Confronting The Wind: a reading of a Hollywood film by Victor Sjöström

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Abstract
This close reading of the film The Wind (Victor Sjöström, 1928), from Dorothy Scarborough's novel, attempts to analyze the film's construction of space, mapping the gradual merger between subjective and objective, corresponding to the heroine’s (Lillian Gish) increasing degree of psychic instability, and culminating in a violent storm at night, where all boundaries are being transgressed. Through references to Scandinavian landscape portrayal in the 1910s cinema as well as to Western or Gothic tropes, the image of nature in the film is examined. The essay finally compares the ending of the novel and the film, and discusses the reversal in terms of sexual politics.

Keywords: Victor Sjöström; silent cinema; landscape; space; dissolve; happy end; sexual politics

BACKGROUND
The above cited introductory intertitle from Victor Sjöström’s sixth Hollywood film The Wind (1928), based on a 1925 novel with the same title by Dorothy Scarborough, opens the story in evoking a grandiose register. Scarborough, however, interestingly enough, was not only a novelist, but also an English professor, whose dissertation dealt with Gothic themes, which she also developed in her own writing—and not least in The Wind. The script credit was given to Frances Marion—one of the most proficient female screenwriters in Hollywood. In the following, the film will be examined in close detail: not only its text, but also the relation to some of its contexts: the Western genre, Gothic tradition, Scandinavian landscape. These relationships are not entirely unproblematic. According to Susan Kollin, who has analyzed the novel in depth, “the film overlooked much of the novel’s critique of frontier attitudes about labor, race, and national identity”—not surprisingly in the hope of a more general appeal to the potential film audience.

The story of the film itself is easily resumed: Letty, as an orphan, seeks refuge with her cousin, whose wife, however, views her as a rival. Left with no other choice, she marries their neighbor Lige. But she finds him frightening and abhorrent, and he resolves not to force himself on her. During a storm, the cattle dealer Roddy rapes Letty. This is shown only symbolically, in Graham Petrie’s words: “through the visual violence of the wind itself and the traditional sexual symbolism of the stallion”. She shoots him in self-defense. Despite her shock, she struggles to bury him in the sand, an impossible task in the hard wind. Finally nature does the job itself, the wind covering him with sand. The initial version of the film ends with the crazed Letty receding into the storm, just like in Roddy’s initial account of what—according to an Indian legend—happens to women; they become mad in the wind. In the final version, however, a...
happy ending was tagged on at the request of Irving Thalberg, the producer (in spite of the scriptwriter’s protests: “But no happy ending, Irving, Please not that!”). In the added ending, Lige returns and Letty is capable of loving him now that she—by a baptism of the wind—has been liberated from her fear.

Leading lady Lillian Gish, who had chosen the novel as well as written a four-page treatment serving as starting point for the screenplay, also insisted on having Lars Hanson play opposite her in this film, like in The Scarlet Letter (1927), and on having Sjöström rather than Clarence Brown, MGM’s initial suggestion, to do the directing. Meanwhile, Sjöström demanded that the exteriors be shot onsite in the Mojave Desert. Given 120°F and nine wind machines whipping up the sand that was the visually most distinctive feature of the film, it was an extraordinarily taxing ordeal. Gish later called it “one of my worst experiences in filmmaking”.

The Wind was shot as a silent film, but it opened too late (November 23, 1928) to be wholeheartedly received as such by the critics and public. The talkies had just made their breakthrough (The Jazz Singer was first shown in 1927). This general reluctance toward the film probably had other reasons as well, such as the sombre story; that the producer Irving Thalberg considered it a risky project is revealed by a telegram to Sjöström where he gives instructions in order to try to save its commercial potential:

After careful discussion with Frances and getting opinion of several people definitely (sic!) decided we must have Hanson clean shaven from time of her washing dishes on to finish of picture otherwise there will be no conviction of growing romance and certainly no audience desire to see it come about stop we are taking enough chances on picture without destroying only hope of making it commercial stop please dont worry about this regards Irving Thalberg.

But in retrospect, it has often been considered Sjöström’s greatest Hollywood masterpiece and one of his best works ever. Film historians have particularly pointed out that Sjöström in this film succeeded in rendering the invisible—the wind—visible through its effect: the sandstorm, which plays such an important role in the film. It has been noted that Sjöström, precisely at the time where silent cinema turned into sound, made a last effort to explore the forms of the visible in order to make a silent record of sound—these silent sounds being a characteristic trait to several of his earlier Swedish films.

**LANDSCAPE OF THE ORIGINS**

In The Wind, landscape also seems to take center stage once again. On one hand, there is the Western aspect, where Scarborugh’s novel—to borrow Susan Kollin’s expression—“restores white women’s agency to the winning of the West”.

In the film too, the traditional theme of woman in domestic space overlaps with woman striving to conquer and dominate landscape. On the other hand, there is also a Gothic aspect to landscape in both novel and film. The winning of the West has not been an unambiguous enterprise; on the contrary, white man’s conquests have brought destruction to landscape and led to death or displacement of the original, American Indian population. Supernatural images of nature appear repeatedly in the story, often combined with references to the region’s indigenous peoples, dispelling the myth of the frontier. Thus, “a Gothic nature operates to unsettle Western myths.”

