

# THE BIRTH OF A NEW WOMAN IN THE WESTERN: BECOMING A HEROINE IN THE WIND (VICTOR SJÖSTRÖM, 1928)\*

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«This is the story of a woman who came  
into to domain of the winds»<sup>1</sup>

## I. UNDER CONSTRUCTION: THE PLACE OF THE FEMALE SPECTATOR

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Having identified the patriarchal ideology in the realist structures of (classical) Hollywood cinema (Mulvey, 1975), feminist theorists were then faced with the challenge of rediscovering or re-designing, as a kind of system failure, a textual space for the female spectator. The main conclusion drawn by the British scholar Laura Mulvey in her seminal study was that narrative cinema is intended to meet the neurotic needs of the male ego, founded on the threat of castration, through a fetishistic and sadistic attitude towards the female figure. While this analysis offered tools for identifying the power of the gaze in iconic representations (Mayayo, 2007), it also revealed rather dismal prospects for the female spectator. In this study, I seek to continue the task of reconstruction of this cultural space, which since the 1970s has benefited from contributions by a significant

number of feminist film scholars (Johnston, 2000; Kuhn, 1991; Kaplan, 1983; De Lauretis, 1984; Doane, 1987; Modleski, 2002). The space to be rewritten, silenced by the hegemonic discourse and reactivated by a theoretical approach attentive to the symbolic discourse of reality offered by film and other audiovisual productions, has been associated with parody, a strategy that constitutes *a kind of resistance* against the unconscious work of myth (Johnston, 2000; Hutcheon, 1991) and/or a way for the heroine to *resist* her socialisation by the patriarchal system (Modleski, 2002). This cultural space of female resistance provides the central hypothesis that will guide this reading of identity construction in *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928).<sup>2</sup>

### I.1 Audiovisual discourse on identity

Textbooks on audiovisual narratives generally sum up the development of a film's story in three main sections: an initial situation of balance is

threatened by a conflict that continues through to the end, when the original balance is restored. This formalist outline tends to neglect a dramatic element that unfolds over the course of this temporal process: the journey associated with the *becoming* of the subject of the action. In other words, it overlooks the fact that what lies at the very heart of this archetypal structure is the basic question of identity that forms the very foundation of human culture. In this sense, the destabilising element at the beginning of the story coincides with a breakdown of being that prompts the protagonist to act, to embark on a quest. The metaphor of a journey underscores the idea of change and access to knowledge that constitutes a repeated updating of the mythical story of Oedipus. The etymology of the word “identity”, from the Latin *identitas*, *identitatis*, derived from *idem* (“the same”), reflects the aspect of repetition that characterises this journey.

In this process of social construction and affirmation lies much of the pleasure experienced when watching an audiovisual product. That pleasure culminates in a recognition: the protagonist, and with him/her, through a process of identification, the spectators, become *heroes or heroines*. The question here is how this gender difference has been constructed in the narrative in which viewers recognise themselves. Since the 1970s, the journey of *becoming a woman*, although criticised for being based on male structures, has been explored from various perspectives. As noted above, a number of feminist studies have highlighted the idea that femininity is associated with a form of resistance that infiltrates the patriarchal forms of the language. In 1990, the psychologist Maureen Murdock (2010), in a critical response to the influential model of myth proposed by Joseph Campbell (2001), suggests that in this patriarchal system the woman has to embark on a quest to recover her feminine being.<sup>3</sup> Inspired by Campbell, Christopher Vogler’s (1999) proposition responds to the criticism of such “gender problems” in fair-

ly simplistic terms with respect to the form and objective of the quest, arguing that “much of the journey is the same for all humans” (Vogler, 1999: xxi).

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The analysis of this temporal and cultural process unfolding in the heart of the narrative through the energy of desire is especially interesting in *The Wind*. This film is an essential work for exploring how the concept of identity has been constructed within the symbolic constellation of the Gothic heroine and the contemporary female investigator, as it is an audiovisual narrative that offers a metafictional reflection on femininity. The circumstances surrounding its production were conducive to a reconsideration of the hegemonic conception of identity. Produced at a time of severe economic and social unrest, shortly before the Wall Street Crash of 1929, its release came at a time in film history that has been characterised in ambivalent terms. On the one hand, it has been defined as a period of splendour, a golden age for the misnamed “silent film” as a narrative and aesthetic form, but also a time of uncertainty due to the rise of the talkie, a new movement opposed, as it happens, by the driving force behind *The Wind*, Lillian Gish. On the other hand, it was also a time of significant social and political changes for women. Following the Great War, women in the United States entered the workforce in large numbers, and it was only a decade earlier, in 1920, that they had received the vote. This context of change makes it particularly

interesting that the question of *becoming a woman* (in the Western genre) should feature in one of the last masterpieces of the silent film era.

