

## SAAS CONFERENCE

April 9-11, 2019

University of Salamanca, Spain

### Panel 16

On the Screen as on the Stage:

Film and Theater Interplays and the (Fe)Male Gaze

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#### [Slide 1]

**“The (Fe)male Gaze in the Cinematographic Adaptations of *Little Women*”**

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#### [Slide 2]

Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868) presents the tribulations of the four March sisters, as they make the transition from girlhood to womanhood, always under the watchful eye of their loving mother.<sup>1</sup> Set against the backdrop of the American Civil War, the novel portrays this female community facing the trials of daily life and genteel poverty, while learning to become the type of women they want to be (or that Mr. March wants them to be).

#### [Slide 3]

As part of their growing-up process, each daughter must fight her “personal demon”: Meg her jealousy of other people’s wealth, Jo her anger and boisterousness, Beth her shyness and reclusiveness, and Amy her selfishness. In a letter to his wife, their father states:

#### [Slide 4]

I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully,

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<sup>1</sup> As the novel begins, the narrator indicates Meg is 16 years old, Jo is 15, Beth is 13 but there is no indication of Amy’s exact age. She is just described as “the youngest” (7).

that when I come back to them **I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women.** (11, my emphasis)<sup>2</sup>

### [Slide 5]

It is then that Mrs. March reminds her daughters how they used to perform John Bunyan's Christian allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) when they were younger.<sup>3</sup> She further reinforces her husband's message by insisting upon the emotional assistance the girls may find in Bunyan's book during their quest for perfection: "We never are too old for this, my dear, because it is a play we are playing all the time in one way or another." (12)

This idea of woman's life as a never-ending performance is present in almost all of Alcott's writing, both in her novels for adolescents and her short stories for adults. She believed that nineteenth-century American society assigned females a role as constrictive as the corsets they had to wear. To avoid being labeled as deviants, women had to adjust their behavior to what was considered acceptable, therefore performing their whole lives an imposed character instead of showing their true personalities.

It is this pressure to be a "true woman" what makes Jo March's transition into adulthood especially difficult: while Meg, Beth and Amy comply with society's view of what a woman should do, Jo has to find the way to restrain her nature in order to find the balance between the person she wants to be and social expectations.

### [Slide 6]

Jo's only respite comes from the thrillers she publishes anonymously and the plays she performs with her sisters. Undoubtedly, it was Jo's struggle one of the reasons that made *Little Women* a best-seller upon its publication in 1868-

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<sup>2</sup> He doesn't say "if they do it, they will be better/happier women" but "I may be fonder of them". Shouldn't father's love be unconditional? This sentence by Mr. March is a clear reflection of the emotional blackmail Bronson Alcott imposed upon his wife and children.

<sup>3</sup> Considered one of the most important works of English Protestant theology, and with its explicit antipathy towards Catholicism, *The Pilgrim's Progress* was very popular in the Puritan colonies. Translated into more than 200 languages, and never out of print, it has influenced many British and American writers. In Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, the protagonists read it at the outset of the novel, and try to follow the good example of Bunyan's Christian. Throughout the novel, the main characters refer many times to *Pilgrim's Progress* and liken the events in their own lives to the experiences of the pilgrims. A number of chapter titles directly reference characters and places from *Pilgrim's Progress*.

69, and why it has never been out of print in the last 150 years. Regarded nowadays as a classic of American literature, it has been translated into more than 50 languages and has sold over ten million copies.

**[Slide 7]**

Throughout the years, the popularity of the story has prompted its adaptation to other media:

once to theatre (in 1912),

5 times to the cinema (in 1917, 1918, 1933, 1949 and 1994),

10 times to TV [TV series in 1939 (lost), 1946 (lost), 1949 (lost), 1950, 1950 (BBC), 1958, 1958 (BBC), 1970, 1978 and 2018],

once to ballet (in 1969),

twice to Japanese animated series (in 1981 and 1987),

once to musical theatre (in 1998)

and once to opera (in 2005).