But there is yet another aspect to be taken into account, namely the relation to Scandinavian landscape; perhaps the feature most often pointed to as main characteristic of Sjöström’s earlier films, and thus in his case a particularly strong sign of the continuity between Sweden and Hollywood. According to Peter Cowie, landscape in Terje Vigen (1917)—for the first time in film history—consequently reflects the conflicts both within and between the characters in the narrative. In an article on Terje Vigen, John Fullerton also touches upon this characteristic:

> The most striking aspect of Terje Vigen is its finely-wrought narrative structure; a narrative such that the sea is not merely a symbol for the object of revenge but the very embodiment of the revenge motif. […] Not only do the people of Grimstad fare by the sea and live beside the sea—the economic and the geographical basis of their livelihood—but in a very strict sense the sea is both an instrument for their protection and a source of potential danger.
Widening the scope of his analysis, Fullerton also discusses The Outlaw and His Wife (1918) where snow and ice play a similar double role; they function as protection against the arm of the law, but at the same time they cause the death of the two central characters. Landscape in both these films appears as strongly metaphorical. Fullerton points to the dialectics in the relationship between human and landscape, which establishes analogies between them.13 In his review of The Outlaw and His Wife, French filmmaker and critic Louis Delluc had already mentioned “a third interpreter, particularly eloquent: landscape!”—which echoes several other comments from the period.14 Henri Agel repeats the same point, talking about a fascinating “fusion between man and landscape.”15 In my own analysis of The Outlaw and His Wife, I have shown in detail how man’s exposure to the overwhelmingly powerful forces of nature seems to make the latter more and more hostile.16 Thus, the shape of landscape in the film functions as a series of visual presages, which to the spectators forebode the dark conclusion of the narrative. In a quite similar manner, the central element in The Wind appears as an ever-present, overwhelming force in the film that makes all attempts at human resistance appear futile and ineffectual. The original ending of the film seems particularly close to its Swedish forerunner. Graham Petrie, however, rather emphasizes the difference between The Wind and its Swedish predecessors:

In The Wind [...] there is little grandeur in the natural environment; rather it is a relentless, omnipresent force that steadily saps the willpower and the energy of the central character and demonstrates in its unpredictable eruptions into violence that human attempts to resist it are puny and ephemeral. Nature here is neither an awe-inspiring, almost mystical force, as in the Swedish films, nor a challenge to be overcome through human courage and endurance, as in an American Western ...17

Petrie may be right in tracing a divergence in the way of dealing with landscape in The Wind. Still, what unites this film with both Terje Vigen and The Outlaw and His Wife is that their portrayal of landscape is far from being idyllic or romantic, as in so many other Swedish films from the silent era. Instead it is, just like in The Wind, a natural force or an original, primordial power, which was there long before any human being entered the stage. And man’s attempts to conquer this force, evoked in the first intertitle of The Wind, are doomed to be in vain, or in Petrie’s words, the statement is “quickly shown to be a premature and over-confident assumption.”18 This also seems to point in yet another direction, namely that the causes for the dominance of the wind as well as the woman’s problematic position “stem less from some metaphysical force of nature than from ideologies that shape the social position and power of white, middle-class women.”19

This film, however, produced in a new context as it is, also comes close to embodying what Mikhail Iampolski, following Laplanche and Pontalis, has labeled the “phantasm of origins,” which according to Iampolski keeps haunting the entire problematics of influence.20 In the case of Swedish cinema this “phantasm of origins” is particularly associated with the original quality of landscape. At the same time, it is here separated from the culture that generated the phantasm and integrated within a new cultural framework. The vitality of the phantasm, however, is clearly demonstrated by an article from 1924 by Chicago critic Clary Berg on the Swedish origin of Sjöström’s films:

The secret lies in their style rather in the way of achievement. It lies in their method of letting the simply magnificent act by its own efforts. It is precisely the simplicity that grants their film productions the great effect that appears. We decorate our Christmas trees with tinsel, in order to make people believe in them. The Swedes show us their pine trees the way they are in reality, striving towards the sky.21

In fact, this “phantasm of origins” does indeed serve as a way of accounting for influence from Sjöström’s Swedish films to the American ones, still with particular focus on landscape portrayal. The iconicographic symbolism of the landscapes, however, paradoxically also sheds light upon the specific cinematic context within which these films were produced. The Wind thus also serves as a kind of essay on the twofold capacity of the cinematic image—the feeling of movement created by “framing” the wind, as well as the palpable sensation of wind that the frame composition gives rise to by rooting it in the actual temporal experience. The visual power is systematically
heightened during the course of the film by the connection that, for better and for worse, is forged between Letty and the wind. As it is stated in one of the first titles: “This is the story of a woman who came into the domain of the winds.”