The most obvious textual evidence that this film is especially fertile symbolic terrain for the mobility of a cultural response to the question “Who am I?” is the unique nature of the plot. The value of the film for study lies in the way it challenges established genre boundaries, a characteristic feature of the woman’s film (Doane, 1987: 128). Its storyline, classical only in appearance, connects the universes of the Western and the horror film. These two genres are in fact not so very different, as both explore the idea of the border separating civilisation from the territory of the Other, a strange and lawless realm. Its customary definition as a melodrama, an expressive mode that is traditionally denigrated and associated with the woman’s film, supports this possibility for revisionism. In her study of the melodramatic female body in early cinema, Margarita María Uribe points out that “melodrama is itself constituted as the main means of restoring a kind of ‘hidden morality’, a possibility of expressing emotions constrained by modern rationalism in a desecralised world” (Uribe, 2016: 156).<sup>4</sup>

The control held by women over the film’s production underscores the possibility for a change in the cultural discourse. Gish recalls that after working on *La Bohème* (King Vidor, 1926) and *The Scarlet Letter* (Victor Sjöström, 1926) for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, she thought that Dorothy Scarborough’s novel,<sup>5</sup> written in 1925, “was perfect for a motion picture as it was pure motion”, and that an “overworked” producer, Irving Thalberg, effectively put all the work in her hands.<sup>6</sup> In his analysis of the film, Bo Florin (2009) offers some other interesting details about this project. Gish wrote a four-page story outline that served as a starting point for the screenplay written by Frances Marion, and to play the role of Lige she chose Lars Hanson, who had played her forbidden love in the Victorian New England of *The*

*Scarlet Letter*. With shooting already under way, Clarence Brown voluntarily withdrew from the project, and Gish suggested the Swedish filmmaker Victor Sjöström to direct it instead.

The role of women in the conception of the project highlights the story’s implicit crossing of another frontier identified in the symbolic territory of the narrative. Teresa de Lauretis describes the gender difference inscribed in the story with reference to the universal Oedipus myth: “Therefore, to say that narrative is the production of Oedipus is to say that each reader—male or female—is constrained and defined within two positions of sexual difference thus conceived: male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; and female-obstacle-boundary-space, on the other” (De Lauretis, 1984: 121). However, in this case the monstrous Other is the product of the female imagination. Desire, the energy that triggers the action and marks the relationship between subject and object (Greimas, 1987: 263-267) spills over the boundaries through the actress’ bodily movements and gaze, in a strategy that failed to convince a significant number of critics. On its release it was a box office failure and received discouraging reviews for being *overwrought* and “too explicit in its evocation of the threatening landscape” (quoted by Jacobs, 2008: 75-76).

## 1.2 The resistance against becoming a heroine in the Western

Although readings of the film have generally focused on the duality between heroine and landscape, this duality has been viewed not as an essential feature in the journey towards femininity but as a mark of the author’s (director’s) style or of the influence of the naturalist pessimism that had prevailed in Hollywood since the release of *Greed* (Erich von Stroheim, 1924) (Jacobs, 2008: 74-76). Described by Jean Mitry as a “masterpiece” in which Sjöström’s filmmaking achieved “total perfection” (Mitry, 1989: 387), for Florin (2009) the landscape acts as a “mental space”, a directorial

signature that provides an aesthetic connection to his work in Sweden.<sup>7</sup> This dramatic value accorded to the landscape has also been noted to identify the style of David W. Griffith (Mottet, 1998), and has often been cited as proof of the aesthetic capacity of cinema in general. Edgar Morin (2001) identifies this dramatic connection as one of the principles that facilitated the transformation of the cinematographic image into *the magic of cinema*, exemplifying “the powerful current that carries each film along” with the climax of *Way Down East* (David W. Griffith, 1920): “Thus the heroine is turned into a piece of flotsam. The ice floe itself becomes an actor” (Morin, 2001: 70). Meanwhile, Núria Bou (2006) suggests that the function of the landscape in Griffith’s films is to mark a melodramatic construction of femininity: “dynamic and heroic masculinity’s objective is to rescue the girl, while femininity’s is to convey the intensity of the emotions clearly to the spectator” (Bou, 2006: 102).

Indeed, the wind and the landscape operate as melodramatic elements in the construction of female identity, characterised as a result of a highly emotional process. Through the shot/reverse shot structure, female desire is projected onto the monstrous Other, in an encounter which, as Linda Williams (1984) points out, is crucial to the breakdown and subsequent recognition of the woman, as historically the two have shared the cultural space of alterity. One clear piece of evidence of the importance that this strategy of projection has for the construction of the subject in *The Wind* is a shot with a mirror that appears in the party sequence, a significant moment in the heroine’s initiation (Image 1). The *double-framing* effect with an extreme close-up of Letty in the mirror adds to the *mise-en-abyme* of the representation that marks the whole text, with the presence of windows and doors. It also points to the central theme and, at the same time, thematises the gaze through the strategy of interpellation. It would not be the only instance of such a



Image 1. *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928)

technique, as from the beginning of the film the discourse problematises two issues of relevance to the study of the relationship between women and cinema, critically positioning the point of view and the image of the woman at the root of her conflict with the wind.