For this paper, we will focus on the adaptations to the silver screen; as the first two (1917 & 1918) are considered lost—and therefore cannot be watched nor analyzed—I will comment on the remaining three versions (1933, 1949 & 1994).<sup>4</sup>

**[Slide 8]**

Therefore, and to be consistent with the title of this panel (“On the Screen as on the Stage: Film and Theater Interplays and the (Fe)Male Gaze”), this paper has two objectives:

(1) to analyze how directors and studios modeled their films to make them more appealing to the female gaze,

(2) to analyze the role Louisa May Alcott gave to theatre as a means to explore the boundaries of female roles and how this is presented in the cinematographic versions of her most famous novel.

**[Slide 9]**

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<sup>4</sup> See Annex 1.

To achieve objective number one, we will focus on three elements of the films: (1) the script, (2) the casting and (3) the set & costumes design of the three films.

**[Slide 10]**

The 1933 adaptation was directed by George Cukor and the script was written by Sarah Y. Mason and Victor Herrman. The Film Academy recognized the quality of Mason and Hermann's work, awarding them the Oscar to the best screenplay. **[Slide 11]** Although they closely followed the novel, Mason & Herrman added a new scene at the very beginning of the film where we find Mrs. March working at the United States Christian Commission: Concord Division, providing clothes for those in need. As Barton Palmer indicates, this scene "shows an entirely female workplace [...] and a female manager"; thus, by adding it, Cukor "firmly established [...] a spirit of free thinking in relation to women's lives."(82) This is also the only script "introduc[ing] the March women in relation to their 'occupations'-- Marmee/Spring Byington at the Soldier's Aid Society, Meg/Frances Dee as a nanny, Jo/Katharine Hepburn as a companion, Amy/Joan Bennett at school and Beth/Jean Parker helping at home—all trying to make ends meet" (Kirkham & Warren, 84). Given that this adaptation was filmed right in the middle of the Great Depression, to emphasize the importance of woman's work as a key element for the economy of the country was a gesture to female spectators.

**[Slide 12]**

However, the 1933 version eliminated those parts of Alcott's novel presenting the tension between Jo and Amy March as, for example, when Amy almost drowns in a frozen lake while spying on Jo and Laurie or when out of spitefulness Amy burns Jo's manuscript. Katherine Kellet explains "the film [...] unsurprisingly downplays family conflict [...] and minimizes the two sisters' frequent clashes in the novel to a couple of instances of absurd bickering toward the beginning of the movie." (19) The reason behind this is "to focus on the family's deep and unbreakable bonds, always framing sisters within close proximity of each other, usually in one grouping or in a tight circle" (19); thus, emphasizing the concept of sisterhood and the importance of female bonding.

**[Slide 13]**

Sixteen years later (1949), when the Metro Goldwyn Meyer decided to film another adaptation of *Little Women*, they chose Mervyn LeRoy as director and Sarah Y. Mason, Victor Herrman and Andrew Salt as scriptwriters. **[Slide 14]** The truth is they simply took the script that Mason and Herrman had written for the 1933 version, thus keeping the elimination of Amy's drowning at the frozen lake, Amy's burning of Jo's manuscript, and most of the frictions between Jo and Amy. Mason, Herrman and Salt made only minor changes (*Willow and Thatch*), such as making little reference to the war and not showing Beth's death (Cartmell & Simons, 83), what is easily understood given that the Second World War had recently finished and Mason, Herrman and Salt probably assumed that the audience would appreciate been spared any reminder of their recent suffering.

The most important change in the script of the 1949 adaptation was the addition of a last scene, where "Professor Bhaer returns and shyly proposes to Jo, [...] Huddled under an umbrella [...] Jo fills what Bhaer calls his 'empty hands'" (Kellet, 21). **[Slide 15]** The scene does not exist in Alcott's novel but it became so popular among viewers that it was imitated **[Slide 16]** in the 1994 film-version and in most TV adaptations.

