilege the male subject. In the course of this analysis, Mulvey questions the extent to which systems of cinematic looking reproduce "a world ordered by sexual imbalance," and where the articulation of a male oriented gaze ensures that the "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (62). For the author, classical cinematic mechanisms function to contain the threat of female sexuality and bodily difference by reducing women to "their traditional exhibitionist role," where they "are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance codes for strong visual and erotic impact" (62). As a result, these mainstream cinematic mechanisms function to marginalize both the feminine and the connotations of lack and castration they evoke in the viewing male. While strategies of voyeurism (which Mulvey exemplifies via Alfred Hitchcock) function to limit the "threat" of female physiology by investigating and devaluing her sexual power, processes of fetishism (which she identifies in the cinema of Joseph Sternberg), attempt to glamorize and adorn the body of the female performer as an additional coping mechanism to diminish her implicit threat.

As critics of Franco's presumed voyeurism have long acknowledged, the director often went to elaborate ends to ensure that his camera captured *all*, particularly when it

surveyed the female body caught in throes of extreme sexual activity. As recently as 2015, Stephen Thrower's exhaustive overview of the director noted that he was above all else a voyeur, who "gained sexual enjoyment from watching others, from conceiving and then filming sex between other people. His scopophilia is intense, his arousal predicated on gathering up the maximum visual harvest" (42). Representing this obsession to "see" is Franco's trademark zoom shot, which he uses to focus in extreme and fetishistic detail on actresses such as Soledad Miranda.

However, while Franco's work clearly appears to employ the key mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism that Mulvey's study highlights, their projection upon Soledad Miranda appears to function in a markedly different manner to the "determining male gaze" (62) identified by Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Specifically, because of the cinematic mechanisms the director used to survey the starlet, as well as how she responded to such strategies of male voyeurism, it could be argued that the Franco's collaborations with Soledad Miranda contain what I would term as an "interruptive porno gaze," which complicates the gestures of arousal that the visual access to titillating scenes are meant to ensure. Indeed, this interruptive focus on Miranda's body is partly ensured by Franco's distinctive use of photography, and in particular his much discussed use of the zoom shot. While Thrower argues that the director's preoccupation with the zoom can be seen as an "essential part of his style" (22), it has ramifications for the concept of the interruptive porno gaze when applied to representations of Soledad Miranda. For Franco's detractors, the use of this mechanism is evidence of the "cheap, crude, ugly and unsophisticated" (22) nature of his work. However, for Thrower, the understated unease that this mechanism evokes for some critics and viewers relates to the fact that it suddenly jolts spectators away from the security of the fiction they are consuming. As a result, "zoom lens, by doing something the human eye cannot, reminds us that what we are experiencing is not real but mediated by the hands of others" (22). While Thrower concedes that the director's use of this cinematic mechanism was as much to do with budgetary restrictions as it was to ensure an experimental feel to his productions, it does have ramifications for images of female sexuality portrayed in his cinema. If it is it is the case that in the author's words the "zoom is erotic!" then it also functions to ensure that such sensuality is diffuse, undefined, and beyond the control of any assumed male delegate (23).

If the technological intervention of the zoom shot functions to disrupt the flow and seamless pleasure associated with structures of heterosexual pornography, they are replicated by the threatening manner in which Soledad Miranda frequently returns the desiring gaze of her audience. Indeed, it seems significant that the title of Tim Lucas's foundational essay on the actress references her ability to return the look of the camera with a "black stare." More recently, Thrower has defined her unnerving look "like a gorgon, her dark brown eyes turning to black marbles of hostility . . . we see in her eyes a fury that's feral, intense and utterly convincing" (248). Both Lucas's and Thrower's observations indicate that rather than being a compliant object of sexual display, the performer possessed an overbearing and defiant gaze that not only seduced but also surveyed and terrified the male characters she encountered. Although not strictly a horror production, this "black stare" is evident in Soledad Miranda's last role as the undercover agent/erotic dancer in Franco's *Der Teufel Kam aus Akasawa* (*The Devil Came from Akasava*, 1971). This film contains a number of examples where her threatening stare and austere performative style injects a sinister tone into otherwise titillating scenes. In particular, seduction scenarios and nightclub performances by the actress starkly contrast with the alluring construction of her costumes and her frequent direct address of the camera, which functions to challenge the viewer's pleasure at surveying her. These provocative gazes appear in the film as more challenging than consensual, especially when coupled with Franco's use of zoom and dissolves on extreme close-ups of the performer's face to further dislocate defined visual access to the performer's image. In such instances, the star image is degraded, because it subverts the "cinematic techniques such as the close-up" (105) that Brotmann argues should ensure that the performer's "bodily movements and physical gestures are constantly subject to intense and ongoing public scrutiny" (105).