My starting hypothesis for this study is that in this early Western, with its self-reflexive “superwestern” (Bazin, 1967: 150) tone, atypical of the genre thanks to the invocation of the Gothic and female desire in its narrative, the representation of identity is a precursor to the narrative of the Gothic heroine in the classical Hollywood cinema of the 1940s. Mary Ann Doane (1987: 123-154) has studied this cycle of films, belonging to the “woman’s film” subgenre and characterised by generic hybridisation, to which she gives the name “paranoid woman’s films”. Like the Gothic heroine, Letty is positioned at the centre of the story, but her gaze is associated with anxiety and terror, placing her in the role of the victim. She is the subject of desire, but she encounters *the void*, identified by Doane with the aesthetic category of abjection posited by Kristeva (1988), the place where the signification culturally associated with the woman collapses. Doane concludes that Goth-

ic woman's films represent the difficulty involved in the psychological journey of *becoming a woman*. Through the gaze, the woman enters into an encounter with an earlier phase of language, prior to the establishment of identity, which, according to psychoanalysis, is identified with the place of the mother.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Letty confronts the mother figure, Cora, and after her marriage, it will be in the space of the angel in the house that the female fantasy will be fully expressed. Here we see the reappearance of the wild horse ghost which, according to Wirt Roddy, the sinister herald who initiates the travelling woman at the start of the film, drives people—especially women—to madness. This liminal emotional state is a common feature of the Gothic woman and the contemporary female investigator, who suffers the lack of comprehension of a male world. Like Cassandra, madness operates as a kind of martyrdom in the forging of the heroine, the penance to be paid for her transgression.<sup>9</sup>

As prescribed by the archetypal odyssey that forges (the identity of) the hero (Campbell, 2001), the adventure begins with a train journey, the image of the trajectory towards a new femininity in the Wild West, far from her home in Virginia. On this winding journey, Letty's relationship with the wind is rendered visible, in classic Gothic and Expressionist style, as a fantasy that can be interpreted as the *heroine's resistance* (Modleski, 2002) against becoming the epic Western heroine. This resistance is reflected in the terror in her gaze and the movement of a melodramatic body that oversteps the boundary. Commonly defined as patriarchal, the Western presents a mythic vision of the woman as wife and mother, a figure with a special connection to nature, the earth; a vision that Letty ultimately seems to reconcile herself to: "where the figure of the mother is, despite everything, an object of veneration: as a repository of tradition, a principle of continuity, and of serene, almost 'telluric' force. Rooted in the natural, organic world, never exposed or excluded from any

manifestation of life, she is the soul itself of every home" (Astre and Hoarau, 1997: 135). A similar idea has been proposed by André Bazin: "The myth of the Western illustrates, and both initiates and confirms woman in her role as vestal of the social virtues, of which the chaotic world is so greatly in need. Within her is concealed the physical future, and, by way of the institution of the family to which she aspires as the root is drawn to the earth, its moral foundation" (Bazin, 1967: 145).

The happy ending demanded by the distributors to replace the tragic conclusion to the novel, the imposition of which, according to Gish, was considered a moral outrage by the whole production team,<sup>10</sup> could not erase the woman's resistance. According to Florin (2009), it would have transformed her usual image from Victorian victim to empowered heroine. However, the resistance of the creators—Gish and Marion—against this change by the commercial censors is described by Marion's biographer as being because their objective was to break down the Romantic vision of the Wild West (quoted by Berke, 2016: 9). Instead, with this new ending, the film contributed to the establishment of *the myth* of the wife and mother (Johnston, 2000; Kaplan, 1983) imposed by the Western narrative. It is no accident that this ending should be reflected in the grammar of the scene that serves as the memorable opening to another masterpiece of the genre: Martha, blinded by the intense light of the desert, opens the door to *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) to welcome home, from her perspective (desire), the man she loves and the antihero of the story.

### 1.3 Gish's leading role

It is a little known fact that film stars exerted extraordinary power in the final years of the silent period. The artistic work they performed with their bodies was considered similar to that of the scriptwriter or the director, as it overlapped into these creative territories. In a revealing analysis of the theoretical work of the actress, who in 1930





Image 2. *Way Down East* (David W. Griffith, 1920)

wrote “A Universal Language”, Annie Berke (2016) debunks the cliché of Gish as subordinate to the work of her mentor David W. Griffith. Gish’s writings, consulted by Berke at the New York Public Library, reveal a conception of performing that affirms her claim to authorship of the work on an equal footing with the screenwriter and the director. Indeed, the art of performing was a factor behind her opposition to talkies, as dialogues ostensibly cut down that art. All this leads Berke to identify an allegory for this creative empowerment in the film: “*The Wind*, ostensibly the story of a weak, victimized woman, functions as an allegory for a silent film star at the height of her power, so committed and controlled that the rest of the film bends to her will and vision” (Berke, 2016: 11).

The creative work of this petite and powerful actress, who directed a film that is now lost, *Remodeling Her Husband* (1920), has been eclipsed by the hegemonic notion of the auteur in film studies, eliding the fact that much of the modernity of the cinematic image arises from its collective authorship. Together with the characters portrayed by Mary Pickford and Janet Gaynor, Gish’s characters have been identified with the old-fashioned archetype of the Victorian heroine, a model of the romantic, virginal woman, firmly rooted to the earth, which tends to be associated with the male imagination. At the same time, she is defined

