HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Secret Beyond the Door 1947

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

Inspirations and Connections. The infamous aristocrat who has a habit of murdering his wives, marries the nth time. The hesitant bride is banned from entering a certain room in his palace. Will she suffer the fate of her predecessors? Thus begins the folktale "Bluebeard", adapted many times into film as early as 1901 by Georges Méliès. Fritz Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door* is a modern Bluebeard tale. It tells the story of a young, rich and adventurous woman who marries an enigmatic architect and moves to his ancestral mansion. She soon senses that something's off with the man and his secretive chambers.

Bluebeard is not the only inspiration for Lang's film. A cycle of 1940s films revolved around heroines in peril, typically in an old residence. Examples of these Gothic melodramas are George Cukor's *Gaslight* (1944) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940).

The other major inspiration was a large number of dramas that had a keen interest in psychiatry and/or psychoanalysis. 1945's *Spellbound* may be the most famous representative of this sub-genre (Hitchcock again!). Psychoanalysis and its focus on dreams proved to be instrumental for filmmakers looking to incorporate fantasies and a surreal element to their narratives. In *Secret Beyond the Door*, cinematographer Stanley Cortez has created dream-like imagery of the old mansion's rooms and halls with their deep shadows. Cortez, would later work on Charles Laughton's dark masterpiece *The Night of the Hunter* (1955).

Female Scriptwriter and Protagonist. A film that merged these two worlds was Curtis Bernhardt's *Possessed* (1947). It shared the same scriptwriter—Silvia Richards—with *Secret Beyond the Door*. Richards would later author the story that Lang's *Rancho Notorious* would be based on. This Western centers on a strong and independent female character played by Marlene Dietrich. *Secret Beyond the Door* also privileges a feminine point of view by having the leading woman narrate most of the story. The film would be Joan Bennett's fourth collaboration with Lang, following *Man Hunt*, *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*. The star's costumes were designed by Travis Banton who had created the iconic Marlene Dietrich look in *Morocco* (1930) (The Metzinger Sisters).

Architecture and Space. The male lead played by Michael Redgrave is an architect. He is one of the creative types featured also in Lang's films in 1945 (an amateur painter in *Scarlet Street*) and 1950 (an author in *The House by the River*). The architect is a theorist who runs the periodical *Apt*—the name intended to describe a conception of architecture, "fitting … the events that take place in" buildings. The problem with him is that not only does he act suspiciously, he has an unusual hobby—"he collects rooms like some people collect butterflies". In his rooms, Mark likes to reenact famous crime scenes and he uses original objects in order to tell stories. He would be called a curator today. His "felicitous rooms" anticipates a version of Vincent Price's collection in the *House of Wax* (1953)—except that he has no interest in mannequins of any sort.

The architect's enthusiasm for creating such exhibits is one of the things about him that unnerves the heroine. It would hardly be considered an unusual pastime in our time, given the popularity of true crime today with numerous books, documentaries and exhibitions. Mark's exhibits offer a vantage point to explore the representation of space in film. Similar to Robert Wise's fascinating *The Haunting* (1963) and its themes of architecture and the uncanny, *Secret Beyond the Door* invites critical perspectives from psychoanalysis and feminism.

CHARACTERS

Celia Lamphere (Barrett). Adventurous heiress seeks raw emotions and is strongly attracted to Mark.

Mark Lamphere. Celia's husband Mark is an architect and a publicist of a magazine about modern architecture. He is also a "collector of rooms" that were once scenes of violent crimes.

Miss Robey. Mark's assistant. She had been injured while saving his son David from a fire. Her face is partially covered with a scarf to hide her disfigurement—which turns out to be a lie. She is jealous of women in Mark's life and starts the fire at the end of the film.

Caroline Lamphere. Mark's rather controlling sister who manages the mansion.

David Lamphere. Mark's teenager son from his first marriage. David believes that his father murdered his mother (which isn't proven to be true).

Intellectual Sub-deb. A minor character who plays an interesting part. She is one of the guests of Mark's home tour and challenges Mark's narration with a psychoanalytic approach.

Rick Barrett. Celia's protective brother dies early on in the film, leaving Celia in control of the family's considerable assets.

Bob Dwight. Bob is a lawyer and colleague of Celia's brother Rick. They would get married if it was not for Celia's vacation where she met Mark.

SYNOPSIS

.