Arguably, these disorienting systems of looking draw parity between Soledad Miranda's disruptive performances and the importance of other famous "Eurotrash" icons such as Barbara Steele. It is no coincidence that Lucas compares both actresses in his article "The Black Stare of Soledad Miranda," and this comparison is confirmed by wider theoretical studies in the area. For instance, Carol Jenks's analysis of "The Other Face of Death: Barbara Steele and *La maschera del demonio*" has noted the performer's associations with death and sexual subversion in a range of 1960s pulp productions. In particular, noting Steele's influential work with Italian director Mario Bava, the author concludes such work to be dominated by "an extreme violence toward the audience, an aggressive desire to wound the

very site of vision, the eye" (154). Thisprocess of rendering the film's spectator as "the owner of a violated gaze" (154) is similar to that which dominated hybrid spy sagas such as *The Devil Came from Akasava*, while Soledad Miranda's punitive black stare also becomes prominent in horror titles such as *Vampyros Lesbos*. Here she is cast as Countess Nadine Carody, whose role oscillates between that of a melancholic member of the undead and that of an erotic nightclub performer. In the many club routines that punctuate the film, Miranda's strip scenes repeatedly evoke an unsettling mood, through both her staged seduction of an immobile female mannequin and the way in which she frequently confronts the nightclub audience that has assembled to contemplate her. Indeed, *Vampyros Lesbos* even underscores the danger of Miranda's dark stare via the repeated use of low-angled shots of her thrusting her hands aggressively into the lens of the camera during the erotic performances. In so doing, the film confirms Pavlović's view that:

> Jess Franco's work often foregrounds ambiguities of gender and sexuality and suggests the instability of power relations implied by acts of looking. . . . Franco gave Spanish cinema many interesting female figures and created remarkable and unusual heroines: women detectives, female and lesbian vampires and women killers. ("Gender" 138)

Arguably, Soledad Miranda's performances for Jess Franco confirm Pavlović's view that the director's female characters function to destabilize depicted patriarchal structures. More importantly, the prominence of the performer's "black stare" further connects these subversive qualities to unsettling scenarios of suffering and fatality.

Soledad Miranda: Formal Repetitions in the Representation of "Dark Stardom"

Underlying Soledad Miranda's morbid construction and disruptive modes of looking in her final performances was the way in which her presence initiated a process of suffering and decay that actually seeped into the structure of the fiction. What is marked in films such as *Vampyros Lesbos* and *She Killed in Ecstasy* is the extent to which Soledad Miranda's role as an agent of trauma also renders motifs of sexual violence and death as narrative problems: nihilistic elements that must be endlessly replayed and recounted through the use of montage sequences, flashback scenes, and melancholic voice-over narrations.

For instance, in its attempts to be both hip *and* horrific, *Vampyros Lesbos* reverses much of the iconography associated with the vampire genre (such as bats and wolves), to

replace them with psychedelic shots of red kites and butterflies in flight. However, as if to reiterate Nadine's slippage between the boundaries of life and death, it is significant that the film repeatedly juxtaposes these vibrant inserts with images of blood-drenched drapes and a scorpion ready to deliver a venomous blow. These juxtapositions represent a form of macabre montage that repeatedly halts the film's narrative flow in order to review the vampire's campaign of destruction.

Even when cast as a human character, Miranda's ambiguous link to mortality becomes similarly recast as a form of narrative fixation. For instance, *Eugenie de Sade* is told via the function of a "fatalistic" flashback where the dying heroine recounts how a past incestuous infatuation with her stepfather resulted in him destroying them both after the pair committed their killing spree. The frequent switches in temporality between Eugenie's past actions and her present-tense suffering indicate that the female body suffering in an agonized state of near annihilation is ultimately caught in both a physical and a temporal bind.