as childlike and naive, because her actions are not motivated by sexual desire. The model of the *adult woman*, which stands in opposition to the Victorian model, was embodied by Greta Garbo and Norma Shearer (Bou, 2017: 109), interpreted as a reflection of the *new woman* who appeared after the First World War in the form of the flapper or *garçonne*. However, in titles like *The Scarlet Letter* and *Way Down East*, the actress known as the virginal muse to the father of film grammar displays with her actions, performed in solitude in contrast to the hostile crowd confronted by the transgressive woman, a determination and strength that reveal the apparent fragility of her characters to be merely superficial. The memorable climax to *Way Down East* could be viewed as a precursor to her work in *The Wind*, as an actress who surrenders her body to the excesses of a belligerent emotion. In one of the most melodramatic moments of the film, Anna confronts the patriarch (whose subjective point of view is the one the spectator identifies with), who casts her out for having had a child out of wedlock, while she reveals the man responsible (Image 2). Her body movement punctuates the timing of the scene and expresses an emotion that rebels against Victorian norms. When she goes outside, she is caught in the snowstorm and it is this same melodramatic movement that establishes a continuity with the previous scene. The wind and the snow that fall

on the woman seem to punish her for what happened in the heat of the hearth and, at the same time, contribute to underscoring her mood, establishing an alliance between female expressiveness and nature. Indeed, it is an alliance so strong that the heroine will ultimately become one with the landscape, carried on an ice floe towards a waterfall before being rescued *in extremis* and becoming the hero's wife.

## 2. THE HORIZON OF THE NARRATIVE

The introductory intertitles of the omniscient narrator point in a particular moral direction, suggesting the breach of another boundary thanks to the hegemony of male actions in the epic feat of conquering the Earth.<sup>11</sup> But unexpectedly, the second intertitle pushes the male subject out of the leading role to assign it instead to a woman, thereby subverting the prevailing conventions of the genre and highlighting the passage through a first threshold for the character who is called upon to be the heroine of the story. The actions of the woman take on an audacious quality, as if, by

assuming the dimension of a heroic act, she were guilty of a transgression.

The omniscient perspective of the opening shot visualises one of the most immediately recognisable motifs in the visual repertoire of the Western. In the background, we see a horizon lined with mountains that presages, as a kind of narrative promise, the place where the story will unfold (Image 3). Indeed, this iconic image will reappear several times as the story progresses, its view distorted by the wind. Its appearance underscores the important role of the landscape, the earth and its relationship with the wind as a symbol of the psychological drama. Thus, in the second sequence, a shot of the horizon dissolves into a medium shot of Letty and Lige travelling on the carriage to the Sweetwater ranch. Shortly afterwards, Lige explains to Letty the ghost horse legend of the "Injuns", and it is at this moment that we see the first dreamlike vision of the white horse of the north wind, underscoring the couple's desire-gaze. In the party sequence, after Letty's confrontation with her cousin's wife, Cora, the exterior shot of the horizon blurred by the wind cuts back to Letty's gaze. Apart from serving as a metaphor for the developing suspense of the story, the shot of the horizon has an ambivalent function, signalling a romantic connection with the earth, verging on a sense of the sublime, exploring the idea of the vastness of nature alluded to earlier by the omniscient narrator, while at the same time acting as a kind of compass, a comfortable cultural site that will be constantly distorted, as the legend of the "Injuns" warns, by the phantasmal violence of the wild horse of the north wind. It is precisely in the opening shot that this untamed horizon is presented, before the iron horse comes into view, ploughing across the rugged terrain of the arid landscape. The lap dissolve, one of the most notable strategies in the film's discourse, highlights the objective of the continuity system of narrative cinema and points to the symbolic relationship between the worlds

Image 3. *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928)





Image 4. *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928)

outside and inside the train, where we see Letty for the first time.

## 2.1 Ariadne's thread

Evident in the organisation of the narrative is the rhetorical figure of parody, identified by Claire Johnston (2000) as one of the basic strategies of the woman's film and, according to Linda Hutcherson (1991), used in postmodern culture as a means of updating certain forms whose use has become naturalised. Generally associated with modern and postmodern narratives, this self-referential feature can be found in other films of the 1920s as well. Perhaps one of the most emblematic examples can be found in the comedy genre, in *The General* (Buster Keaton & Clyde Bruckman, 1926), which makes use of parody for comic effect to ridicule the figure of the hero and the cultural construction of masculinity. The horizon, the visual motif of the "Wild West" *par excellence*, and the gaze that illuminates it if the wind does not prevent it, are the two elements that are parodied in *The Wind*. Even at the beginning of the film, the question of point of view (that invisible but revealing Ariadne's thread in the analysis of an audiovisual text) and the female image are turned into objects of reflection, thereby questioning the enunciative transparency of classical discourse. On the textual level of the story, it is obvious that the film's key theme is the female gaze. Letty's eyes and the object of her gaze, the landscape,

are repeatedly afflicted by the relentless wind. At the same time, the narrative reveals a high level of self-awareness on this question. The opening sequence introduces a structure that is repeated all the way through to the final climax, developing the idea of the threat that the male gaze poses for the female object of desire. The shot that introduces Letty portrays the minority status of the female traveller (Image 4). She has her back to us in a carriage full of men, in a composition that conveys the idea of the woman's vulnerability. It is also interesting to note the point of view of the shot, as the privileged position from which the story is told and the power (of the gaze) is controlled in an audiovisual narrative. What at first seems to be a neutral perspective is soon revealed to be a diegetic point of view. The next shot, of a man gazing at the woman, is not introduced in the conventional manner, with a sharp cut, but with another lap dissolve, serving as a visual emphasis of the domination of the male gaze. It is significant that a film with a female protagonist should introduce her with an archetypal image resulting from male scopophilia. In this way, the first phantasmal image in this Gothic Western is established: the image of a man gazing at a woman. At the end of the climax, this Gothic villain's body will disappear as if he were merely an evil spirit.

