PANDORA-EVE-AVA:
ALBERT LEWIN’S MAKING OF A “SECRET GODDESS”

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Introduction

The myth of the primordial woman, the artificially fabricated Pandora, first related in the early Greek poetry of Hesiod, has proven extremely influential in the European history of culture, ideas, literature, and art from antiquity to the present day. Not only did the mythical figure itself undergo numerous refunctializations, but, in a striking manner, particular elements of the narrative in the *Theogony* (*Theogonia*) and in *Works and Days* (*Opera et dies*) – for example, the jar, which would later be conceived as a box – also took on a life of their own and found their place in ever new cultural contexts. Having been drawn out from the “plot” (in the Aristotelian sense of μῦθος), these elements formed separate strands of reception that at times interfered with each other and at other times diverged.

In the twentieth century such myth-elements also developed a distinctive dynamic of their own in film. Albert Lewin’s *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* (1951) offers a particularly original conception of the Pandora myth by interweaving its elements with the legend of the Flying Dutchman and plotting it into a story that takes place around 1930.¹ It is the story of a young American woman, Pandora Reynolds, “bold and beautiful, desired by every man who met her” – so goes the original trailer of 1951, which opens with some introductory remarks about glamour by Hedda Hopper.²

Lewin’s intermingling of the Pandora myth and the Dutch legend in a love story of the 1950s is in many ways bold and original. The film effects a hybridization of two narratives from different cultural contexts and times. In front of a colorful setting of archaeological ruins and antique finds, Flamenco dance and Corrida, beach parties and motor racing, it intertwines overbearing material sensuality on the one hand with a seemingly spooky

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¹ *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*, directed by Albert Lewin (England, 1951).
extrasensory nature on the other. This is done in such a way that it produces a chimera of apparently natural supernaturality, which led to varied criticism after the release of the film. While Anglophone critics ranked it as pretentious and trashy, the film was celebrated by French critics, who drew a connection to surrealists such as Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. Lewin himself, a friend of Man Ray, who made two painted portraits and a color photograph of Ava Gardner for the film (only the photograph was used; the portrait seen in the film was made by Ferdinand Bellan), spoke likewise of surrealist influence.

However, all this – most of all the question about the surrealist subtext of the film as well as the possibilities and limitations of combining classic narrative film production with the surreal – has already been discussed by Susan Felleman, among others, in her book *Botticelli in Hollywood*, and is therefore not the subject of the following reflections. I shall examine instead the manner in which the motif-providing Pandora myth and the structure-providing Dutch legend are linked in Lewin’s film. I demonstrate how the motivic elements in the myth – for instance, hope, Pandora’s double nature as both evil and good, and her resemblance to Eve – have been fitted into Lewin’s adaptation of the seafarer’s legend and combined in an amorous melodrama. In all this I shall consider more closely, apart from Lewin’s film, Hesiod’s Pandora myth and the Dutch legend in Richard Wagner’s opera with special regard to the concepts of gender relation and the images of the woman that underlie these two narratives and how they are portrayed in the film.

**The Filmmaker’s Fabricated Figure**

Let us begin with the story of the film. It takes place in 1930 in Esperanza, a fishing village and holiday resort on the Spanish Costa Brava (“wild coast”). The nightclub singer Pandora is the much adored centre of a small group of British and American expatriates; several of the men in this group have

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