



Aging Faces, Voice, and Barbara Steele's Revenge

Libertad Gills, The Future of Cinema and the Audiovisual Arts, Università della Svizzera italiana, CH, libertad.gills@gmail.com

Most scholarly and journalistic work about British actor Barbara Steele focuses on her unique physical appearance, especially her face. *Steele's Revenge* aims to rework images of Steele's face across her films beyond the Italian gothic horror productions she is known for from the 1960s, as well as to bring in her voice, which was erased from these films in the process of redubbing, in order to give Steele an opportunity to respond to her own image, in a gesture of videographic revenge. The video essay begins with fragments from Steele's first film, *La maschera del demonio* (*Bloody Sunday*, Mario Bava, 1960), in which the greatest evil is the aging process itself. It includes fragments from Steele's later work, including *8½* (Federico Fellini, 1963), *Shivers* (David Cronenberg, 1975), and *The Butterfly Room* (Gionata Zarantonello, 2012), allowing the viewer to witness the aging process in another way. Finally, the video essay includes an excerpt from *Sois belle et tais-toi!* (Delphine Seyrig, 1981) where, at only 40 years old, Steele talks about her acting career in the past tense, critical of the films she's made in a male-dominated industry and how she has felt reduced by someone else's image of her.





Creator's Statement

The English actor Barbara Steele is best known for starring in Italian gothic horror films in the 1960s. As she shared in an interview, it was in Italy that she finally felt accepted and at home as an actor. Her first film, *La maschera del demonio* (*Bloody Sunday*, 1960) directed by Mario Bava, established her as a horror film star and she went on to act in several now cult classics from that period. Later in life, however, she rejected these films, in part because they had limited her as an actor to playing one kind of character and to a single film genre. Most literature about Barbara Steele focuses on her physical features, particularly on her face (Nia Edwards-Behi, 453). The aim of this video essay is to rework images of Steele's face across her films beyond the 60s, as well as to bring in her voice, which was erased from the Italian horror films in the process of redubbing, in order to give Steele an opportunity to respond to her own image, in a gesture of videographic revenge.

In *La maschera del demonio*, one of the evils that is explored, turned into spectacle and eventually annihilated, is aging itself. Here, as in three other films of the genre including *The Long Hair of Death* (Antonio Margheriti, 1964), *Nightmare Castle* (Mario Caiano, 1965), and *An Angel for Satan* (Camillo Mastrocinque, 1966), Steele plays two women: Asa, a vampire-witch put to death in the opening scene, and Katya, her innocent descendent and double. Before Asa is brutally murdered with a spiked mask that is hammered into her face, she curses her assassins promising to get her revenge. Centuries later, this finally occurs just as Katya is coming of age. Old age and what it symbolizes—i.e. the greatest evil imaginable, death—“stands in the way” of Katya's exploration of youth, romance, and sexuality (to reference Barbara Zecchi's video essay “The Wrinkle of Film,” in which Zecchi argues that in Hollywood films older generations are often represented as standing in the way of the young).

The film uses makeup and changes of speed to show the aging process as one that takes over an unprotected Katya when the evil Asa gets her way. By simply resting her hand on young Katya, the process begins, in a fascinating display of artisanal visual effects. The result is, of course, one of horror, as deep dark lines begin to cover Katya/Steele's face, wrinkles appear, and what was once a smile turns into a sad and dreadful frown. Aging here is shown to be an unstoppable phenomenon that is most visible and most horrific as it affects and transforms a woman's face. Susan Sontag writes in her essay "The Double Standard of Aging" that a broken nose, a scar, or a burn mark is a terrible psychological wound to a woman because it diminishes her value (1972, 22–23). As she ages, we see Katya's sexual and romantic value vanish before our eyes. As Asa becomes younger, on the other hand, Steele's performance conveys one of sexual gratification. The very act of becoming young again is shown to be an orgasmic experience. For Patricia MacCormack, Steele's performance is an example of what she calls "cinesexuality," defined as sexuality of and for the cinema. "Steele's eyes roll ecstatically as Asa," MacCormack writes, and "in demonic rage, she makes the rushes of breath and cries belonging to the order of desire, inviting us to enter the highly corporeally receptive, harrowing and libidinal intensity of the situation. [...] The shadows on Steele's face are an affective plane with no meaning—she has dark and light not on but *as* her face. This seduces our dread and yet is delicious running into our eyes." Asa's pleasure at getting her revenge and absorbing Katya's youth is a highly sexually gratifying experience that is shared with the audience.