Indeed, this title condenses the central idea of the story, where the construction of landscape is increasingly merged with the portrayal of female subjectivity. The key theme of the film is the gradual intertwining between Letty and the natural forces represented by the wind and the sand, finally collapsing the boundaries between subjective and objective, inner and outer space. Emmanuelle André has convincingly argued that every episode in the film consists in a deplacement of the original shot/countershot structure, where Letty progressively advances toward the doors and windows that she faces, thus also confronting the wind to an ever-increasing degree:

Any advancement of the body towards the frame engages a supplementary degree of fragility, corresponding to three levels of occupying space: first of all, the wind is framed (in the train, at the farm), then the frame is shattered (during the feast and the storm), then the body crosses the frame (the final aggression).²²

FRAMING THE WIND

The theme of The Wind is introduced already in the first sequence of the film. In the establishing shot, a train crosses the prairie, accompanied by smoke and dust, prefiguring the wind and sand that will soon take over the scene completely. In a few interiors from the train, Roddy and Letty are introduced, he gazing at her from behind and then, approaching, brushing sand off his sleeve. This gesture later turns out to be the most frequently reoccurring throughout the film, used on numerous occasions by the male characters Roddy, Lige, and his comic counterpart Sourdough, often as sign of embarrassment or defensiveness.

These interiors are followed by a new exterior shot, now closer to the train, which shows the sand drifting about, and in the next cut back to the compartment it is shown whirling into the train through the open window. Roddy’s first narrative function thus is to help Letty close the window, thereby indicating the central line of division between inner and outer space. Having laughed at first at Letty’s naïve remark that she wished that the awful wind would stop blowing, Roddy, however, soon instead predicts her dark future in the domain of the winds. “Injuns call this the ‘land o’ the winds’—it never stops blowing here,” and in the next title: “day in, day out; whistlin’ and howlin’ makes folks go crazy—especially women!” This is the first, but definitely not the last time that “Injuns” are mentioned in the film—and closely connected to its Gothic side. As Susan Kollin has stated in her analysis of Scarborough’s novel, “the Gothicized Indian operates as a ghostly reminder of a national past that was once dangerous and enticing, deadly but intriguing”; here, however, the novel also adds a critique of “the nation’s expansionist ideologies.”²³ The film hovers between these two positions; while downplaying any explicit critique, it still sticks to the novel’s “refusal to grant white characters a place of innocence in the text.”²⁴

Already during the train sequence, the wind is also introduced visually by repeated shots of the window frame covering the film frame almost entirely. These shots are inserted three times during the train sequence, with the sand hitting the window more and more violently. On the second occasion, the window frame with the sand is dissolved into the next shot of Letty and Roddy. For a moment their image is entirely covered by the whirling sand, both inscribing them visually into the “domain of the winds” and introducing for the second time the central theme of the crossing of the borders—windows, doors—separating protected space from unprotected. This particular sequence also introduces the use of dissolves, a device used throughout the film and often combined with another central feature: the close attention to certain important details, which in most cases are foregrounded by close-ups.²⁵ The dissolves also introduce on a stylistic level another important Gothic trope of the film: the doubling, in this case of space.

The dominant theme of The Wind stays in focus for the narrative as Letty and Roddy leave the train, primarily through the visual means of the whirling sand, now directly exposing her to its force, but also on a secondary level, as continuous subject of conversation. In Letty’s first conversation with Lige, as he has picked her up on her arrival, he tells her the frightening story of “Old
Norther,” once again associating the wind with the Indians. Thus, the “phantasm of the origins” is evoked in a figurative sense, as the original force of nature is here connected to the original inhabitants of the land: “Mighty queer—Injuns think the North wind is a ghost horse that lives in the clouds.” This is followed by a cut to Letty after which the image of a horse galloping up in the clouds is inserted for the first time. Its subjective character is confirmed by a cut back to Letty, her eyes wide open in horror. This subjective shot is to be followed.

The first key sequence in the gradual progression of “the domain of the winds” is the dance party, which is introduced by a shot of an orchestra playing, where the shadows and the movement of people dancing in the foreground are strangely reminiscent of sand blowing. Apart from this symbolic reminder of the threatening forces of nature, however, the party scene takes place in a closed and seemingly protected indoor space, where no windows or doors give an inkling of the ever-presence of the wind outside. Within this apparently safeguarded sphere, Roddy offers Letty a mirror, first shown from behind, which makes it appear as a framed picture. When a cut to the opposite perspective reveals Letty’s face in close-up within the frame of the mirror, this on the one hand marks the culmination of intimate space, but on the other hand also reveals its profoundly illusory character. The contrast is enormous when the doors immediately afterwards are flung open and the announcement of the cyclone is confirmed both visually by its menacing black shape, rapidly approaching, and through the movement of the sand blowing into the building, people fleeing in panic. This is the first time that the clear line of division between interior and exterior space, which was established already in the first scene of the film through the train window, is violated. But it is still only a dark foreboding of what is yet to come: this movement, collapsing the distinction between inner and outer space, will be accomplished throughout the film.

