

AGnieszka Budzyńska

The rhetoric of gender role reversal – strong female characters in the American revisionist western

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AGNIESZKA BUDZYŃSKA

UMCS LUBLIN

BUDZYNSKAGNIESZKA@GMAIL.COM

The rhetoric of gender role reversal – strong female characters in the American revisionist western Retoryka odwrócenia ról płciowych. Silne bohaterki w amerykańskim westernie feministycznym

Abstract

This article investigates gender role reversal in the feminist revisionist Western film by exploring the notion of reversal (peripeteia). First, it demonstrates features of classical Western on the example of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). It establishes genre's reliance on gendered binary opposites i.e. civilization/wilderness, individual/community, passive/active, and draws attention to language. Then it analyzes how these fundamental conventions are changed in more recent films and what do differences signal rhetorically. Distinction is made between *The Missing* (2013) with its clear focus on reversal of generic features associated with dominant masculinity, and *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993) which addresses critical concepts of agency, gaze, and performative aspect of gender.

W niniejszym studium autorka bada odwrócenie ról płciowych w westernach określanych jako feministyczne i rewizjonistyczne, powołując się na Arystotelesowską perypetię. Podstawą analizy są cechy klasycznego westernu ukazane na przykładzie „Poszukiwaczy” (1956) w reżyserii Johna Forda. Przywołane zostają typowe dla gatunku nacechowane płciowo przeciwieństwa, tj. cywilizacja/natura, jednostka/wspólnota, bierny/aktywny bohater ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem języka. Analiza kluczowych konwencji gatunkowych w nowszych filmach i ich retorycznego znaczenia pozwala na skonstruowanie dwóch podejść. Podczas gdy film „Zaginione” (2003) skupia się przede wszystkim na odwróceniu gatunkowych tropów i konwencji kojarzonych z męską dominacją, „Ballada o małym Jo” (1993) zajmuje się kwestiami aktywnej podmiotowości, kategorią spojrzenie, performatywnością gender.

Key words

Western film, gender roles, reversal, peripeteia, feminist film criticism
western, role płciowe, odwrócenie, perypetia, feministyczna krytyka filmowa

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AGNIESZKA BUDZYŃSKA
UMCS LUBLIN
BUDZYNSKAGNIESZKA@GMAIL.COM

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Introduction

Reversal is a term which in rhetorical theory can be traced back to Aristotle and his concept of *peripeteia*. In *Poetics* he defined it as “a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity” (1452a). In this sense *peripeteia* means a plot twist which reverses a situation. It is a powerful dramatic device that can evoke strong emotions and therefore it is closely tied to audience’s expectations. As a result *peripeteia* can be understood as either: reversal of the situation, intention or expectation of the characters, or reversal of the expectation of the audience. The following analysis uses the idea of *peripeteia* as fundamental change in the orientation of the story.

Presented below is an investigation of gender role reversal and representation of strong female characters in two American Western movies characterized both as revisionist and feminist: *The Missing* (2003) and *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993). Even though the Western is no longer the dominant cinematic genre, it is worth examining as it still has an impact on our culture either by reproducing or reversing dominant assumptions about the gender roles.

From classical to feminist Western

In his book *The Western* David Lusted traces the history of the genre that despite initially being seen as only entertainment and derisively called a “horse opera” (2003, 13-14) became a “part of the cultural language by which America understands itself” and a “central American art form” (2003, 22). It also became a crucial “twentieth-century signifier in popular culture, advertising, fashion and tourist industry” (Lusted 2003, 37). The genre can be called masculine both in respect to its origin and content. According to Jane Tompkins (1992, 39) the Western was a reaction against the dominant Victorian culture of domesticity and increasing presence of women in the public sphere. As for its content, it was focused on the cowboy hero and his adventures in the American West of the 19th century. It works

on a set of binary oppositions and conflicts defined by Jeremy Kitses as: individual/community, nature/culture, West/East (Lusted 2003, 21).