I first became familiar with Steele's enormous screen presence when I saw Federico Fellini's *8½* (1963) and fell in love with the cinema. Steele plays Gloria Morin, wife of a film producer who captures Guido (Marcello Mastroianni)'s attention. There was something about Steele that spoke to me too, as a film student then, something that differentiated her from the other women in Guido/Fellini's male fantasy world of lovers, prostitutes, mothers, witches, and monsters. Her character was all of these and at the same time none. She was a world apart: a complete mystery. Gloria is both extremely charming, almost childlike, and at the same time, potentially cruel and sadistic (again the duality from Bava's films, continued by Fellini). As a cinephile, I stayed with this image of her, only to discover much later that Steele went on to work with several other directors including Jonathan Demme (*Caged Heat*, 1974), David Cronenberg (*Shivers*, 1975) and Louis Malle (*Pretty Baby*, 1978). Most recently, Steele has appeared in *Lost River* (Ryan Gosling, 2014) and *The Butterfly Room* (Gionata Zarantonello, 2012), a horror film in which she plays a murderous elderly woman.

Hollywood is far from kind to older female actors. But Steele was finally able to have her say in the documentary *Sois belle et tais-toi!*, directed by the great actor,

filmmaker, and activist Delphine Seyrig, shot on videotape in black and white in 1976 and released in 1981, in which Seyrig interviews twenty-three female actors, including Jane Fonda, Maria Schneider, and Shirley MacLaine. Rachel Pronger writes, “The grey grainy aesthetic strips away the glamorous veneer of the dream factory to offer a bleak, unvarnished insight into the reality of a discriminatory industry.” In my video essay, the grey videotape aesthetic of Steele’s interview in this film contrasts with the professionally illuminated industrial films that are seen before and after it. The rawness of Seyrig’s film offers a space of documentary sincerity, even if Steele shows herself to be an actor who never stops performing for the cinema, through gestures that demonstrate an acute awareness of the camera’s gaze and in modulations to her voice for dramatic emphasis.

Made by the 1970s feminist collective *Les Insoumuses* (a word created by combining the French words for “insubordinate” and “muses”) founded by Seyrig and activist video maker Carole Roussopoulos, with translator Ioana Wider and sociologist Nadja Ringart, the title is borrowed from a 1958 black-and-white crime comedy film of the same name by Marc Allégret, and refers to what is expected of female actors by the film industry. In the film, they discuss their experiences dealing with sexism in a male-dominated industry, about the roles they wished they could play, and a general sense of alienation felt by their screen image. “That’s not me!” Steele cries out, referring to the films that she is often celebrated for. At the age of 40 she is already speaking of her acting career in the past tense. The inclusion of *Sois belle* in this video essay is especially crucial when we consider that Steele’s voice was dubbed in the Italian horror films that made her famous, thereby, as Carol Jenks writes, removing “her from the arena of language, literally reduced to silence by the process of redubbing” (434). In other words, the voice that was heard by Italian audiences was not Steele’s own. In *Sois belle*, on the other hand, Steele is finally able to have a voice—and, as we discover, she is not afraid to use it. She does not stay quiet about her critical rage towards the films that made her famous: “That’s somebody else’s image of me!” she exclaims: “I wasn’t even there!”

Seyrig went on to make several films with an all-woman production crew on subjects including the fight for legal abortion, against torture and the Vietnam war, and for the rights of sex workers and political prisoners, in an effort to bring about a change in the work experience of female actors and women film workers. “I found it fantastic that I, an actress, had suddenly become a director,” said Seyrig in 1983. “It was a revelation, an enormous pleasure, an incomparable revenge.” Steele would also go on to work on the other side of the camera, acting as an associate producer for the miniseries *The Winds of War* (1983) and producer of *War and Remembrance* (1988), for which she received an Emmy. In this video essay, by putting *La maschera del demonio*

next to *Sois belle*, I hope to draw attention to Steele's own kind of revenge, when she is finally offered a space to use her voice and speak out. On a secondary level, I also hope to show another kind of aging process, not exactly the fascinating and accelerated spectacle constructed by Bava, but one that occurs between films, across an actor's work.

References

- Edwards-Behi, Nia. "Barbara Steele," in *The Routledge Companion to Cult Cinema*, eds. Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton. Routledge, 2020: 451–459.
- Hudson, David. "Delphine Seyrig and the Defiant Muses," *The Criterion Collection The Daily*, April 7, 2022. <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/7750-delphine-seyrig-and-the-defiant-muses>.
- Jenks, Carol. "The Other Face of Death: Barbara Steele and *La maschera del demonio*," in *Popular European Cinema*, eds. Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau. Routledge, 1992: 422–459.
- MacCormack, Patricia. "Barbara Steele's Ephemeral Skin: Feminism, Fetishism and Film," *Senses of Cinema* 22 (2002). <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/feature-articles/steele/>
- Pronger, Rachel. "Feminist Film Collectives", *Mubi Notebook*, April 7, 2022. <https://mubi.com/en/notebook/posts/notebook-primer-feminist-film-collectives>.
- Sontag, Susan. "The Double Standard of Aging," *On Women*, ed. David Rieff. Picador, 2023 (1972): 3–39
- Zecchi, Barbara. "The Wrinkle of Film," 2020. <https://vimeo.com/390816850>