**[Slide 17]**

In 1994 Columbia Pictures hired Gillian Armstrong to direct a new adaptation of Alcott's novel and Robin Swicord to write its screenplay. Unlike her predecessors, Swicord "created virtually every line of dialogue from scratch" (Gilbert). While she ignored many elements in the text, she respected its spirit; or, at least, her interpretation of Alcott's feminism. In this film Marmee has been transformed from the domestic goddess of Cukor and LeRoy adaptations into a spokeswoman of women's rights. **[Slide 18]** As Deborah Cartmell and Judy Simons state, "The shift of emphasis is exaggerated by the casting of Susan Sarandon, an actor well known for her feminist sympathies, in the role" (85).

Another modification of the novel made in Swicord's script refers to the physicality of the March sisters: while in the two previous adaptations "[o]nly Jo was active [...] here all three younger daughters romp in the snow with Marmee/Sarandon's approval" (Kirkham & Warren, 94).

A third change made in the 1994 script seems to me a treason to Alcott: Swicord's Amy is made more agreeable to the audience by presenting her less like "the selfish brat of the novel [...] and less materialistic and pretentious" (Kirkham & Warren, 95). Also in the other two films Amy returns home after Beth's death "in the highly fashionable dress noted in the novel" (Kirkham & Warren, 95) to show off her new financial status after marrying Laurie, however "this one costumes her in mourning dress" (Kirkham & Warren, 95).

A common element in the scripts of the three adaptations is the eradication of the novel final scene. While Alcott ends *Little Women* with Jo married, with two children, having given up her literary career and running a boarding school with her husband, the three films conclude immediately after Professor Bhaer's marriage proposal. [Slide 19] Deborah Cartmell and Judy Simons explain that, "[t]he choice, between husband and career, patriarchy and independence, obedience and rebellion, is erased in all three versions" (88). Pat Kirkham and Sarah Warren further indicate that the reason behind this is that "The life of Mother Bhaer [...] is regarded by some as a surrender to the patriarchal values of self-denial, renunciation and mutilation" and the films all avoid depicting it (82).

### [Slide 20]

A second feature common to the three scripts is the simplification of Mrs. March's personality. As Cartmell and Simons state, in the novel Alcott presents Marmee as a strong woman who, however, admits having spent all her married life fighting "to achieve self-control over her unruly and **unfeminine** temper as a result of her husband's guidance" (85, my emphasis). Thus, she behaves as her husband expects her and not as she really wants, but at the same time she stresses to her daughters the importance of independence. [Slide 21] Marmee sends contradictory messages regarding marriage and identity, thus "the films of *Little Women*, determined to convey an uncomplicated message, elide this ambiguity by presenting Marmee either as a domestic goddess (Cukor and LeRoy) or as prototype feminist (Armstrong)" (Cartmell and Simons, 85).

As we compare the three scripts, we can see an evolution in the attitude towards the original text. To understand this alteration, we have to bear in mind the changes in the prospective audiences. In 1933 and 1949 the people going to

the cinema to watch the two films were mainly female readers of Alcott's novel who expected to watch a faithful rendition of their beloved book. They usually understood that the adaptation to a different media implied the eradication of certain "minor" scenes but they certainly would not accept mayor modifications. However, by 1994 statistics showed that *Little Women* was not read as often as in previous decades, so there were less chances for the film watchers to have memorized parts of the novel and therefore to feel betrayed by the possible alterations made in the script.

Continuing with the decisions made by the studios to make the films more attractive to the female gaze, a key element that was decided with women spectators in mind was **the casting**; especially in the first two adaptations, as in 1933 and in 1949 "fan mail was [...] important in the choice of stars" (Kirkham & Warren 85).

A common element of the first two adaptations was the age of the actresses portraying the March sisters: it is impossible to believe that those women were young teenagers. **[Slide 22]** For example, in the 1933 version Joan Bennet, playing 12-year-old Amy, was actually 23 and pregnant (a fact she hid from the producers) ("All the *Little Women*").

**[Slide 23]**

In the 1949 version, voluptuous Elizabeth Taylor, playing 12-year-old Amy, was actually 17 and June Allison, playing 16-year-old Jo, was 31 and also pregnant during filming. Allison "was only 11 years younger than Mary Astor, who played Marmee" ("All the *Little Women*").

**[Slide 24]**

At least in the 1994 version, "actresses [were] closer in age to their characters' than in previous versions" (Gilbert).