Although Miranda is cast as a human for her emblematic performance in *She Killed in Ecstasy*, she is frequently referred to in supernatural terms. For instance, one of her male victims brands her "a devil" at the point at which he realizes her intent is vengeful castration rather than seduction. Given that the ending of the production provides a near mirror to the performer's actual car crash, it also seems appropriate that the film also demonstrates one of the most complex forms of narrative repetition in all of her work with Franco. The film opens with a past-tense sequence of shots from her husband's research laboratory (which is later destroyed by the medical panel that condemns his work), before shifting its temporal plane to present-tense narration that follows Miranda through the isolated villa that is now her home. Here, her voice-over begins to explain the background to the loss of her husband, resulting in an extended flashback scene from the point where the couple marries up until his suicide.

This extended flashback segment establishes a pattern whereby death and violence continually interrupt the smooth running of narrative progression, confirming that the film remains wedded to an exploration of past suffering. Even when the text does return from these prior scenes to follow Miranda tracking each of her potential victims, this fatal past still interrupts the filmic flow in the form of a series of "prior inserts." For instance, during Soledad's seduction and murder of one male medical figure, the film juxtaposes images of the couple kissing with similarly framed shots of her kissing her husband. In this respect, a film such as *She Killed in Ecstasy* draws parity with what Olga Cox Cameron has defined as

the "type of narrative in which the forces of repetition . . . reflect the particular mode of inhibiting time, which . . . illustrates the death drive in action" (109). According to Cox Cameron's analysis, types of narrative repetition that remain fixated on loss, suffering, or trauma provide a link between fictional forms and the psychic construction of reality that lies behind it. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's work on the death drive and obsessive compulsions, Cox Cameron argues that the morbid fears that plague the adult mind are often revisions and repetitions of earlier infantile displeasure: "The basic trope of narrative is repetition of a prior event, an event which exists primarily in the telling, but repetition as Freud demonstrates is also that which provides the warp and wave of psychic life" (109). Although Freud was eager to utilize case study as a method of linking such compulsion repetitions to unresolved childhood and Oedipal dramas, he frequently made connections between the workings of the mind and the narrative world. As early as 1899, Cox Cameron notes, his work on "Screen Memories" discussed how disturbing childhood memories could become altered, recast, and characterized "almost like works of fiction" (101).

In terms of linking the fatal fictions of Soledad Miranda to the traumatic compulsions that Cox Cameron discusses, it is noticeable that her films reference death and impending doom through similar processes of repetition and doubling. Indeed, this notion of "split" female identity is itself underscored by the fact that Miranda herself endlessly doubled her true identity behind the pseudonyms of Susan Korda/Susann Korda/Susan Korday for this role and her other collaborations with Franco. The opening sequence of *Vampyros Lesbos,* where Miranda performs a strip routine before a full-length mirror (in what is later revealed to be an erotic stage routine), indicates that this is a character whose reflection and indeed very essence is literally doubled. Indeed, throughout the film, the heroine (and Miranda's on-screen love object) Linda Westinghouse (Ewa Strömberg) is unsure whether the seductive Nadine who performs erotic strip routines at an Istanbul nightclub is the same person as the countess whose estate she has been employed to catalog. These processes of repetition and doubling are further replicated in other Miranda performances, such as in *She Killed in Ecstasy*, where the female body comes to connote not only desire but also death, doubling, and mutilation. In her role as the castrating Mrs. Johnson, Soledad Miranda is literally everywhere: not only is her reflection endlessly doubled and reproduced by the mirrors in which she mysteriously appears and disappears but she also occupies an impossible spatial as well as temporal plane. For instance, one sequence depicts her chasing another victim

through a network of buildings and passages before unexpectedly (and unrealistically) turning up in the surgeon's bed a moment later.

While these processes of narrative repetition and doubling provide a traumatic set of connections in Soledad Miranda's collaborations with Jess Franco, they also function to fatally prefigure her own real-life demise on the road. Indeed, it seems significant that Franco molded her on-screen persona as a female protagonist who strives for sexual gratification and emancipation only to have these desires thwarted by suffering, mutilation, and death. These scenarios can be read as a mirror to Soledad Miranda's own untimely death. After a succession of unrewarding screen appearances, she died on the way to sign the contract that would have allowed her to become the kind of actress she dreamed of being. As Franco himself recounted in Lucas's account of "The Black Stare of Soledad Miranda":