This mythic vision is also associated with other characters portrayed by Gish. In *Way Down East*, the image of the poor country girl Anna



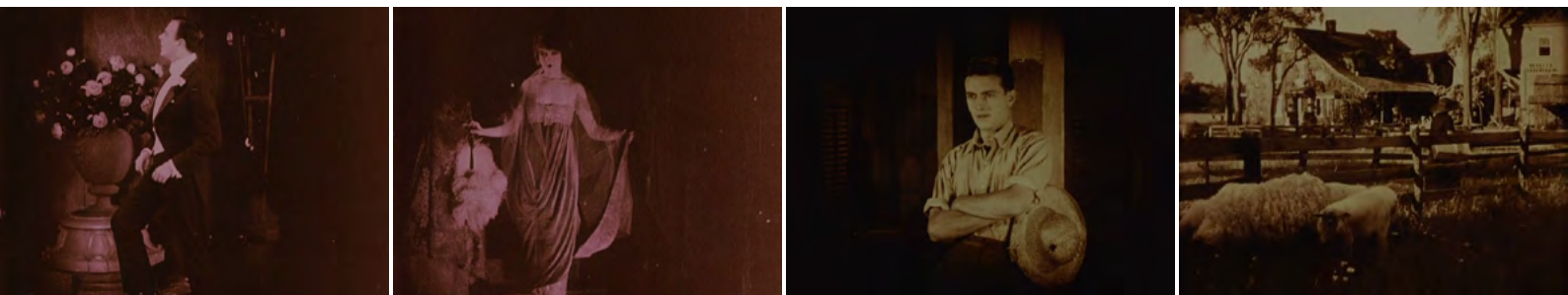


Image 5. *Way Down East* (David W. Griffith, 1920)

Moore fluctuates between the glamorous view of the dashing Lennox Sanderson, the villain who tricks her into a fake marriage, and the pastoral view of the hero, David Bartlett, which wears away feminine emotion in *the great storm* of the climax (Image 5). However, it does not acquire the self-referential quality of *The Wind*, where the male gaze is associated with a restlessness that seems to increase the force of the wind, in a metaphor for female desire. The connection between the two is presented in the first shots of the film. Later on, Lige, whom Letty initially confuses with her cousin Beverly, exhibits a gaze that also fits into this pattern, when he and another man waiting for Letty engage in a target-shooting contest to determine who will get to travel in the carriage next to the trophy-woman. At the family ranch, these same two men will compete for her attentions and, a little while later at the party, will flip a coin to determine who will get to ask for her hand in marriage.

In this male domain of the iron horse, the symbol of reason, the empowered gaze of the travelling woman will be punished by the wind. A shot/reverse shot juxtaposes the gazes of the man and the woman, marking sexual difference. This exchange of gazes is interrupted by the omniscient point of view of the narrator to create a

situation of suspense. In an exterior shot, we see the force of the wind against the train, obscuring it and the view of the horizon. Back inside the train, the woman leaves the established axis of action to gaze through the window, and it is here that her gaze is assaulted by the wind, suggesting that the outside space is a source of anxiety. As the action unfolds, this relationship will become increasingly violent. The various scenes where it reappears include the dinner at her cousin Beverly's house, at the party, in her new home with Lige, and even in the climax sequence, where the imaginary level of the diegesis, i.e., the subjective realm of the story, takes over the action. The window also serves another semantic function here, as it establishes a diegetic *double-frame* that alludes to the spectator's view of the screen. This *mise-en-abyme* of the representation underlines the spectator's identification with the character's desire.<sup>12</sup>

In the final climax, the structure of parodic signification developed throughout the text resumes with renewed intensity, suggesting a circular pattern that seems to return us to the beginning (Im-

Image 6. *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928)



age 6). In a picture with a background of flowers, centred in a medium shot, the virginal figure of the young woman is looking to a point off-camera. This other mythic image of the woman



Image 7. *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928)

in a kind of lost paradise, symbolised here by her home state of Virginia, is suddenly dominated violently by a man's gaze, as the shot dissolves to an unsettling close-up of the villain's eyes, recalling the phantasmal image at the beginning of the film. The next shot is a neutral POV of the man gazing at the picture of Letty through a stereoscope, and then from the man's point of view we see Letty herself performing household chores. Once again, it is this restless point of view that seems to exacerbate the pressure of the wind, which is shown in a shot/reverse shot with Letty.<sup>13</sup>

It is also worth noting how the opening sequence is organised around a duality, the rhetorical figure with which the question of identity has been culturally signified. In addition to the woman-wind binary, one of the basic strategies in the construction of this duality is the fade to black. Most of the narrative blocks are separated by this kind of transition between shots, marking an ellipsis and organising the information in a binary manner. In this way, in the first sequence, in addition to the spatial relationship (inside/outside) and the binary of gender identity (male/female), the fade-to-black divides the block into two parts associated with the duality of day/night. The repetition of certain shots with slight modifications emphasises this division. In the second part of the film the shot of the couple engaged in dialogue is repeated, but the image of the woman has changed; her smile is gone and her clothes

are darker and more mature, contrasting with the light and innocence of her first appearance. This sinister inversion is combined with references to confusion. When she gets off the train, Letty confuses Lige with her cousin Beverly. Later, at the Sweetwater ranch, there will also be connections of identity between Letty and Cora, as when Beverly carries his cousin into the house in his arms, as if she were his newlywed wife soon to assume the role mother.