**SHATTERING THE FRAME**

This dramatic peak is followed by comic relief in the next scene, where Lige and Sourdough both propose to Letty and she bursts out into laughter, commenting to Cora, her cousin’s wife: “And for a moment, I thought they were serious . . .”. However, as Cora reacts with hostility to this comment, and in jealousy throws Letty away from her husband, who has entered the room, the tone of the scene is sharpened and Letty’s unprotected position is clearly revealed. It is only logical that the next shot shows her wincing, obviously at the sound of the wind, as the following cut shows the whirling sand once again.

After Letty’s unsuccessful attempt to join Roddy, who now has to confess that he is already married, follows the wedding scene, which is exemplary in its concentration on significant details in close-up, joined together by dissolves. Leaving Roddy’s hotel in a carriage, Cora makes clear to Letty the destiny that awaits her in an intertitle: “Two men want to marry you—make up your mind, which one you’ll accept.” This is followed by a frontal shot of the two women, after which there is a fade-out to black for a few seconds. Then, a fade-in shows a couple of anonymous hands in the foreground, one slipping a ring on the other’s finger, with an open book and the chest of a person with a sheriff star in the background. A slow dissolve transfers the spectator to an unknown space: a close-up of dirty dishes on a sandy sink. Then, a new dissolve reveals a table with a lit lamp in focus, surrounded by a bottle and other dirty dishes. Yet another dissolve reveals Letty within this space, for a second overlapping the lamp in the middle. This series of dissolves thus both include and enclose her into the interior space of Lige’s house, to which she is constrained by her marriage. The film thus gradually isolates its heroine in a position of victimization. She remains almost constantly enclosed in a prison-like shelter, which however turns out to be insufficient as enclosure. According to Ray Tumbleson, this all corresponds well to the construction of domestic femininity in the 18th century novel.26

In the following scene, Letty and Lige are alone for the first time after their wedding. Graham Petrie calls this a strong sequence, citing “both the intensity of Lilian Gish’s performance and Sjöström’s ability to create a complex pattern of repulsion and attraction, conciliation and antagonism, evasion and misunderstanding, through gesture, movement, facial expression, camera angle, and the bare, uncluttered setting that both allows the emotions to evolve without visual
distraction and serves as a reminder of the bleak future awaiting Letty in her married life."

How, then, is this pattern created? Lige approaches Letty awkwardly, and then shows her the bedroom, brushing sand off the bedspread. As he leaves the room and closes the door, she lets down her hair, as he is shown in crosscutting preparing coffee. She reacts once again to some off screen sound, which is followed by a cut-in of an exterior shot of the house in the whirling sandstorm. He enters again, offering her the coffee, which she pours out while he isn’t looking. She picks up the comb again and frantically tugs at her hair in order to divert his attention. He leaves the room. At that point, the cutting alternates between the two rooms, where husband and wife are each pacing back and forth—bound together by the same frustration, and by the cut-in shots of wind howling outside the house—an image of dysfunctional, or unconsummated sexuality.

He marches rapidly out of the bedroom, leaving her there and closing the door behind him, thus creating a double space with the couple separated by the door, not dissimilar to the scene in The Phantom Chariot with husband and wife on each side of the door: this scene is repeated twice, first as he threatens her with an axe, and then when he seeks reconciliation before it is too late. It thus suggests the double possibility of the door, to separate or reunite the couple. In The Wind, a dissolve from Lige to Letty behind the closed door is followed by another dissolve from her to a close-up of his boots, as he walks across the room and turns around. Then, another dissolve from his boots to an exterior shot of the house in the sandstorm, an image inserted already in the preceding scene where it was presented as a subjective image, introduced by a shot where she obviously reacts to the sound of the wind. Here, it is immediately followed by a new dissolve back to Letty walking around, her eyes opened in horror in the characteristic way that associates to the wind, confirming once again the subjective status of the image. At this point, the dissolves are replaced by plain cuts. First to his boots, as he once again walks across the room and turns around, aiming at the can in which he previously had served her coffee, and then—for the first time—to her shoes turned in the direction “toward him.” A new cut back to his boots shows him kicking the can, which is followed by a cut across the line to reverse angle where it lands in the direction of the door. After the next cut, there is only a brief glimpse of her shoes as she tramples on the spot. The following cut takes the spectator back to his shoes as he takes a run. Then, in a shot of the lower part of the door, it is flung open and his boots are seen entering and then hesitating for a moment. In the next cut, her shoes are shown as she takes a step backward—cut to his boots moving forward—cut back to her shoes, showing his boots arriving into the same image frame. The last cut in the scene changes from the previous low angle to a medium shot of the couple as he embraces her violently, which leads to her disgust and hatred.

Lige then leaves Letty alone in the room, promising never to touch her again, and closes the door between them with a definitive gesture; it confirms that she is now forever enclosed, alone, into the space that she never wanted to enter. The frontier between these two indoor spaces is much more absolute than the fragile borderline between the house and the surrounding outdoor space. This is revealed when she starts sobbing, hiding her face in her hands, but soon enough she takes her hands from her eyes again, listening, which is followed by an exterior shot of sand whirling in the direction of the camera, seemingly toward her. This demonstrates the increasing degree of her tension; her reaction to the sound of the wind is not only shown as before, by the more neutral exterior image of the house in the storm, but it is further emphasized by the wind and the sand attacking her. An intertitle summarizes her sombre state of mind: “Wind . . . sand . . . sand . . . wind . . . yesterday . . . tomorrow . . . forever . . . .”.