Being targeted at male audience and appealing most to working-class adolescent males, the Western film gave limited roles to women, who functioned “as deviations from or prizes for the hero’s narrative quest” (Lusted 2003, 28). This statement evokes Laura Mulvey’s criticism of the cinema that operates on gendered oppositions. The male hero is usually the active, powerful agent who influences the dramatic action and the cinematic look is organized around him, while the woman is represented as the passive, powerless object of desire (Smelik 1999, 491). Though there were “heroines who rode opposite the cowboy heroes”, stereotypes for females varied from a “hapless maiden” to a heroine who “could ride a horse as well as anyone else on the set.” Other stereotypes have been: the long-haired, wild-riding hellions’ girls dressed as boys; chocolate-box heroines; decorative heroines; and spunky heroines. Perhaps the most common stereotype is the dark-haired and a blond girl competing for the same cowboy hero (Varner 2008, 235).

During the classical period (1910s—1950s) the Western was bigger than all other genres produced and it “was central to the popularity and profitability of the Hollywood film industry” until 1970s (Lusted 2003, 11). As Buscombe (1988, 51) recalls,

The withering away of the traditional audience for the Western had led by the 1970s to a free-for-all, where in order to find a market everything was tried at least once. There were Westerns for children, for blacks and hippies, for liberals and conservatives.

The decline of appeal of the Western coincided with the development of feminist film theory and cine-psychoanalysis (Lusted 2003, 28). What followed in the 1980s was the interest in the complexity of the U.S. history and its representation in the media. Frontier hypothesis was questioned and lost its romantic appeal and the history of racial conflicts and westward expansion has become more nuanced in the revisionist Western. The women’s movement and historical revisionism sparked off the debate about the place of female characters in cinema and the critique of the genre as being too limiting (Lusted 2003, 28), relegating women and racial minorities to the roles of Others (Varner 2008, 235). Because some films were clearly intended to make a feminist statement, a new type of Western emerged — the feminist Western. It was characterized by the domination of women, reversal of gender roles, men playing subservient roles and women playing typically male roles often wearing male clothes. *Johnny Guitar* (1954) starring Joan Crawford is the earliest example of a feminist Western, called “anomalous” due to its early emergence (Varner 2008, 87).

***The Missing* revisiting genre conventions**

The Missing (2003) is a revisionist Western directed by Ron Howard (the director of *A Beautiful Mind*) starring Cate Blanchett and Tommy Lee Jones with Rachel Evan Woods and Jenna Boyd in supporting roles. It bears some similarity to John Ford's 1956 classic Western movie *The Searchers*, which "illustrates a number of basic assumptions, basic conventions, of classic Westerns" (Varner 2008, 186). Both stories share some narrative elements i.e. they are set on the frontier in the second part of the 19th century, follow determined family members in pursuit of a missing girl and their action focuses on tracking down the Indian kidnappers and freeing the child by any means necessary. What sets them apart are different representations of gender roles. *The Missing* is an example of a feminist Western, which reverses traditional tropes of gender roles of the classical Western formula. Not only does it replace the cowboy hero with a female lead character, but also investigates emotional lives of its characters more deeply. It also makes the previously restricted representation of the feminine sphere (with domesticity, female concerns and family life) more prominent and allows women unrestricted freedom of movement between civilization and wilderness. In the process typically dominant male characters are presented as weaker, more indolent, sometimes even feminized, and their role of guardians of order and civilization is undermined. The distinction between power and language used by protagonists also gets reversed and female voice no longer functions as a background noise to the male narrative, but becomes recognized as valid. Last but not least, female characters are able to make their own choices and act accordingly and the repertoire of possible plot developments is not restricted to marriage or passive captivity.

The story is a typical Western revenge combined with a melodramatic storyline of an uneasy relationship between estranged daughter and father. The main protagonist Magdalena Gilkeson (Blanchett) is a single mother of two and a rancher in New Mexico. The movie is set in 1885 when after years of absence Magdalena's father, Samuel Jones (Tommy Lee Jones), arrives seeking medical assistance. Despite the fact that he is dressed like an Apache he gets help. However, once Magdalena recognizes him she wants Jones to leave the ranch. Soon afterwards her peace is disturbed yet again, when her lover, Brake, is killed in an attack of a group of Apache scouts who deserted from the army, while her daughter is kidnaped and being trafficked to Mexico. Unable to rely on anyone but herself Magdalena is forced to pursue the kidnappers. She is accompanied by her younger daughter Dot and Samuel. This cooperation allows Magdalena to change her negative and prejudiced opinions and form a bond with her father, who heroically dies in the final fight scene.