**[Slide 25]**

Leaving aside the age of the actresses portraying the March sisters, the Jo March closer to Alcott's description is Katharine Hepburn (1933), while June Allyson (1949) and Wynona Ryder (1994) are neither tall enough nor androgynous enough to convey the physical awkwardness explicit in the novel.

**[Slide 26]**

The March sisters are not the only characters were the film adaptations differ from the novel; the same happens with Laurie and Professor Bhaer. With regard to Theodore Lawrence, neither Douglas Montgomery, nor **[Slide 27]** Peter Lawford or **[Slide 28]** Christian Bale look anything like Alcott's "black-eyed, dark-skinned, half-Italian lover of music" (Kirkham & Warren, 82).

The casting is even more shocking when it comes to the role of Professor Bhaer. Alcott describes him as a forty years old German immigrant, with a bushy beard, appalling table manners and not "a really handsome feature in his face" (*Little Women*, 343). Deborah Cartmell and Judy Simons explain how "the films increasingly romanticize the marriage of Jo to the Professor [...] with Bhaer becoming incrementally youthful and attractive. **[Slide 29]** The 46-year-old Paul Lukas is awkward and fatherly in appearance, **[Slide 30]** while Rossano Brazzi in the 1949 adaptation, at thirty-three, once he has lost his glasses, looks quite glamorous. [...] **[Slide 31]** Gabriel Byrne [sic], a very young looking 44-year-old, smoldering with undeclared passion, as by far the sexiest of the three" (85). Kirkham and Warren notice how "All three films use music to mark Bhaer as romantic and sensitive. Indeed, he is given the musical talents Alcott allocated to Laurie" (85).

To continue with our analysis of how directors and studios modeled their films to make them more appealing to the female gaze, we must focus now on the design of both the sets and the costumes.

Alcott based *Little Women* on her experiences as a teenager, but the novel is not a veracious account of what really happened in the Alcott home, but a sugarcoated version without Bronson Alcott's educational experiments and emotional blackmail, and without Abba Alcott's outbursts and bitterness. In *Little Women* Alcott also softened the often-desperate financial situation of her family, turning the destitute Alcotts into the gently poor Marches.

**[Slide 32]** When the book was adapted into films the toning down of that poverty was taken one step further; thus, although the three scripts mention that the March family is struggling to make ends meet, we can see how the different set designs present their spacious home decorated with good furniture, a fire always burning at the fireplace, the many lamps lit, and on Christmas morning



the table is set with fine china and their maid serves them sausages, muffins, coffee, bread and cream.

**[Slide 33]** A similar embellishing process takes place with the costume design, as the constant change of dresses and the rich fabrics used for the dresses of the March sisters do not portray the financial hardships described in the novel. By looking at their attire is hard to believe they depend on Jo's thrillers to pay the bills. **[Slide 34]** Talking of Walter Plunkett's costumes, Kirkham and Warren indicate that they "serve to prettify both the wearers and the poverty they were supposed to be enduring" (85). If this is true of Plunkett's designs for the 1933 adaptation, it is even clearer in those he made for the 1949 version. **[Slide 35]** As Cartmell and Simons observe, "Adopting Stella Bruzzi's categorization of clothes on film, in the early films of *Little Women* clothes are used to 'look at,' especially the extravagant costumes of the 1949 version. **[Slide 36]** Here [1949] the clothes, unmistakably, are used to 'look through'" (89, endnote no. 25).<sup>5</sup> In other words, the studios sacrificed loyalty to the novel to make the films more appealing to the female spectators. Kirkham and Warren state "women viewers were used to fashion being an important part of film pleasures" (85). Charlotte Herzog stresses how the promotion of the first two films, particularly that carried out in 1933 in the *International Herald Tribune*, emphasized "the beauty and alluring nature of many of the gowns" and "suggest[ed] that there were many pleasures for women viewers related to dress" (134-159).