**FROM PHYSICAL SPACE TO MENTAL**

The next shot returns at first to the low angle close-up device dominating the preceding sequence, showing Letty’s feet together with a broom as she sweeps the floor in the apparent calm of the morning. Lige’s feet pass by and leave the house, as he picks up his hat and closes the front door in a gesture repeating that of the night before, the sand blowing into the house. She looks out through the window at a group of men gathered in front of the house, her solitude being accentuated firstly by her indoor isolation and the sand whirling outside, and secondly by Lige
returning to pick up his jacket before leaving. This is confirmed by the next intertitle, as she begs: “Take me with you Lige—I’ll go mad here—alone with that wind—.” Her initiative makes her dominate the doors for a while: she both closes the door separating the rooms of the house and then opens and closes the front door as she leaves, for the first time voluntarily penetrating into the domain of the winds. However, the attempt turns out to be fatal: first, she has to get off her own horse in the hard wind and then she falls from Lige’s horse, seemingly blown off; thus Sourdough has to take her back to the ranch. After the insertion of a shot of several carrions, Lige for the first time predicts the arrival of the northern wind, discovered through his binoculars.

In the shot following their return, Sourdough stands by the window singing a sombre tune—“Oh bury me not on the lone prairie—talking talking about norther weather” and “when that Satan hoss o’ the Injuns starts to snort,” thereby doubly announcing the arrival of the northern wind. Letty responds to this by turning her gaze inwards. A dissolve to the phantasmatic ghost horse evoked by Sourdough leaves the image of the horse in double exposure, only gradually disappearing from the screen over the image of the thoughtful Letty, who seems slightly dizzy. Upon the arrival of a visitor a few minutes later, announcing the arrival of an injured man, Sourdough throws out a handful of sand, only to let more sand blow in. As the man is carried to the house, wounded and wrapped in a blanket, Letty fears for a second that it might be Lige—the first sign of her caring about him—but as it turns out to be Roddy, she fears instead that he is going to stay. Throughout the film, the two men are doubled on several occasions, where Letty mistakes one for the other. This doubling of men, associated with the image of the horse in double exposure, adds strongly to the Gothic quality of the film, but also underlines their shared narrative function: both represent the threat of sexual violence. They are both on the side of the wind, constraining and invading.

In the next shot, the exhausted Roddy covers his face with his hand. In a dissolve, where the subjective character of the image is marked by the same intense staring from Letty as in the sequences with the ghost horse, he is shown looking up, smiling toward her with sadistic pleasure and widened eyes. Another dissolve takes the spectator back to the real image of his hand covering the face. After a cut back to the staring Letty, her eyes are instead turned off screen, and a new cut to exterior with the sand violently blowing shows what has captured her attention, after which the image fades out into black. All the more violent is the contrast to the next shot, where Letty stands in front of a blossoming hedge, in an airy frock and a wide-brimmed summer hat. This picture is dissolved into an extreme close-up of a pair of widened eyes seen looking through a stereoscope, indeed a scaring image—the most extreme example of the attention to details cited above as a reoccurring feature in the film’s stylistic design. A new dissolve, slightly reassuring, presents Roddy in medium shot as he looks through the stereoscope at Letty’s image on what turns out to be the photograph that filled the screen shortly before. His smile when he takes out the photo, however, is all but reassuring.

In the following sequence, the announced threats come true, with the arrival of the announced wind. Letty, who is washing dishes in sand, listens as he reminds her of what he told her when they first met in the train, that the wind drives people—and women in particular—crazy. As she tears her hair reacting to this, Roddy adds, ominously: “Well—it’s doing it!” To her original claustrophobia as a housewife is now added an increasingly hysterical and neurotic response to her entrapment. Immediately after her lame protest—“I’m not afraid of the wind. I—I—like it!”—the frame is covered by an image of a window opening toward the uncontrolled forces of wind and sand. The next cut shows her looking towards the sky, whereas the cut introduces her subjective image of the dark clouds. In the following cut, the same window is shown from the outside, still with her regard turned upwards. The verbal threat prefigures the visual threat of his embracing her, showing her being completely lost in the wind while he still strives to maintain the control both over Letty herself and her whereabouts. He talks of the spring in Virginia while she looks out at the sand, deeply frightened. Their conversation is momentarily interrupted by Lige’s return: “—old norther’s here! Hosses are comin’ down from the mountains in thousands—!” He takes Roddy with him—“Every man is needed for the round up”—leaving Letty behind, alone in the
empty house, her hand reaching out as for help and her eyes wide open in despair. For a moment, she goes out in the wind, reaching out in the empty air once again, but she is forced to go back into house after a short moment. This is her first attempt to dominate the wind actively, which thus turns out unsuccessfully.