Jane Tompkins argues in her *West of Everything* that “there’s nothing to [the women in Westerns]. They may seem strong and resilient, fiery and resourceful at first, but when push comes to shove, as it always does, they crumble.” (Tompkins 1992, 61). Also *The BFI Companion to the Western’s* author Edward Buscombe claims that the Western traditionally “makes an absolute and value-laden division between the masculine and feminine.” He links masculinity with “activity, mobility, adventure and emotional restraint,” while femininity means “passivity, softness, romance and domestic containment” (1988, 181). *The Missing* aims at revisiting and reversing these familiar traditional tropes and gender roles of the Western.

One instantly recognizable change effected by the feminist Western is a woman as the main character. Described as “a male-centered world”, the Western’s action traditionally revolved around a cowboy hero – a lone gunman influenced by nature, the threat of death and constantly crossing the line between civilization and wilderness (Tompkins 1992, 35). Women, on the other hand, were confined to passive, secondary roles often associated with the town life and were believed to have feminizing (emasculating) effect on men (Varner 2008, 259). *The Searchers’* central character Ethan Edwards (played by the legendary John Wayne) is an ex-Confederate soldier. He is a loner with ambiguous past relentlessly chasing the kidnapers of his niece. Both he and Martin Pawley have their own goal to achieve through the quest to find Debbie: revenge (Ethan) or proving himself as man (Martin). *The Missing* makes a statement with a female cattle rancher Magdalena Gilkeson (Kate Blanchett) as its principal character. It is her perspective on family, rancher’s life in New Mexico, and, most importantly, her quest to liberate the child and improve the relationship with her father that the movie follows. What is more, instead of relegating them to the backstory, the film places Blanchett’s character and her daughters in the center of viewers’ attention. That is not to say that the classic Western limited the appearance of female characters. There are quite a few women in *The Searchers* e.g. Martha Edwards and her daughters (the victims of the disastrous Comanche attack), Laurie (a young assertive girl impatiently waiting for the return of her husband-to-be), a squaw named Look, Mrs. Jorgensen (whose son Brad dies in the search), and finally Debbie Edwards, the kidnapped girl who having been ‘sullied’ by a Comanche is deemed as good as dead. What links all these females is the fact that they belong to the backstory.

Moreover, *The Missing* blurs the boundary between the male and female domains. *The Searchers* makes a very clear distinction between those exclusive spheres: men take care of cattle, chase rustlers and Indians have gunfights and fistfights, and are able to come and go as they please (Ethan and Martin, spend five years roaming the country in search of Debbie). While men are away women and children

stay at home where they can fall victim to: violent attacks (e.g. Martha Edwards and her family), kidnapping, they face bereavement (Mrs. Jorgensen) and loneliness. Laurie, Martin's bride-to-be, spends five years waiting for the chase to finish during which time she receives only one pithy letter describing the events. This is not the case in *The Missing*. Magdalena moves freely between her home, the neighboring town and the wilderness and uses firearm as any John Wayne's character would. What is more, her younger daughter Dot refuses to stay at home and takes part in search for Lily despite Samuel's opinion that it is "awful foolish" and "no way to care for a young girl." However, nothing speaks as powerfully to the change of attitude towards the female spheres when the camera is allowed access to previously hidden, intimate events in character's life and any notions of proper decorum are abandoned. First, the movie shows Maggie in her bedroom during an intimate scene with Brake (such a scene would be impossible under The Motion Picture Production Code even if they were married). Then comes open discussion of Lily's menstrual cramps. Finally, even more unusually, *The Missing* begins in a privy and it is where the audience sees Maggie for the first time. In this establishing shot she finds a moment of peace and quiet before she is not too subtly called back to her duties, after which the camera cuts to the harsh and desolate but beautiful landscape surrounding Gilkeson's ranch.