The dualistic organisation is supported by the relationships established between female and male characters through the composition of frames and the editing. Thus, as the film progresses, the villain Wirt Roddy will be established as a counterfigure to Lige Hightower. This division is revealed in the climax sequence at the end of the film through the strategies of repetition and confusion of identities. Similarly, the gaze of the dark and rough Cora, who contrasts with Letty's lightness and fragility, is also a source of violence. Through her malicious gaze we see Letty talking intimately to Cora's husband and winning the affection of her children. The reverse shots of Cora, in a depiction evocative of the witch in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand et al., 1937), drive home the idea that she sees in Letty the wife and mother that she can never be.

The strategy of duality is combined with the triangular form of the characters' relationships, suggesting a reading of Letty's story as an Oedi-

pal journey (Image 7). In the first part of the film, and again in the ending, the triangle is Letty-Roddy-Lige, while at the Sweetwater ranch another triangle is established between Letty, her cousin Beverly and his wife Cora. As the maternal figure, Cora assumes the role of teacher of the initiate, explaining to Letty the only option left to a single woman with no financial resources who wants to survive in those arid desert lands: marriage. With a symbolic lap dissolve that questions the enunciative transparency, the narrator shows the consequences of this alliance: a shot of Letty's hand, on which Lige has placed the ring, dissolves into a shot of dirty dishes, and then to one of a household lamp. The marriage is not consummated and the house is depicted as an ambivalent space that protects her from the wind but at the same time imprisons her.

### 3. THE DUEL OF THE GAZES AND A NEW CULTURAL HORIZON

The expression of desire and its object, identity, effectively splits the most exciting sequence in the film into two parts. The first, in an Expressionist visual style, presents Letty's progressive state of madness. The imaginary level of this scene—dominated by the actress's gaze and physical performance, together with the representation of a space that offers a troubling portrait of her emotions and the return of the dreamlike image of the ghost horse—establishes an intertextual reference to the female fantasy depicted by the painter Henry Fuseli in *The Nightmare* (second version, 1790-1791). The second part represents a return to the symbolic level of the film's narrative, where the woman's new identity is established through her love for the other.

On the imaginary level, Roddy's assault of Letty increases the violence of the wind and the image of the white horse is replaced visually with sexual aggression. The following morning, Letty confronts her nemesis in classic Wild West style,



Image 8. *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928)

with a revolver. This test of initiation, the duel between heroine and villain, is notable in various ways, all of which point to the self-referential theme that marks the whole film: the gaze. The exterior shot of the dawn lighting up a new horizon after the storm dissolves into a high-angle shot of Letty, her back to us, which draws our attention to the point of view and returns to the idea of a looming threat (Image 8). This is followed by an autonomous camera movement, an enunciative mark of the "great imaginer" which, in a suspenseful moment, foreshadows the heroine's use of the weapon. The male gaze off camera once again positions the woman with her back to us. But this time the woman's gaze off camera is not to remind us of the presence of the wind but to represent her resistance. Letty turns to Roddy and says: "I'm not going away with you."





Image 9. *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928); *A Lady of Chance* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1928); *The Kiss* (Jacques Feyder, 1929)

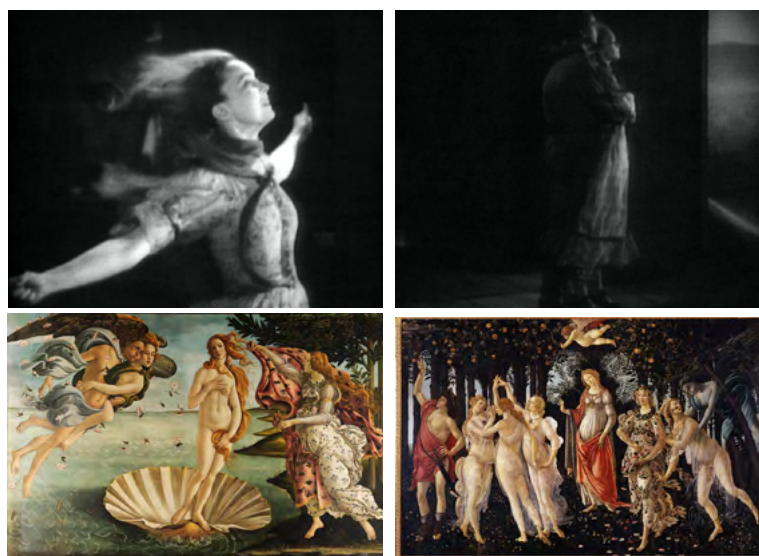
In other pre-Code genres, female protagonists also turn to guns to exact justice. In an era in which emotion was paramount, both the Victorian-era heroine of the Far West and the new urban woman take up arms against men who refuse to respect their wishes (Image 9). In the romantic drama *A Lady of Chance* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1928), a female con artist nicknamed “Angel Face” (Norma Shearer), redeemed by love, threatens the villain with a pistol in hand to stop him from conning the man she loves. This female recourse to violence against an authoritarian male also forms part of the climax to *The Kiss* (Jacques Feyder, 1929), another masterpiece of Hollywood’s silent era. After she is acquitted for her husband’s murder, Irene (Greta Garbo) confesses her crime to her lover and defence lawyer, while it is presented in a flashback.