But immediately after joining the group of men, Roddy is seen turning back to where he came from. After a crosscutting sequence showing the group of men disappearing into the desert-like landscape and Roddy alone riding in the opposite direction, a shot of the men absorbed into the prairie, visually covered by the whirling sand, is dissolved into an interior with a lamp swinging back and forth from the ceiling. This creates a pattern of stripes on the wall that makes the whole space seem turned over. This introduces the most central scene as concerns the gradual intertwining between Letty and the wind, and the most elaborate subjective sequence in the film, where Letty’s state of mind seems to dictate the whole course of events. Through the dissolve, the sand and the lamp overlap for a moment, finally merging interior and exterior space. A cut to Letty cowering in a corner is followed by an exterior shot in the storm, blowing the sand over the house and partly effacing it, the big distance to the house further emphasizing its smallness and vulnerability, and its exposure to the merciless forces of nature. Next cut, back to interior, shows her raising her eyes with a savage look, while the house seems to be vibrating. The following exterior shot shows a herd of cows breaking their fence, after which a cut back to interior space shows that the boundary between them has been crossed once and for all, as the sand is shown whirling into the house through a hole in the wall. Furthermore, this is confirmed by crosscutting between inner and outer space where the sand keeps whirling ever more violently. At first, Letty seems completely paralyzed as the table lamp is overturned and starts a fire, but finally she pulls herself together and puts out the threatening flames. The ceiling lamp keeps pendulating as she drifts about the room, overwhelmed by her dizziness, and the whole space around her seems to be swinging. In Emmanuelle André’s words, “Letty alone fights the wind during the nocturnal storm, thus her body becomes the carrier around which space is organised, submitted to disturbances such as the soil giving away under her feet. [...] The frame (of the film) has taken hold of space, which implodes against the figure of Letty until the creation of a purely mental space.”

Then, a hand is shown knocking at the front door, which is almost blown open at this point. Another shot of the hand knocking is followed by her opening of the door, but only to be knocked down by the wind. In the close-ups of the hand, however, it remains unclear whether it is a real hand or just a subjective vision attributed to Letty in her tense state. Subjective space has merged with objective, and inner and outer have become one. Interior space offers no longer any protection or safety. As she finally lets the visitor in, she is blown down by the storm. The visitor closes the door behind him and embraces her violently. Upon her discovery, taking off his hat, that it is Roddy, the door is blown open again, interrupting the embrace. Consequently, as inner and outer have merged, the wind also seems to blow her out and about again into the whirling sand, roving about; where her vision of the ghost horse—the force of the northern—is once again cut in as her subjective vision. As she literally blows back into interior space again, scared more by her vision than by the blowing sand, the vision does return, confirming that no protection is to be found, neither outdoor nor indoor. Her feminine enclosure has now definitely been violated. Upon this insight, she faints. Roddy carries her to bed and bars the door behind her, in a vain attempt to close up the house. This turns out to be a highly ambiguous movement, which is just as threatening as it might be securing. The next shot of the galloping horse has been interpreted as a means of visualising his outrage. In Letty’s imagination, the wind is now seen “as a sexual threat, ‘a demon lover’ intent on violating her body and mind.” In Scarborough’s phrasing: “She saw the wind as a black stallion with mane-a-stream, and hoofs of fire, speeding across the trackless plains, deathless, defiant!”

This is followed by a shot of a blackened screen, creating a pause in the narrative flow. This way of visualizing—or rather avoiding to visualize—the rape described in the novel deserves further comment. The Production Code, which had just begun to take hold in the late 1920s, stated that representations of rape “should never be more than suggested, only when essential for the plot,
and even then never shown by explicit method,” as part of a general strategy to strive for the “elision or effacement of sensitive subjects.” This was not only the case within cinema. On the contrary, film culture seemed to rely heavily on other, earlier forms of representation in its avoidance of an explicit dealing with the subject. An intermedial analysis shows that: “What remains is a conspicuous absence: a configuration where sexual violence against women is an origin of social relations and narratives in which the event itself is subsequently elided”; moreover, this is pointed out as a “basic conceptual principle” both within social and aesthetic contexts.

THE FINAL CROSSOVER

Next shot, to exterior, reveals a landscape in the unexpected calm of the morning, which is followed by an interior: a shot from behind, gradually closing in on Letty’s head and shoulders. This recalls the first shot of Letty in the train, captured from behind by Roddy’s gaze, thus holding her in his grip. Here, the circle closes. But the way out of this grip is also indicated in the next shot, by a close up of Roddy’s holster on the table beside her. When Roddy opens the front door later in the sequence, a sandbank wells in, and he tries in vain to bar the door with a spade. This first of all shows that he has become unable to dominate and enclose her into interior space. Secondly, it prefigures Roddy’s own burial into the sand. Thirdly, it also affirms for the last time the definite merger between indoor and outdoor space. It is as though this shot in the calm of the morning finally confirms what had already been revealed in the dramatic images of the evening before.