What is more, *The Missing* widens the repertoire of female roles, makes them more realistic, and endows them with more psychological depth. The film establishes Magdalena – a complex, multifaceted character – first and foremost as a mother and a healer. Then it proceeds to show her as a brave outspoken individual, and "a good Christian [who] won't turn away any man in need." Moreover, she is presented as a sexual being with a history of relationships with unreliable men. As Samuel's daughter she struggles with hatred caused by abandonment. Magdalena's daughter points out that "when she was young, she was... treated with cruelty." This probably justifies vehemence in holding a grudge against Samuel who deserted his family to join Indians years ago. Even though she heals Mexicans and speaks Spanish, she is prejudiced against the Indian "heathens". Magdalena feels uneasy about operating a wounded Apache, for which she is mocked by Jones saying, "They have green blood and a pinecone in their chest instead of a heart". As a rancher and head of family, Magdalena is rational and down-to-earth. She considers Lily's fascination with the upcoming town fair and technological innovations ("a graphophone") a waste of time. This is a sign of a greater conflict between mother and daughter and their clashing values. While Maggie believes that "the calves are more important... than hearing your voice come out of a machine", Lilly is unhappy and wants to leave the ranch as soon as possible. She states "I'm moving to the city... I was born into the wrong family."

Another dimension of this conflict is that Lily is developing into a woman and she seems jealous of Brake's affection for Magdalena. Notably, *The Missing* lends yet another dimension to its female characters – the awareness of their bodies and their functions. The boldness of the bodily aspect in *The Missing* is unparalleled to the timidity of *The Searchers*. One of Magdalena's patients is an elderly Mexican woman, who despite advanced age is still concerned with her appearance. "It is her only tooth. She worry how she look", her companion explains in broken English. The previously mentioned scenes of the main character sitting on the toilet, conversation about menstruation, and explicit sexual relationship between Maggie and Brake also expand the way the Western portrays women.

The feminist Western does not escape binarism and in turn it portrays men as passive and unreliable characters. Although instances of male indolence are present in Ford's movie they are rather benign and associated with youth and immaturity e.g. hot-headed Brad who wants to fight despite odds being against him. Overall, male characters in *The Searchers* are of the macho type: good shooters and horsemen, they command respect, are able to restore order in the aftermath of the attack and always follow the male code of honor (Varner 2008, 50-51). Realization of the erosion of the male power in *The Missing* comes first with the sheriff's dismissive attitude and refusal to help Magdalena. "With the fair in town, I need all the men I have right here... Ma'am, I am elected to keep vigil over this town of ours," he asserts as if validating the argument of the feminizing influence of the town. Then, Maggie learns that the army will not help either. The cavalry is more preoccupied with looting with the captains' approval, transporting non-violent peasant-like Indians and shooting an easy target, when they take Jones for an Indian murderer. She informs them that they are going in the wrong direction but the captain's response is "I grieve for your situation, I truly do." The harsh reality is that they cannot bring order to the area and openly admit that the situation has gone out of control as the "whole territory's gone topsy-turvy. You got Indians running with whites, whites running with Indians." Moreover, men are unreliable both as fathers and husbands. Dot's father built the ranch with Magdalena but "the notion of it was better than the doing it." Lilly's father is even more elusive. Jones explains his own disappearance saying "There's always the next something, Maggie. And that will take a man away. You tell yourself you're protecting them, they're better off without you. Stay or go, there's nothing a man can do to protect his family from himself." This echoes the notion present throughout the movie that it is always the man, whether a stranger or family member, who is responsible for suffering.

As power is reflected in language *The Missing* gives opportunity to women to express themselves. Jane Tompkins (1992, 65) calls the Western "the language