Celia is a carefree socialite Celia Barrett meets Mark Lamphere in Mexico and they soon decide to get married. Mark is an architect and publicist; a theorist who holds that a building shapes whatever takes place inside. Mark asks Celia to join him at his ancestral home in Levender Falls where they would live. The three residents of the Blaze Creek House are Mark's assistant Miss Robey, his sister Caroline and his son—Celia is surprised to learn that Mark is a father.

During their housewarming party. Mark takes a group of guests for a guided tour of his collection of rooms. It turns out that the rooms contain nothing but objects—all original—associated with actual homicides that took place in Paris, Missouri, and Paraguay. They had been collected by Mark to recreate crime scenes of sensational murders. The guests are told that a particular room is to remain locked and is not to be viewed.

Celia's former suitor Bob Dwight tips Celia that Lamphere family is totally bankrupt. Celia also hears enough to think that Mark's relationship with his mother was strained. Celia is getting worried about her own safety and is very curious about the 7th room. One evening, she manages to sneak in an imitation of her own bedroom.

Mark finds out about the breach and so enraged that in his mind, believes that he has murdered Celia and stages a court trial of himself—that is, as a figment of his imagination. In this mental trial, he appears both as a prosecutor and defendant. As the latter, he claims that he had thought about killing but never actually carried it out—he was a victim dominated by women, primarily his mother—all his life. Celia confronts Mark and uses rudimentary psychoanalysis to prove to him that he has no reason to hate his mother. Mark and Celia settle things nicely but this makes Miss Robey very jealous and she arsons the house. Mark saves Celia at the last moment; the two make a fresh start as a happy couple.

SCENES

A Dreamy Wedding. It is Celia Barrett's wedding day. She has dreamt of daffodils and believes they symbolize danger. Celia hardly knows the man she is marrying. The following two flashbacks offer quick recaps of how she found herself before the altar.

The Heiress. Celia is a carefree socialite. She is popular with men but evidently picky and capricious. Her brother Ricky is her sole custodian and would like to see her hook up with his lawyer friend. Bob Dwight is a safe choice for her and she seems destined to marry him. Everything changes when Ricky dies and Celia inherits the family's sizable trust fund. She decides to have a last adventure in Mexico before settling down with Bob.

Flashback to Mexico. In a Mexican village Celia witnesses a knife fight between two men over a woman. She is struck by the sight of the men's deadly passion and envies the senorita. As this takes place, a man in the crowd of onlookers is watching her with enchantment. Celia notices the mysterious man's gaze and is intrigued. The two acquaint and not before long they decide to get married. Mark Lamphere is an architect and publicist—that's pretty much all Celia knows about him.

Happily Married. Mark and Celia spend their honeymoon in Mexico. All is well and Celia is passionately in love. Mark's work as an architect is "in vogue by those in the know". He also publishes the magazine *Apt* about modern architecture. Mark's theory is that "under certain circumstances, a room can influence or even determine the actions of the people living in it."





The Mysterious Husband. Evidently Mark's approach to architecture diverges from mainstream notions and he advocates it with the magazine. Basically, his theory is that a building shapes whatever takes place inside. He has a related hobby which amuses Celia, he collects "felicitous rooms". It all sounds well except that Mark seems to be too eager to sell *Apt*. By the end of their honeymoon, Celia can't help but wonder about her husband's financial situation. Mark subsequently leaves for New York to negotiate with a prospective buyer. He asks Celia to join him at his ancestral home in Levender Falls where they would live. Celia's first evening at the Blaze Creek is somewhat unnerving. As she enters the house, she ascends the staircase decorated by tribal African masks. A similar collection had been featured in 1933's *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*).

The film would be Joan Bennett's fourth collaboration with Lang, following *Man Hunt*, *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*. The star's costumes were designed by Travis Banton who had created the iconic Marlene Dietrich look in *Morocco* (1930) (The Metzinger Sisters).

The Residents of Blaze Creek. The three residents of the Blaze Creek House are Mark's assistant Miss Robey, his sister Caroline and his son—Celia is surprised to learn that Mark is a father. David's mother Eleanor had passed away as a result of illness. Mark's sister Caroline manages the house and acts as a motherly figure. Miss Robey is the architect's assistant and isn't too friendly towards Celia. Robey's face is partially covered by a scarf that supposedly hides a prominent burn scar. Celia learns that a fire had engulfed the house ten years ago and little David's life was saved by Robey. The concealed scar is a reminder of the accident and appears to be the reason of Mark's attachment to her.