Biography

Libertad Gills is a filmmaker, writer on film, and researcher. After teaching film and criticism at the Universidad de las Artes in Ecuador between 2015–2023, she is now a Post-doc Researcher for the Future of Cinema & the Audiovisual Arts at the Università della Svizzera italiana, in partnership with Locarno Film Festival. Gills holds a Ph.D. in Artistic Studies from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, a Master's in Visual Anthropology from FLACSO-Ecuador, and a BA in Film Studies and Government from Wesleyan University. Her films have screened at international festivals and her articles on film have been published in *Short Film Studies*, *Senses of Cinema*, *Fuera de Campo*, *God/Art*, *desistfilm*, and other magazines and collective books. She is also the co-director of *Fuera de Campo* and Associate Editor at *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies* and author of two books on cinema (*La crítica es una escuela* in 2022; *Guayaquil en ruinas* in 2023).

Review by Danielle Hipkins, University of Exeter

What a delight to watch this “gesture of videographic revenge” in which Libertad Gills crafts a range of footage from Barbara Steele’s film career to restore a sense of the performer’s experience to the one-sided and reductive representation of her that emerges from many of her feature film narratives. This essay uniquely puts the experience of the actor, not the characters she plays, at the centre of the story. Existing literature doesn’t do this, being more focussed on the horror genre and feminist psychoanalytical criticism. In particular, the essay makes us consider how the aging process for women is made to carry symbolic negative weight, at the expense of exploring female experience.

The video essay is engaging and communicative, drawing us into the mismatch between image and experience through our vision of Steele’s youthful, made-up face and the voice-over whisper of Sontag’s words on the reduction of women to appearance and female aging as we draw closer to Steele’s face. This mismatch of image and experience is further underlined by the sudden vision of Steele’s much older face, reminding us of the fragmented subjects cinema delivers to us. The subsequent sequence from Fellini’s *8½* wordlessly underlines the way a younger woman often symbolizes rejuvenation for older men, on screen and off screen.

The essay continues with its clever juxtapositions, most striking of all the contrast between the earlier horror images and dubbed voice with Steele’s self-determined performance in Delphine Seyrig’s documentary interview with her. Here the use of subtitles further highlights the import of what Steele is saying about her alienation as a female actor. The follow-up juxtaposition of two images from *La Maschera del demonio*, of the character Katya’s transformation and an image of the same character covering her eyes, followed by the “it’s just ridiculous” clip, convey lyrically and humorously Steele’s horror over her own performance in horror. The final image of her turning away from a mirror presents a fitting concluding reflection on a woman’s difficult journey from object to subject that Gills has dramatized for us so effectively.

Review by Sadia Quraeshi Shepard, Wesleyan University

Libertad Gills’s video essay, *Steele’s Revenge*, considers the work of British actor Barbara Steele and explores how, for a female actor, her face is both her destiny and a liability. Juxtaposing Steele’s performance in the Italian gothic horror film *La maschera del demonio* (Mario Bava, 1960), in which she plays a vampiric witch, and selections from her interview in feminist filmmaker Delphine Seyrig’s documentary *Sois belle et tais-toi!* (1981), Gills creates a dynamic and thought-provoking dialogue between Steele’s roles as an idealized, sexualized figure as a young woman and her perception,

at the age of 40, that she has been “exploited and reduced” by the films she is best known for. Bringing together Steele’s performances, a provocative epigraph by Susan Sontag, and Steele’s objection to how she has been portrayed on screen, *Steele’s Revenge* uses multi-screen, collage, and alterations in speed to reexamine female beauty standards and the artifice of performance. In doing so, Gills performs a poignant act of videographic restitution, allowing Steele to comment on her own work and image.

The contrast between Susan Sontag’s bold statements about the expectations placed on women in the epigraph and the quiet delivery of the whispered voice reading the quote is enigmatic and mysterious, suggestive of the secrets women tell one another about the impossible standards for female beauty. Placing the text over Steele’s face asks us to contemplate how the actor’s face and future are intertwined. When we see a close-up of Steele, from her role as a murderous older woman 52 years later in *The Butterfly Room* (Gionata Zarantonello, 2012), the transformation of her face, marked by time and experience, feels shocking.

Throughout *Steele’s Revenge*, the color fuchsia—bright, strong, and often associated with the feminine—signals the perspective and interventions of the video essayist, highlighting certain words or phrases or serving as a field of color for Steele’s interview in *Sois belle et tais-toi!*, which appears within a smaller screen. Much like the duality of the two characters that Steele plays in *La maschera del demonio*—one young and innocent, one old/dead and evil—in her interview in *Sois belle et tais-toi!*, Steele notes a gulf between viewers’ perceptions of her body of work and how she sees herself. Describing this distance, Steele remarks: “I wasn’t even there,” and “That was somebody else,” in a performative diction that suggests that even when Steele appears as herself, she is playing a part. By intercutting, juxtaposing, and combining Steele’s roles as a witch, a murderer, and a woman, *Steele’s Revenge* presents and queries the multi-faceted nature of performance and the precarity of the aging process for a female actor.