> The day before she died, she received the greatest news of her life I visited her in her apartment in Lisbon with a German producer, who came to offer her a two-year contract with CCC which would assure her of at least two starring roles per year in big budget films. She was going to become a major star in Germany. The next day, as her contract was being drafted, she had the accident. When the hospital called to break the news I nearly passed out. (189)

Indeed, her accident was made even more bizarre in the way in which it was cruelly prefigured at the end of *She Killed in Ecstasy*, where the vengeful widow drives her car (along with her husband's corpse) off a cliff. According to Tombs and Tohill, the film's frenzied finale confirms that, "deprived of sex and genuine affection she embraces annihilation" (102). The fact that Miranda's real-life husband (and the driver of the doomed vehicle) escaped the incident relatively unscathed only adds further weight to the perception that she was fated to die.

Repetitions Beyond a Role: Or How to Read Death into Online Life

Although Soledad Miranda had worked with a number of other filmmakers (completing 31 movies before she died), her curious affiliation with Jess Franco's morbid obsessions functions as an index between her fictional roles and future demise. Although the movies she starred in for the director varied between porn potboilers, lesbian vampire narratives, and female revenge melodramas, they were all marked by a macabre similarity in both theme and

performance style. At the level of content, Miranda's roles were governed by an overpowering sense of doom and impending (and repeated) peril, a feature that appears incongruous when set alongside the quest for eternal love and sexual plenitude that her characters crave. As Franco observed in a *European Trash Cinema* interview, "she had a personality which translated to the screen a lot of the things that she felt deep inside. But it was translated in an unconscious way. She was a funnel" (qtd. in Collins: 17).

In terms of her on-screen persona, this mode of performative "funneling" sees the actress oscillate between wild, uncontrollable gestures of sexual desire and a near entranced approach to scenes of death and suffering. In these works, it is as if the performer's body becomes possessed by a greater and unworldly force when she is exposed to the glare of Franco's constantly zooming and penetrating voyeuristic lens. If Miranda's output with Franco does fulfill the function of fatalistic fiction, then it is also worth assessing the impact of her death on Jess Franco. According to Tohill and Tombs, the director remained haunted by Soledad's memory and would frequently alter shooting schedules and request location changes after being "consulted" by the dead actress during his sleep. Equally, the process of doubling and traumatic repetition identified previously in Miranda's work became the basis for continued modes of replication in Franco's work that was completed in 1973, when he met his late partner and long-term collaborator Lina Romay.

Reiterating the notion of traumatic doubling, it seems appropriate that Lina, with her long flowing dark hair and slender frame, resembled Soledad as well as being cast in near identical roles to her by the director. In the words of Tohill and Tombs, "it seemed that Lina was a projection of Soledad. She moved like her; it was uncanny, almost as if she was trying to live up to the image of Soledad" (103). What is even more unnerving than Franco finding his "double" of Soledad in Lina was the fact that her first film for him, titled *La Comtesse noire* (*Female Vampire*, 1973), was a virtual remake of *Vampyros Lesbos* (even down to the image of the heroine's suicide in a blood-filled bath). As if to underscore Tohill and Tombs's view that Lina represents "a lusty reincarnation of Soledad" (103), it seems significant that when Franco created the pseudonym of Candy Coster for her 1980s porn films, a blonde wig identical to the one worn by Miranda in *She Killed in Ecstasy* was used to disguise her appearance. During these works—which included the film *Die Marquise von Sade* (1977), where Lina is literally doubled as a pair of twins exploring the limits of violent sexuality—Franco was well aware of the influence that his former star continued to exert over his work:

> After the first two or three films with Lina . . . strange things happened.....We were shooting in Madeira for instance, and it was like Soledad was there..... in those first two or three films, Lina too had the feeling that Soledad was vampirising us. (18)

Beyond the fatalistic impact that Soledad Miranda had over Franco's later career, it is also interesting to note how the contradictions surrounding her "dark star" persona and demise have further affected the subsequent reception by critics and fans of Eurotrash/horror cinema alike. For instance, Amy Brown's website, soledadmiranda.com, features a number of striking fan-derived portraits, paintings, and collages of the starlet that emphasize the ethereal qualities linking her collaborations with Jess Franco to her untimely demise. For instance, Stephen Abel's artwork for the site merges and manipulates shots from the pair's collaborations with startling compositions and colorings that clearly connote the star's deathly qualities. Some of the significant titles for these images include "Blood Queen" (featuring a publicity still from *The Devil Came from Akasava*) and "Psycho" (adapted from a still of *She Killed in Ecstasy*), both of which distort the actress's otherwise glamorous appearance via saturated, blood-red backdrops to convey her more sinister qualities. The fatal connections between Miranda's roles for Franco and her later death also seem to permeate other paintings produced by this artist. For instance, images such as "Soledad Transcending," "Death Mask," and "Immortal Clay" effectively split or multiply images of the female icon's face and body in a manner that recalls the unnatural processes of female doubling that marked her work for the director and wider accounts of traumatic repetition identified above.