of men.” The cowboy hero cannot trust immaterial and misleading words so he prefers action instead (Tompkins 1992, 49). Indeed the taciturn recluse uses language only when necessary: i.e. in commands or like a weapon. Tompkins (1992, 51) notes “when heroes talk, it is action: their laconic put-downs cut people off at the knees.” People who use language generously and those who act belong to different sets of characters with the latter being perceived as more powerful. In *The Searchers* it is the women and young men who talk most, which marks their inferior status. Unwilling to listen to Mrs. Jorgensen, Ethan cuts her off impatiently saying “I’d be obliged if you’d get to the point, ma’am,” and ignores her emotional pleas. Whenever a hero hears something that makes him uncomfortable or stirs deeper emotions, he simply tells his companion to “shut up.” It seems that being talkative is a phase in an adolescent male’s life best illustrated by Lieutenant Greenhill who cannot get his message across: he stumbles, uses convoluted sentences, which obscure meaning and make him a laughing stock among men. Although Magdalena is taciturn when it comes to emotional scars and her way of expressing herself is rather laconic, especially when compared to Samuel’s, *The Missing* gives its female characters a voice equal to that of men. Still words are used as daggers, in a cowboy-like manner laden with negative emotions. We can see it either when Dot tells her sister: “You look stupid working in these clothes,” or in an altercation between Maggie and Lilly when the latter picks on words to show her mother’s backwardness. Maggie warns Lilly “Don’t you ever act helpless and pitiable to win favor with a man.” To which she answers “Some people shouldn’t give advice on how to act with men. And it’s «pitiful» in English.” Sometimes words are used to express emotions from playful joking around at a family table to exclamations of anger “You get the hell off my ranch!” but also to assert will as when Dot cries out “You can’t leave me mama. You know I won’t stay put!” Here words are not ignored. Jones obeys his daughter’s wish of him staying away; and Brake conforms to her not wanting to marry despite his own wishes. This is in stark contrast to the situation in *The Searchers*. No amount of Laurie’s heartfelt pleas to settle down changes Martin’s plans.

Lack of female agency traditionally manifested itself in formulaic plots of Westerns. As McHugh (2007, 4) observes, “Historically women’s inferior status had been justified by an allegation that... unlike men, women were unable to think reasonably, make moral decisions or take responsibility for their actions.” Firstly, marriage is the only viable option for any decent woman in *The Searchers*. Laurie conforms to her parents’ wishes and is to be betrothed to Charlie MacCorry in Martin’s absence even though she herself chose the latter. Expressing his belief in benefits of marriage her father states “A young man should get married early

in life... at least once.” Martin’s surprising comeback on the wedding day ends up in a fistfight. Who will marry Laurie is decided by men among themselves with violence. Nobody seems to bother with the bride’s opinion. In *The Missing*, on the other hand, Maggie manages to live independently as a rancher who does not want to tie the knot. In a reversal of roles Maggie is the one who has been “married more than once” while a man, Brake, is being declined despite repeated proposals.. What is more, *The Missing* questions the idea of daughter’s absolute obedience. It is manifested firstly with Magdalena’s explicit rejection of Sam Jones and her unwillingness to hear his advice on child rearing. Secondly, when her own daughters challenge and disobey her. Furthermore, all Gilkeson women choose action instead of passivity. Even the weakest of them Lily tries to escape her captors. When that fails she stands for herself and confronts El Brujo, the witch responsible for the kidnapping, and says “Go on. Hit me. You won’t fetch as many pesos with my face swollen, and you know it,” for which she is punished. This is in stark contrast with *The Searchers*’ Debbie who seems to be totally denied a will and a voice of her own. Instead of functioning as a person Debbie becomes a symbol of Ethan’s obsession and revenge, Martin’s passage into manhood, and a Comanche’s wife who is taken from the environment she has come to accept and brought back to civilization against her wish ultimately becoming a girl whose mother would rather she died for being sullied.

In its emotional portrayal of a family and its focus on a parent/child relationship *The Missing* is evocative of Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s that was targeted at female audience with “women’s issues” (Hollinger 2012, 37). One of its permutations of such cinema was sacrifice and suffering (Hollinger 2012, 40). Magdalena and Samuel’s relationship is rebuilt by saving Lily. But the eventual defeat of the antagonist and safety of the Gilkeson women is possible only through the ultimate sacrifice of Samuel who dies in a fight with El Brujo. It is a surprising reversal of maternal melodrama, and simultaneously its continuation for Magdalena’s successful mission to rescue her daughter ends with the heroic death of the father she has just reconnected with. Maternal loss and bitter-sweet endings are symptomatic of the woman’s film (Hollinger 2012, 43) which tended to construct a masochistic female spectator (Hollinger 2012, 41). Although Magdalena and her daughters set off from their home as the sun is rising, promising them peaceful future, the loss experienced by the heroine and measured in men who she has lost (farm worker Emiliano, Kayitah and his son, Brake, and finally Samuel) cause a striking dissonance. Therefore, the overall female empowering message of the film might be seen as ambiguous.