A Strange House Tour. The couple throws a housewarming party. Mark takes a group of guests for a guided tour of his collection of rooms. It turns out that the rooms contain nothing but objects—all original—associated with actual homicides. They had been collected by Mark to recreate crime scenes of sensational murders.



Mark would be called a curator today. His "felicitous rooms" anticipates a version of Vincent Price's collection in the *House of Wax* (1953)—except that he has no interest in mannequins of any sort.

Room #1, Paris. First room shows an event associated with the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Mark recounts that Comtesse de Bleumanoir was killed in 1572 by her husband for being a Huguenot. He points out to the rapier on the floor as the murder weapon and the blood stains on the countess' scarf. Don Ignacio is a wife killer but is also a "cultivated man."

Room #2, Missouri. Next room is designed to recreate a basement during the 1913 floods in Missouri. The centerpiece is a wooden chair that has leather straps attached. Mark explains that a man tied his mother to the chair to drown when the basement was flooded by water pouring through a small window. Mark adds that the motive was financial. The man murders his mother—eventually it will be hinted that Mark has contemplated the same.

Room #3, Paraguay. This room showcases a refined aristocrat named Don Ignacio. The don is a connoisseur of the arts, a passionate lover, and the killer of several of his wives. Mark claims that Ignacio's viciousness must have something to do with the house. The aristocrat murders in the 17th Century (which roughly corresponds to the time Mark's family settled in the Levender Falls).

A Guest Challenges Mark. One of the participants of the tour is a young woman (introduced as a "brain psych major") who forcefully challenges Mark's narrative. She suggests that these crimes could have been prevented if the killers were properly treated by a psychoanalyst. She also observes that the murder of the mother in the second room hints at unconscious hatred. Mark barely manages to evade her arguments. The guests are told that a particular room is to remain locked and is not to be viewed. Soon the tour is over.



"Brain psych major" effectively argues in favor of psychoanalysis. In the credits she is referred to as "Intellectual sub-deb" while her friend with the funny glasses is tagged only "sub-deb."

Celia is Startled. Seeing the rooms proves to be quite a shock to Celia. When Mark was talking about felicitous spaces she had thought this implied happiness. Mark provides a technical explanation by referring to the vocabulary definition of the word—"happy in effect, apt, fitting… to describe an architecture that fits the events that happen in it". He adds that violent crimes demonstrate this theory well due to the strong emotions involved.

Confusing Rumors. Celia's former suitor Bob Dwight is among the guests and tips Celia about Mark's financial situation—he claims that the Lamphere family is totally bankrupt. She also hears people gossiping about Mark's previous wife Eleanor conveniently passing away after her money had dried out. Celia tries to find out more but can only learn that Eleanor's love for Mark was not reciprocal.

Mark's Childhood. Celia also hears enough to think that Mark's relationship with his mother was strained. Following her death he had destroyed her beloved flower bed with lilacs in a fit of rage. His sister Eleanor also recounts a childhood memory about Mark's sensitivity. Eleanor had one day locked up her brother for fun but the practical joke had made him extremely upset.

The Mystery of the 7th Room. Celia is getting worried about her own safety and is very curious about the 7th room. She craftily makes a mould of the room's key by getting its impression on a piece of wax from the candle. She mails the wax piece to her friend Edith to get a cast of the key.



Secret Beyond the Door is a modern Bluebeard tale—cinematographer Stanley Cortez has created dream-like imagery of the old mansion's rooms and halls with their deep shadows. Cortez, would later work on Charles Laughton's dark masterpiece *The Night of the Hunter* (1955).

Robey's Secret. Celia incidentally runs into Miss Robey when the latter is not wearing her scarf. To her astonishment, Celia sees that the Robey's face shows no trace of disfigurement. The secretary admits that there used to be a burn scar indeed but she had it removed by plastic surgery. Apparently she simply wanted to preserve Mark's gratitude for her and kept the scarf as a reminder of saving his son's life.

Inside the Forbidden Room. The key Celia had been waiting for arrives by mail. Celia waits for Mark to leave, and then she unlocks the door of the forbidden room. The sight is disturbing because the crime scene recreated here is an imitation of her room. Celia is a bit relieved to see that the objects are all copies, unlike those in the other rooms about real homicides.

Danger! Mark unexpectedly returns. Celia leaves the room in terror and runs away into the field. In the mist she can discern the silhouette of a man approaching her. She is relieved to see that it is not Mark, Bob has come to check her well being.