### 3.1 Birth of a new woman

By way of conclusion, it is worth considering an intertextual relationship on which the construction of female identity in the film is based, and which exemplifies the cultural dialogue between the art of cinema and the art of painting. In the final shots, the wind acts as a kind of baptismal element for the heroine. The woman celebrates her new identity with her hair flowing wildly like the goddess of love imagined by Botticelli in *The Birth of Venus* (1482-1485) (Image 10). Embracing

one another on the left, Zephyr and the nymph Chloris are blowing air at the central figure, Venus, who is actually slightly off-centre, leaning towards where the goddess Flora awaits the new woman with her cloak of flowers. The figures of Flora, Chloris and Venus herself raise a question about the representation of femininity, as they

Image 10. *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928); *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928); *The Birth of Venus* (1482-1485); *Primavera* (Botticelli, 1477-82)



all appear to depict the same female model, inspired by Simonetta Vespucci. In his reading of the work, Edgar Wind (1972: 129-144) identified the concept of division at its heart. In this sense, the diptych comprising *The Birth of Venus* and *Primavera* (Botticelli, 1477-1482) present the elemental and pastoral scenes of the same theme: love, featuring two Venuses, the heavenly and the ordinary. The scene showing the triad of figures on the right side in *Primavera* represents a metamorphosis, when Zephyr abducts the nymph Chloris, who is transformed into Flora, while the figure of Mercury has its counterfigure in Zephyr. Both the film and the painting depict desire, associated with violence and love, through the gaze. It is through these emotions that the identity of a new woman is born. And in both cases, female identity is understood as a temporary process operating under a duality: a woman who is both the object and subject of desire, touched by the arrow of a blind Cupid; an abducted woman and a lover, embracing her kidnapper; a self-absorbed heroine nymph and goddess with an empowered gaze.

Yet another analogy could be proposed. The Florentine master focused solely on the last part of the myth, leaving its sinister aspect outside the frame: the goddess of love was born out of the genitals of Uranus, cut off by his son Saturn and mixed with the foam of the waves, and she was led by Zephyr to the Earth, where the Horae dressed her. Eugenio Trías explains how the ghastly event that gave rise to this birth has not been omitted altogether, as it is symbolised in “the foam of the sea, highlighted by Botticelli in such a way that the omitted scene is present nonetheless” (Trías, 2001: 79). Similarly, *The Wind* makes reference to the horrifying event which, according to the discourse of this strange Western, serves as the foundation for the love of the Other and the problem of *becoming a woman* in a space dominated by the male gaze: the virginal Persephone is transformed into a goddess of love. The last shot not only constitutes the epic confrontation of the

Western couple with the wind, but also highlights the liberating effect of the female gaze. This empowerment is possible at the end of the Gothic journey thanks to the disappearance of the female fantasy; in other words, the disappearance of fear and its phantom: the male fantasy of the woman. In this way, framed in the doorway appears another intradiegetic screen reflecting a mise-en-abyme of a new cultural horizon for the woman and the couple in the Western. ■

## NOTES

- \* This article forms part of the project conducted by Universidad Rey Juan Carlos' CUV PAC research project (Visual Culture and Contemporary Artistic Practices: Languages, Technologies and Media).
- 1 First intertitle in *The Wind*, presenting an introduction by the film's omniscient narrator.
- 2 In the film's credits appears the name Victor Seastrom, which was used by the Swedish author for the films he made during his time in Hollywood.
- 3 In previous studies, the journey of the female investigator has been characterised as a self-reflexive exploration of femininity (Antón, 2016; Antón, 2019).
- 4 *The Wind* is one of the three films selected as a case study. However, Uribe's analysis focuses less on the “modern female body” introduced by the melodrama (Uribe, 2016: 11) than on the elided event in the climax and the change to the ending (Uribe, 2016: 189-208).
- 5 Scarborough's literary creation is marked throughout by a Gothic aesthetic, which became a focus of theoretical study. According to Inés Ordiz (2014: 18), “Dorothy Scarborough's study [*The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (1917)] is considered to be the first work to offer a systematic analysis of the Gothic”. Initially published anonymously, *The Wind* would become her most acclaimed work.
- 6 From “*The Wind* presented by Lillian Gish”.
- 7 Gösta Werner's documentary *Victor Sjöström: Ett porträt* (1981), apart from emphasising this directorial signature, sums up his stay in Hollywood with a few still shots and the idea that Greta Garbo eclipsed Lillian Gish.