Gender role reversal in *The Ballad of Little Jo*

The Ballad of Little Jo, a film written and directed by Maggie Greenwald released in 1993, was based on a story of a Buffalo society girl Josephine Monaghan. Little is known of her life. Monaghan had a child out of wedlock and travelled west in 1866 where she settled and lived the rest of her life as a man. It was only after her death in 1904 that her true identity was discovered (Brand 2011). The film is a Greenwald's vision of Monaghan's story.

The movie has features of the feminist Western, such as female lead character who drives the plot, but it goes further than *The Missing* in the reversal of gender roles. Its portrayal of men is more radical and critical at the same time. By incorporating cross-dressing of the main character and successful fluid and reversible transformation it seems to argue after Judith Butler that "gender is not a noun, neither is it a set of free-floating attributes... gender is performativity... Gender is always doing" (Butler 1990, 25). Gender perceived as action corresponds with Kenneth Burke's (1966, 44) dramatic notion of language defined as "symbolic action". Jo's female-to-male and Tinman's male-to-female gender role reversals have an inevitable effect on the most fundamental levels of their personhood, reflected, among others, in the retreat from the conventional male and female rhetoric of "appropriate" role behavior.

The plot of *The Ballad of Little Jo* finds Josephine (Amis) on the road after she had been forced to leave her son and home in the East. After being attacked by soldiers, she decides to dress as a man for safety and moves west to a little town in Idaho. She settles there as Jo and establishes her new life as a man. After gaining trust and respect of local men she becomes a sheep farmer and develops a long-lasting friendship with Frank Badger (Bo Hopkins) who forces Jo to employ a Chinese man (David Chung) as a domestic servant. Soon an affair ensues between the two. When the prosperity of sheep farming is endangered Jo joins forces with Badger and successfully fights The Western Cattle Company's thugs. She lives in disguise until her real sex is discovered by an undertaker, which surprises everyone in town, shocks oblivious Frank and makes local headlines.

Josephine achieves freedom by cross-dressing and is a continuator of a long tradition. Stories of heroines dressed in male clothes existed as a sub-genre of dime-store Westerns in the 19th century and were a part of transition towards a more active heroine (Modleski 1997, 528). From the very first scenes *The Ballad of Little Jo* reminds its audience what 19th century society considered the proper place of a woman. Josephine travelling on foot is something uncommon and immediately draws attention. Men either greet her politely or comment on her presence in an ungentlemanly fashion. A passing salesman offers her a ride just after calling her "a female vagrant." A young upper-class woman in a fancy dress with

a lace umbrella and heavy baggage is surprising and raises suspicion, even hostility (could it be a veiled concern of the female shopkeeper?). Unless she is a fallen woman a young unmarried girl's place is at her family's house where she is protected. When she loses this protection she becomes an easy target. A rude comment is nothing compared to being sold to soldiers and barely escaping rape. Very quickly into the movie the heroine learns that she has become "an object of the gaze" and "a victim of biological femininity" (Modleski 1997, 525) and in order to survive she decides to don male clothes and transform herself into a man. To dress "improper to your sex" is a transgression punishable by law. Josephine becomes Jo and she starts life-long masquerade during which she "proves herself to be in some respects more manly than the men." (Modleski 1997, 541).

The movie allows its audience to identify with a strong female character in pursuit of her goal, but instead of completely deconstructing the classic Western and simply reversing its traditional tropes, it tries to assert female identity. This makes it a representative of feminist cinema as defined by de Luretis and evoked in Anneke Smelik's article (1999, 494). Initially Josephine functions in the film as if to express Laura Mulvey's idea that a woman in film generally is an object of desire for the male character, a quality she calls to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey 1989, 19), which influences representation of women as either Madonna or a prostitute. This is conveyed by Josephine's eye-catching clothing and ornaments that she has to reject in order to avoid further sexual abuse and establish herself as an active agent. *The Ballad* challenges the notion that to function in society as a woman, a person can be either a proper woman (understood as a wife and mother) or a fallen woman (a prostitute). Under the patriarchal authority where strict moral rules apply and the goal of matrimony is never forgotten woman's reputation means everything. Having had an illicit affair with a photographer and bearing an illegitimate child, Josephine is thrown out of her family home. "I want that whore out of my house! Out of my sight! She and her bastard can die out on the street!" her father shouts. In the scene of paternal wrath Josephine is already physically distanced from her family. As a fallen woman she is left to the discretion of males. Her sex becomes a commodity, which is first signaled by Josephine's harrowing experience on the road and later elaborated on in a story of Duke Billy's arrival in Ruby City with his "menagerie": a horse, a llama, a couple of rabbits, a sack of beans and the main attraction – deaf mute Elvira. "She can't hear, and she can't talk. Come and see her, it's worth the walk," Billy asserts. Elvira enters the town looking like a nymph but is soon to become abused by dozens of miners finally to be brutalized by Percy Corcoran (Ian McKellen) for refusing to perform some sexual act. She leaves the town as a shadow of her former self.