Inside Mark's Mind—a Trial. Mark finds out about the breach and is infuriated. He looks as troubled as ever but this time he is more revealing—it is now time for his voice-over. Mark thinks that he has murdered Celia and stages a court trial of himself—that is, as a figment of his imagination. In this mental trial, he appears both as a prosecutor and defendant. The judge and jury are merely silhouettes of shadows. He first accuses himself of premeditated murder then provides a defense. He claims that he had thought about killing but never actually carried it out—he was a victim dominated by women, primarily his mother—all his life.

Celia Challenges Mark to face his Trauma. Celia confronts Mark and uses rudimentary psychoanalysis to diagnose and fix his problem. She points out that lilacs symbolize his unconscious anger at his mother over a trivial incident in his childhood. On a particular day, Mark was happily picking lilacs for his mother. His trauma began when (he thought) that she locked him in his room to go to dancing with her boyfriend. Celia assures Mark that he was locked up by his sister Caroline as an innocent joke. Consequently, it was all a misunderstanding and he has no reason to hate his mother.

Fire! Mark and Celia settle things nicely but this makes Miss Robey very jealous and she arsons the house. Mark saves Celia at the last moment; the two make a fresh start as a happy couple.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Celia Lamphere (Barrett) – **Open** (Heiress, Adventurous, Curious, Crafty, Brave)

Mark Lamphere – **Emotional** (Aristocratic, Broke, Architect, Jarred)

CELIA LAMPHERE (BARRETT)

Celia is intelligent and passionate. She marries Mark on a whim and when he shows that he is dangerously obsessive, she helps him to overcome his issues.

Illustrative moments

Heiress. "I was going to be fired… is the word too blunt for you Mrs. Lamphere? For me it's basic English, one of the key words." Miss Robey bitterly explains why she decided to keep covering her face with a scarf even though it was no longer scarred—she wanted to hold on to her job as the assistant. In doing so she underscores that the two women's basic difference is class. Celia is a privileged member of the society—one is reminded of the young Freder in *Metropolis*. The upper class heroine is not the most common one in Lang's films. The word heiress comes up twice in *The Big Heat*—the police detective's wife jokingly refers to herself as one (because she is so resourceful) and the gangster's girlfriend says she chose the life because she was no heiress.

Adventurous. "20th Century sleeping beauty" is how Mark describes Celia (the more relevant folktale, *Bluebeard* is never mentioned in the film). According to him, she is a "wealthy American girl who has lived her life wrapped in cotton wool but she wants to wake up". Celia may not be as naïve as Mark portrays her to be but is obviously driven by a sense of adventure.

Curious. In the spirit of the Bluebeard tale, Celia's curiosity is triggered when she is told to never enter a certain room.

Crafty. Celia penetrates Mark's secret chamber quietly and swiftly by getting a wax mould of the key.

Brave. Couple of times Celia shows that she is not easily scared. During witnessing the fight in Mexico a knife thrown by one of the man accidentally lands very close to her but she doesn't flinch. Later, when she figures out Mark's murderous intentions, she confronts him in the room where he would be expected to be most dangerous.

MARK LAMPHERE

The architect is unstable and potentially dangerous because of a traumatic incident that (he thinks) took place in his childhood.

Illustrative moments

Aristocratic. "The Lampheres have lived at Levender Falls since 1698" and are a respected family. Mark's house looks like a small palace and he is supposedly wealthy.

Broke. "All this is mortgaged to the hilt" says Bob Dwight about the Lamphere House. Mark is quite desperate to sell his magazine because he is broke.

Architect. Mark is pictured as an avant-garde architect. "There is a vogue" for his work "among the people who know" Celia observes. "If I can't build houses according to my theories, at least I can get talk about them" he says of his magazine which reportedly "leads the field".

Jarred. Celia gets a piece of wax from a twin candle holder to get an impression of the key. Mark appears on the scene and immediately notices that one candle is shorter. "It jars me somehow, it breaks the symmetry", he remarks. While Celia is calm and mature, Mark is erratic and anxious.