<figure 12.2 near here>

Equally, titles such as "Soledad Ghost," "Soul of the City," and "Huge Shades" (also by Abel) draw attention to the near demonic gaze that the actress used to both seduce and then torture the predominantly male victims that featured in these works. What the perpetuation of such fan-based artifacts points to is the fact that at level of pop iconography, Soledad Miranda remains one of Europe's first fully fledged scream queens, a label that ensures her immortality. Indeed, her screen persona as a "cool," kitsch, and kinky femme fatale seems confirmed by the plethora of contemporary internet sites and fanzines run as textural shrines to the dead star that exist beyond Amy Brown's exhaustive resource. These ancillary resources explore the dead starlet's biography and influence from a number of differing perspectives that include her use of fashion/costume,[4] questions of her national

heritage,[5] and the connections between her early roles and later career.[6] However, as this article has considered, the processes of identification and adoration for the cult of the dead star remain as complex and troubling as the roles and performative strategies undertaken by the actress herself.

By virtue of her sudden demise in a manner so close to that staged in one of her final films, Soledad Miranda embodies what Mikita Brottman has termed the "dead star phenomenon" (112). As the author notes, "Little wonder then, that the death of a celebrity (particularly if public, tragic, untimely, accidental or self-inflicted) should arouse such violent emotion, such voyeurism, such curiosity, such alarm" (111). It is precisely these unsettling qualities that index the star's final performances to her death, and that remain the basis for her fascination among the fan sites and online communities dedicated to her work. In the course of generating this ongoing interest in her iconic fictional roles and real-life demise, the legend of Soledad Miranda ultimately highlights the point where the cult of Jess Franco and death cult stardom meet.

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Notes

1. For further information, see Amy Brown's site www.soledadmiranda.com, which outlines the diversity of the performer's style beyond her more morbid entries for Jesús Franco. As Brown notes, Soledad Miranda's initial film performances were light-hearted musical comedies such as José María Elorrieta's *La bella Mimi* (1960), where her role revolved around a number of musical routines. While other musical performances dominated Miranda's early repertoire (including a minor role in Franco's *La reina del Tabarín* (1960)), her expressive qualities also ensured her entry into other European cycles popular during the decade. This included multiple historical adventure dramas such as Carlo Campogalliani's *Ursus* (1960) and the 1967 release *Cervantes* (Vincent Sherman). While other notable Soledad Miranda performances were made in "spaghetti" westerns such as *Sugar Colt* (Franco Giraldi, 1966), the majority of her roles during the 1960s were in comedies, which traded on her quirky and nonthreatening persona.

Importantly, when appearing in horror productions during this era (such as Julio Coll's *Pyro* from 1963), the emphasis remained on representing Miranda as a love interest, rather than the destructive female figures that she would later perfect with Franco.

2. Again, Brown points out that the two records that Soledad Miranda completed in 1964 and 1965 function as a counterpoint to her more melancholic collaborations with Franco. As Brown notes: "Most of us know Soledad as the dark, mysterious icon of Franco's movies. But when Soledad sings, we experience a whole other side of her: flirty, bubbly, happy, and cute, as well as seductive" (http://www.soledadmiranda.com/records.html accessed 18/9/2016).
3. The study was, in fact, expanded from the author's earlier monograph *Despotic Bodies and Transgressive Bodies: Spanish Culture from Francisco Franco to Jesús Franco.*
4. See www.anothermag.com/fashion-beauty/1697/soledad-miranda.
5. See http://asketchofthepast.com/2015/08/18/young-rebel-the-exploits-of-soledad-miranda.
6. See https://robbinsrealm.wordpress.com/2012/09/28/the-all-too-short-life-of-soledad-miranda.

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