Jo settles in Ruby City, which “is really far from being a city. Truly, it is a mining camp,” where rare appearances of women foreshadow entertainment (Elvira), some semblance of domesticity as the notion of women as bearers of civilization is present in the film. This is expressed by cleanliness when living conditions improve with the arrival of Mrs. Dupre, a black woman who sets up a laundry. Most importantly, a woman in Ruby City means childbearing and companionship for a miner or a sheep herder. Mary Addie, who gives haircuts to miners, is seemingly the only young girl in town at the marriage age. At the time of Jo’s arrival Mary takes to “him” but she is hastily married off to a first eligible man passing the town and leaves for Texas never to be seen again. Josephine does not conform to simplistic notions of femininity. She evolves from a gullible sheltered city girl. First she decides to leave her son so that he could have a better life. Then she sheds all her frilly dresses and fancy manners. Preoccupation with beauty, vanity and flamboyance associated with femininity give way to a coarse cowboy outfit. To complete her transition she cuts her hair and her face. A scar on Josephine’s cheek is to hide the delicate facial features and to distract from the slight body that is no longer to excite desire in men. She establishes herself among the town’s community as a peculiar loner but is accepted by its people. As Modleski states, “in the course of the film, [Jo] is transformed from sexual prey to a woman in control of her life” (1997, 527).

The scene of the transformation in which the heroine loses all the markers of femininity: her dress, a corset, cuts her long hair and cuts her face, is symbolic in its meaning and amplified by carefully arranged filming techniques. The lighting is low key warm, creating a sense of intimacy. The old portrait, a reminder of her affair, is visible to provide a stark contrast between Josephine of the past and her newly-emerged persona. The camera posited outside seems to invite the audience to participate in a voyeuristic experience (perhaps a metaphor for the whole film) while Josephine’s blurry naked body is reflected in the windowpane. Similarly in the shop scene while trying male attire, Josephine is reflected by three mirrors simultaneously as if to suggest that there is more than one identity to her. Repeated use of mirrors and photography illustrates a complex mental process and is a reminder that “we are constructed by identification with the image” (Pollock 2003, 183). Josephine’s attainment of subjectivity is a process facilitated by wearing a mask of masculinity. It cannot be seen as a desire to become a man, but rather an expression of already existing desire for life unconstrained by strict socially acceptable norms. In this *The Ballad* is a movie which offers its female spectators a particular experience of identification that is not transsexual (as termed by Laura Mulvey; where a female spectator identifies both with the passive heroine and the active man and his desire) but a purely female identification.

Once again the feminist Western paints men in an unfavorable light. A journalist and a film critic, Roger Ebert, in his review of Greenwald's film characterizes its male characters as "men of poor breeding [who] lived and worked together in desperate poverty of mind and body, and were so enclosed inside their roles that they hardly knew each other at all." *The Ballad of Little Jo* offers a glimpse into the West without its mythic veneer from the classic era. Previously the cowboy hero was bound by the honor code and was mediating "between the coming civilization and the innate savagery of the wilderness" (Varner 2008, 58). Moreover, "traditionally his relations with women always involved the hero repressing his latent sexual urges. When a man cannot repress his desires, he becomes the savage" (Varner 2008, 259). In this context, the film portrays life in the West without embellishment. "The daily texture of life in the West" (Ebert 1993) means grueling work, solitude, dirt, and crude, savage behavior. Men are characterized as either obsessed with sex or as high-principled and unforgiving (Mr. Monaghan). They are dangerous, prone to treating women as sexual objects, commodities to be traded, they seduce (the photographer Mr. Hill) or attempt rape (the soldiers). In the West men claim that, "a man can get diseases [if] he don't do it regular." Inhabitants of Ruby City are presented as mostly ignorant, prone to violence against those who are deemed different: "dudes" with colorful socks, the Chinese, they drink a lot, are dirty and smell badly. Miners are whoremongers even when they have wives and children (Frank Badger), or are outright misogynists as Percy Corcoran who believes that knowing how to cook "you won't have to put up with a woman your whole life." He adds, "I found women to be more trouble than they're worth." He is capable of despicable acts: he maims a prostitute, and changes from a friendly, paternal, teacher figure to yet another attacker when he learns Jo's secret and attempts to rape her. The theme repeated by men throughout the movie is "Do you have any idea what that kind of a loneliness will do to a man? Huh? Drive most of 'em crazy."