THEMES

Society – (The Psychoanalyst as a Household Figure, Feminism, Architecture, Space, Collecting and Museums)

Justice – (True-Crime)

Psychology – (Psychoanalysis as Detective Work)

SOCIETY

The Psychoanalyst as a Household Figure. "Paging Mr. Freud" Celia jokes when her friend wittily says that she "got rid of gallons of repressed poisons" by gossiping at the party. "My subconscious is a booby trap" Edith adds. References to psychoanalysts are plentiful in such random small talk. It is mentioned that Celia regularly saw a psychoanalyst before she met Mark. As her brother Rick criticizes her capriciousness with suitors, he teasingly remarks that he'd "I'd rather see you marry that witchdoctor of yours". "Curtis?" he is a brilliant psychoanalyst Celia protests. Celia herself applies a caricaturized version of psychoanalysis when she unearths Mark's childhood trauma.

Feminism. "Thinking is the prerogative of men. And because women are nearer to nature, they don't think, they feel". This may sound like a contemporary cultural critic pointing out a misogynist subtext in a film, but it is actually Mark confidently voicing his opinion. He obviously thinks he is uttering words of wisdom and yet the film doesn't embrace this position. On the contrary, the misogynist view is voiced so explicitly in order to be debunked. First, Mark proves to be hardly credible to be taken too seriously. Second, Mark is acting decently at the very end but that is only thanks to the analytical efforts of a woman.

Architecture. On their honeymoon Mark observes the architecture of the hacienda—"the doorways, the grillwork, the walls … they instill romance, its built into the place". Celia's impression of the church in Mexico echoes Mark: "bandings, pilasters, walls … its altar, its chandeliers tuned to a perfect harmony—built so that here only events of joy can happen … four hundred years of joy". Celia shares her husband's fascination with space. Mark attempts to create similarly strong emotions with his exhibits. By using only objects, the rooms provide an engaging experience for the guest.

Space. The space of the three rooms not only tell stories but illustrate their curator's unconscious: Don Ignacio is a wife killer but also a "cultivated man" (like Mark); a man kills his mother (Apparently Mark has contemplated that); an aristocrat murders in the 17th Century (which roughly corresponds to the time Mark's family settled in the Levender Falls). Leaving aside the rooms' ghastly content and his eccentricity, Mark's exhibitions offer an interesting exploration of meaning produced in space.

Collecting and Museums. Mark is an architect and publicist but being a collector is also an important part of his identity. He avoids replicas and carefully arranges original objects to tell a story. Use of copies in exhibits and storytelling are important issues for curators—and Mark happens to be one.

JUSTICE

True-crime. Fascination about violent crimes and particularly serial-killers (like Don Ignacio in Mark's third room) is a staple today's popular culture. There are countless documentaries, books, exhibits in the field of true-crime. Mark's hobby of reenactment of crime scenes hardly seems bizarre today. Was it regarded as such at the time? "Most people find them pretty potent" he remarks about his rooms—and their background stories. But his guests seem to be noticeably entertained by them as well, at least no one is complaining.

PSYCHOLOGY

Psychoanalysis as Detective Work. A serious case for psychoanalysis is made during Mark's tour of his room collection. One of the guests, the "brain psych major" succinctly points out that Don Ignacio's murders could have been prevented had he seen a psychoanalyst. This character is listed in the credits as "intellectual sub-deb". In his analysis of the scene and the character, Tom Gunning observes that the young woman is not presented as an intellectual snob and does not invite mockery of psychoanalysis (Gunning). It is rather the opposite and the film's conclusion proves the validity of her thesis about the relevance of a psychoanalytic approach. Then again, it is an extremely simplistic understanding of technique. Celia shows that Mark hates women because of a traumatic incident in his childhood that made him resent his mother. Celia proves that it was all a misunderstanding and hence Mark is freed from his obsessions.

Discussion questions

Hitchcock's *Rebecca* and Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door* have basic similarities. In what way are they different?

Joan Bennett's Celia is also the narrator of the story up until the last parts of the film. At one point Celia ceases to narrate—her husband Mark's (played by Michael Redgrave) voice-over takes over. Does this switch from one character's voice-over to that of another has any significance? What effect does it have on the viewer's perception?

Works Cited:

The Metzinger Sisters. *Costume Designer: Travis Banton"*. https://silverscenesblog.blogspot.com/2014/01/costume-designer-travis-banton.html. Accessed November 22, 2019.
Gunning, Tom. *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity*. London: British Film Institute. 2000, 364
The Metzinger Sisters. *Costume Designer: Travis Banton"*. https://silverscenesblog.blogspot.com/2014/01/costume-designer-travis-banton.html. Accessed November 22, 2019.

2019-2023 Humanities Institute All Rights Reserved