As Roddy in the next shot-counter-shot sequence tries to convince Letty to leave with him, threatening with the fact that Lige would want to kill them both, the wind keeps blowing in their hair. As she struggles to get away from him, the barking dog—who already barked in her support during the preceding sequence—seems to take her party. During the whole sequence that follows, their visual separation is emphasized. They are united only as she unexpectedly pulls the trigger, killing him—which immediately separates them once again. This leads to a series of shots of the dog barking, of Roddy lying dead on the floor and of the sand blowing into the house, and of her trying in vain to dig his grave in the storm. The outcome of these vain attempts, however, remain completely unclear until the moment where she is captured through the window from the exterior, staring out madly, apparently at the sight of something horrifying. The next sequence, followed by an all the more desperate shot of Letty, shows Roddy’s face appearing in the sand outside the house. This, which was originally supposed to be the ending, follows Scarborough’s novel closely, where the wind refuses to cover her secret. In Susan Kollin’s description: “After she discovers the exposed corpse on the ground outside her home, the wind revealing the guilty act she has tried to keep hidden, Letty loses her already tenuous grip on reality and runs frantically outside into the punishing wind.”

The earlier sequence where Roddy knocked at the door is now instead interestingly revisited in the added last sequence of the film. Here, an anonymous hand tries to open the door and move the spade, in a manner similar to that of Roddy’s before—just as Letty has had her vision of Roddy’s face and rediscovered his hat left behind on the table. Letty’s subjective fear is all the more accentuated by the fact that the cut-in to the hand—which afterwards turns out to be Lige’s—is followed by shots of her turning over the table and throwing herself on the bed, her previously well-arranged hair now once and for all let loose by the wind. In a complete reversal of the earlier ending, Lige—after having looked in vain out in the sand for proof supporting her account of having killed Roddy—now concludes: “Wind’s mighty odd—if you kill a man in justice—it allers covers him up!”

The subjective sequence in the film immediately following Lige’s statement about the wind administering justice, that momentarily unites Letty with Roddy, is also closely related to the following reconciliation scene at the end of the film when Letty and Lige finally embrace. After which the front door is blown open once again, repeating the involuntary opening in the earlier scene with Roddy embracing Letty, but now following Lige’s and Letty’s embrace. Lige, hesitating, asks: “But the wind, Letty—won’t you always be afraid of it?” In response, Letty walks across the room and stands before the door, her face to the raging wind as it flings her unbound hair backward: “I’m not afraid of the wind—I’m not afraid of anything
now—!” Even though it has been added to the original ending, it is well integrated in the film in several respects. First of all, her mad look of fear associated with the wind throughout the film reappears for a short moment just before her final statement on not being afraid, which questions the whole happy end, revealing that the conflict between the woman and the wind might still be there, unresolved. Secondly, it parallels exactly an earlier scene where she flees from Roddy out into the threatening landscape dominated by wind and sand, where she finally collapses, becoming a prey to Roddy. Visually the two scenes are also constructed according to exactly the same pattern, as she exits the door, facing the wind with her arms wide open. Here, on the contrary, emphasis is placed on the contrast between her being dominated by the wind and her fears, incarnated by Roddy who was the first to announce them, and her newly acquired hope of freedom together with Lige.

Through the close reading of the subjective sequences and the development of the story of the wind, a specific connection between the wind and the men in the story is revealed. This connection is also intimately associated with the problematic image of masculinity that the film provides. And the new environment in which Letty arrives is indeed a man’s world. Men riding over the prairie chasing the wild horses, or men competing by shooting—the conditions for life in this context are exclusively being set by men. The only woman in the film except for Letty herself is Cora, her cousin’s wife. In a key sequence in the first part of the film, which characterizes their relation, Letty, still merry and girlish in her way of acting, is wearing a light frock and ironing another. Cora, in counter-shot, dressed in a big butcher’s apron, is tearing out the heart from a dead cow hanging from the ceiling, with an enormous knife in her hand. Their conflict is thus as much grounded in the contrast established in the narration between the one’s femininity and the other’s masculinity, as in the suggested jealousy between them. The story also seems to indicate that any ambivalence in Letty’s relation to the cousin would be on his side. Letty’s girlish manners and childlike spontaneity in the first part of the film also contrast to the cousin’s carrying her over the threshold like a bride, as she enters his house for the first time.

Throughout the film, the wind is also portrayed as penetrating power; windows and doors are both being repeatedly violated by its force. Thus, Letty is gradually more and more exposed to her double fear: that of men—Lige, Roddy—and that of the northern wind, represented by the stallion of her phantasmatic visions, the two fears being more and more intertwined, as shown in the analysis above. The novel as well as the film reverse “the conventional gendering of landscape as female,” as Letty “describes nature and the wind as male entities.” Gradually, however, she also strives to conquer her fear.

In the first step, she makes the attempt to penetrate by her own force the domain of the winds, only to be overpowered by its force. In the second step, she is blown out in the wind, after discovering that the wrong man has entered into her private space, but through the merciless force of the wind, she is unresistingly blown back into the house. Thirdly, she actively penetrates into the space of the wind as she tries to bury Roddy, after shooting him. According to her own judgment in retrospect, her own project to free herself has failed, but Lige upon his return assures her that she was right, in the intertitle quoted above. Only through Letty’s victory over Roddy by means of his own weapon—the revolver left behind on the table—is she able to conquer surrounding space by her own force. Thus, in the fourth step, she is eventually capable of overcoming her fear, if not unambiguously, so at least through the victory of her will. Here she is reconciled both with Lige, the man that she has married, and with the wind, which she is finally facing without being afraid, though still actively evoking her previous shortcomings. Through Letty’s multiple victory over the wind in the end, its domination is being questioned—and consequently also the male dominance, which throughout the film has become one with the wind.