Josephine's bond with Tinman Wong is a secretive and subversive relation of two outcasts built on paradoxical reversals. Despite being a woman she has more physical strength. She builds Tinman's room with her bare hands, she also is his employer and society recognizes her as Tinman's superior in all respects. Tinman, a representative of a despised minority, is not even considered to be a proper man. Miners believe that the Chinese are "damned good cooks and housekeepers," so Tinman performs all traditionally female domestic duties such as sewing, cooking and cleaning. He acts as a housewife whenever company arrives (in this behavior he closely resembles Martha Edwards from *The Searchers*). He wears his long hair braided and has tiny, frail body and needs frequent medical treatments. The relationship works despite paradoxical reversal of roles, which

is underlined in a poignant argument between the two when Jo is considering selling her farm and leaving Ruby City for fear of the Western Cattle Company's thugs. To get her point across, she makes an awkward reference to her feminine identity that is quickly ridiculed by Tinman. "I can't live like this anymore. It's a chance for us to start over somewhere else," she declares wearing a dress. To which Tinman answers skeptically, "What kind of girl could you be somewhere else? What man would want you? You have no hair! Half your face is destroyed with that ugly scar. You can't even make a pie!" He continues, "What do you think would happen if they found out about me? Little Jo Monaghan turns out to be a woman and she's lovers with an ailing Chinaman. They'd kill us. Unquestionably. Brutally." Then Josephine asks, "Why can't we... Just live as we are?" To which Tinman answers optimistically, "I want peace for the last years of my life. You found it living as a man. I found it living with you... you are a free white man now. And someday soon, you will even vote."

The Ballad of Little Jo ends with an optimistic vision of the future to come, the now bigger, more populous and prosperous Ruby City foreshadows modernization and social change when a female photographer takes photos of the deceased Jo. The film manages to convey the message that independence and personal control are universal human desires. By giving voice to Tinman and Josephine/Jo it offers a feminist critique of a society in which the means to achieve those goals are granted or denied on the basis of arbitrary prejudice.

Conclusion

As has been evidenced, gender role reversal and the portrayal of strong female characters who are no longer passive and powerless heroines have added a new dimension to the Western. Not only does it allow a more nuanced representation of women and racial minorities, but also provides opportunities to investigate and question the validity of social positions with which they had been traditionally associated. Frank Kermode (2000, 18) describes the mechanism of rhetorical reversal as one allowing the audience

... to look at the matter in another way, re-enacting the familiar dialogue between credulity and skepticism. The more daring the peripeteia, the more we may feel that the work respects our sense of reality; and the more certainly we shall feel that the fiction under consideration is one of those which, by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naïve expectations, is finding something out for us, something real.

While some revisionist and feminist Westerns strive to make a difference primarily by addressing the Western formula, and, as a result, simply focus on reversing the familiar classical tropes to the effect of a mawkish melodrama (the cowboy

hero becomes a powerful independent heroine in the center of attention of the narrative), others make an effort to create a picture that successfully functions both narratively and rhetorically as a voice in the public debate: What does it mean to be a man/woman? How to be free?

Even though the movies discussed above give different answers to these questions (*The Missing* focuses on family whereas *The Ballad of Little Jo* advocates individual's independence), what emerges from the analysis of strong female characters in the two analyzed Western films is the inevitable downfall and moral corruption of its male protagonists. What is more, it might be argued that despite elevating the woman to a position of an equal, the feminist Western is guilty of the same offence that the classical Western was, namely relegating the other sex to inferiority, painting it with a broad brush and endowing it with all the negative qualities.

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