To understand why RKO and Metro Goldwyn Meyer put so much emphasis on publicizing the set designs and the costumes, we must remember that the 1933 adaptation was released during the Great Depression and the 1949 version only five years after the end of the Second World War, thus the studios realized that to attract women viewers was essential to offer them alluring images of the affluence they had been missing in recent years. **[Slide 37]** Colleen Atwood's costume designs for the 1994 film are the only one to show faithfulness to Alcott's novel in its depiction of the costumes; the Academy compensated her effort with an Oscar nomination.

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<sup>5</sup> Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies*. London: Routledge, 1997.

**[Slide 38]** With reference to the second objective of this paper, we aim to analyze the role Louisa May Alcott gave in *Little Women* to theatre as a means to explore the boundaries of female roles and how this is presented in the three cinematographic versions of her most famous novel.

**[Slide 39]** As indicated in the introduction to this essay, *Little Women* presents three theatrical allusions: *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), the idea of woman's life as a perpetual performance, and melodrama. We dissect these three references from the perspective of female roles, comparing their portrayal in the novel and in the films.

**[Slide 40]** In *Little Women* John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is presented as the book chosen by Mr. March to act as moral guide for his wife and daughters, so that they become the type of women he wants them to be. Besides their mentioning of the Christian allegory and its characters, there are further allusions to it in the titles of many of the chapters: "Playing Pilgrims", "Burdens", "Beth Finds the Palace Beautiful", "Amy's Valley of Humiliation", "Jo Meets Apollyon", "Meg Goes to Vanity Fair", "Pleasant Meadows" and "The Valley of the Shadow" (respectively, they are chapters 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 22 and 40).

This ubiquity basically disappears in the films, except in the 1933 adaptation. As Homer Dickens indicates, George Cukor's film is the one placing more emphasis on the sisters' struggle against their defects and their moral journeys (51). **[Slide 41]** This version also includes a scene, not present in the novel, where the Marches sing the hymn *Abide with Me*, which "establishes a Christian framework but, thereafter, the film focuses on the girls growing up and on romance, which is how it was advertised (Kirkham & Warren, 83).

With reference to the notion of women imposed a role by nineteenth-century society, Alcott indicated in all her writing how damaging was this as it meant that most women had to spend their lives hiding their true nature, and feeling there was something wrong with them. Jo's feeling of inadequacy and her suffering are clearly indicated in the novel but they almost disappear in the films.

**[Slide 42]** In opposition with the two previous theatrical references, that restrain women, Alcott presents melodrama as providing an outlet where the woman playwright can create female characters that subvert what is considered socially acceptable behavior. **[Slide 43]** "The Witch's Curse, an Operatic

Tragedy” allows her not only to create melodramatic situations that violate social norms but also—by reserving for herself all the male characters—she can act as unladylike as she wants.<sup>6</sup> As Roderigo or Hugo, Jo March does not need to worry about being noisy or disorderly and—free of voluminous skirts and petticoats—she can be as active as she wants.

**[Slide 44]** The films show only the rehearsal but not the final performance, except for Cukor’s adaptation (Kellet 17). But what is more significant, they all tone down the relevance of writing as one of the few means of venting feelings available to women. Mervyn LeRoy’s film goes beyond by eliminating Jo’s literary ambitions “as she announces her wish to be a writer for purely monetary motives with no mention of the powerful artistic impulses that feature so centrally in the novel” (Cartmell & Simons, 84).

Having seen in this paper how the three film adaptations of *Little Women* were modeled to make them more appealing to the female gaze and how Louisa May Alcott’s attitude towards theatre is presented in the cinematographic versions of her most famous novel, I wish I could conclude by saying that all modifications in the story were made to finish with the traditional depiction of women as sexual objects. However, the fact is that the studios were well aware that, just as *Little Women* was written for young girls, and it continues to be read mainly by females of all ages (Showalter, 1991: 42; 1995: 19), all its adaptations (regardless of the medium) had female spectatorship as their target audience. Therefore, the truth is that the shift from the male to the female gaze was not done to empower women but to secure the pleasure of the female viewer and this way guarantee success at the box-office.

### **Works Consulted**

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<sup>6</sup> Alcott published the play as “Norna, the Witch’s Curse” in *Comic Tragedies* (1893).

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