- 8 Lila's Gothic journey in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) leads towards a similar questioning: on a subterranean, subconscious level of the dark mansion, the woman confronts the mummified body of the mother, which expresses the emptiness of the signifier "woman" (Antón, 2016).
- 9 On this point, it is worth noting that Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar associate the constant of the mad woman in nineteenth-century British and American literature with a revision of the imagery of the woman (Gilbert and Gubar, 1998).
- 10 From "The Wind presented by Lillian Gish".
- 11 (1): "Man—puny but irresistible—encroaching forever on Nature's vastnesses, gradually, very gradually wresting away her stranger secrets, subduing her fierce elements—conquers the earth!" And then (2): "This is the story of a woman who came into the domain of the winds."
- 12 In his analysis of the connections of hypnosis with cinema and the train, Raymond Bellour writes, with reference to *The Wind*: "Dans le film de fiction, la fenêtre du train peut cerner au contraire le motif qui va la hanter, par l'abstraction sensible dont elle frappe le double regard du personnage y du spectateur: ainsi ces admirables plans réitérés de *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928), qui condensent au fil du voyage inaugural la fureur du sable tournoyant et s'accumulant, comme illuminé, contre la fenêtre sombre du compartiment, aux yeux effarés de Lillian Gish destinée tout le film durant à ce sable et à se vent" (Bellour, 2009: 78-79). Translation: "In the fiction film, the train window may instead frame the motif that will haunt it, through a visible abstraction that afflicts the gaze of both character and spectator: thus, these brilliant repeated shots in *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928), which encapsulate the fury of the sand that swirls and piles up there over the course of the journey, like something illuminated against the dark window of the compartment, before the frightened eyes of Lillian Gish, destined throughout the film to gaze upon this sand and wind." (Italics are mine.)
- 13 Griselda Pollock, in her study of the Impressionist artists Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassat, questions the

modern painting movement from a feminist perspective and identifies in the paintings of women in public spaces the theme of the male gaze as a pressure on the woman (Pollock, 2015: 111-136). The male gaze is also characterised as a source of anxiety in the audiovisual narrative of the female investigator (Antón, 2016).

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## THE BIRTH OF A NEW WOMAN IN THE WESTERN. BECOMING A HEROINE IN THE WIND (VICTOR SJÖSTRÖM, 1928)

### Abstract

Taking as point of departure the aesthetic aspects and contexts of the production of the film that promoted the transformation of the dominant discourse on identity, this article presents a countercurrent reading of Victor Sjöström's *The Wind* (1928) with the intention of reconstructing the cultural space of the female spectator. The analysis focuses on a structure of meaning that runs through the text with which they parody, within the symbolic territory of western, the narrative resources in the study of the theoretical relationship between cinema and women. From the beginning, the narrative situates in a self-conscious way the resources of the point of view and the image of the woman in the origin of the feminine conflict with the wind. Through the analysis of how the gaze circulates, we understand as a vehicle of the desire of the characters, and also of the discursive figures, we can perceive a metafictional reflection sense of sense the mythical vision of the woman in the distant west to which the protagonist travels. This reflective trait and its passive gaze allow us to inscribe this identity trajectory on femininity in the symbolic constellation of the Hollywood universe configured by the Gothic heroine and the contemporary investigative woman. Beyond the usual reading that places the woman in the role of the victim, our starting hypothesis is in the twilight and atypical, the protagonist's relationship with the wind is visible, in the gothic and expressionistic way, a fantasy which can be interpreted as the feminine resistance to heroic epics of western.

### Key words

Lillian Gish; *The Wind* (1928); Audiovisual Culture; Female Desire; Heroine; Identity; Metafiction; Myth; Western.

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## EL NACIMIENTO DE UNA NUEVA MUJER EN EL WESTERN. LLEGAR A SER HEROÍNA EN EL VIENTO (THE WIND, VICTOR SJÖSTRÖM, 1928)

### Resumen

Partiendo de aspectos estéticos y contextuales de la producción del film que promovieron la transformación del discurso dominante sobre la identidad, este artículo presenta una lectura a contracorriente de *El viento* (The Wind, Victor Sjöström, 1928), con la intención de reconstruir el espacio cultural de la espectadora. El análisis se centra en una estructura de significación que recorre el texto con la que se parodian, dentro del territorio simbólico del *western*, dos recursos narrativos que se han considerado relevantes en el estudio de la relación teórica cine y mujer. Desde el inicio, la narrativa sitúa de manera autoconsciente los recursos del punto de vista y la imagen de la mujer en el origen del conflicto femenino con el viento. A través del análisis de cómo circula la mirada, entendida como vehículo del deseo de los personajes y de las figuras discursivas, puede percibirse una reflexión metafictional de sentido crítico sobre la visión mítica de la mujer en el lejano oeste al que viaja la protagonista. Este rasgo reflexivo y su mirada pasional permiten inscribir este trayecto identitario sobre la feminidad en la constelación simbólica del universo de Hollywood configurado por la heroína gótica y la mujer investigadora contemporánea. Más allá de la lectura habitual que coloca a la mujer en el rol de víctima, nuestra hipótesis de partida es que en este *western* crepuscular y atípico, la relación de la protagonista con el viento hace visible, a la manera gótica y expresionista, una fantasía que puede interpretarse como la resistencia femenina a llegar a ser la heroína épica del *western*.

### Palabras clave

Lillian Gish; *El viento* (1928); Cultura audiovisual; Deseo femenino; Heroína; Identidad; Metaficción; Mito; *Western*.

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