Ray Tumbleson, who has compared The Wind to Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa (1748), the most influential novel of the 18th century, notes that the endings of the novels are identical in spite of almost 200 years separating them. The classical story of victimization is repeated, where a woman who has been raped, even in a state of unconsciousness, may never be restored, but has to be sacrificed, as—in Tumbleson’s words—“bodily pollution [is] irremediable, final and fatal, and—as
as in the Roman legend of Lucretia—reconcilable
with spiritual purity only through death.”35 How-
ever, it is particularly noteworthy that the film
version brought about a change, as the mostly
female collective behind the film tried hard to
keep the original version. Their argument was to
defend art, partly perhaps as they strived to claim
a legitimate place as artists within a male-domi-
nated film industry. But for purely commercial
reasons, they had to accept the change of end-
ing—and Lillian Gish thus, instead of appearing in
yet another role as a virginal, Victorian victim, as
she had already done in seven films with unhappy
endings, now instead paves the way for a new
heroine, who not only survives but is allowed to
endings, now instead paves the way for a new
man and of the wind, of a woman who has
woman conquering nature, in the double guise of
erie elements,
ally wresting away her strange secrets, subduing
her fierce elements,” is transformed into a story of
woman conquering nature, in the double guise of
man of the wind, of a woman who has “come
into the domain of the winds” to stay there.

NOTES

1. Dorothy Scarborough, The Wind [1925] (Austin,
TX: University of Texas Press, 1979).
2. The title of the dissertation was The Supernatural in
Modern English Fiction (1917). See Susan Kollin,
‘Race, Labor, and the Gothic Western: Dispelling
Frontier Myths in Dorothy Scarborough’s The
Wind’. Modern Fiction Studies 46, no. 3 (Fall
2000): 679.
3. Ibid.
4. Graham Petrie, Hollywood Destinies, European Direc-
tors in America 1922–1931 (London: Routledge &
Kegan Paul, 1985).
5. Bengt Forslund, Victor Sjöström, hans liv och verk
[Victor Sjöström, his life and work] (Stockholm:
Bonniers, 1980), 247–8.
6. Ibid., 249.
7. Western Union telegram, May 17, 1927, SF Ar-
chives. The question of shaving as a marker visually
distinguishing between good and evil was as typical
of Hollywood as of Sweden. See Bo Florin, Regi:
Victor Sjöström/Directed by Victor Seastrom (Stock-
holm: Svenska Filminstitutet, 2003), 59–60.
8. Forslund, 246–57.
9. Kollin, 685.
10. Kollin, 682f.
11. Peter Cowie, Le cinéma des pays nordiques [Nordic
cinemas] (Paris: Éd. du Centre Pompidou, 1990),
109.
12. John Fullerton, ‘The First Swedish Film Master-
piece: Terje Vigen’, Focus on Film 20 (1975): 54.
13. Ibid.
14. Louis Delluc, quoted in Georges Sadoul, Histoire
générale du cinéma – Le cinéma devient un art
1909–1920 [General history of cinema, cinema
becomes an art 1909–1920] (Paris: Denoël, 1952),
212f.
15. Henri Agel, Les grands cinéastes [The great film-
makers] (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1959), 43.
16. Bo Florin, Den nationsella stilen, Studier i den svenska
filmens guldålder [The national style, studies in
the golden age of Swedish cinema] (Stockholm: Aura
förlag, 1997), 81–4.
17. Petrie, 142.
18. Ibid.
19. Kollin, 689.
20. Mikhail Iampolski, The Memory of Tiresias, Intertex-
tuality and Film (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London:
University of California Press, 1998), 9.
21. Quoted from Filmjournalen 15/1924, 206.
22. Emmanuelle André, ‘Corps dans le Vent’, Cinergon
10/2000, 31.
23. Kollin, 683f.
24. Ibid, 684.
25. See Bo Florin, ‘From Sjöström to Seastrom’, Film
History 11, no. 2 (1999): 154–63.
26. Ray Tumbleson, ‘Potboiler Emancipation and the
Prison of Pure Art: Clarissa, The Wind and
Surviving Rape’, Literature/Film Quarterly XXV,
no. 3 (July 1997): 195.
27. Petrie, 145.
28. André, 32.
29. Kollin, 688.
30. Scarborough, 175.
31. In her ‘The Elusive/Ubiquitous Representation of
Rape: A Historical Survey of Rape in U.S. Film,
1903–1972’, Sarah Projansky offers a thorough
historical analysis of the subject, Cinema Journal
41, no. 1 (Fall 2001): 63–90.
32. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, eds., Rape
and Representation (New York: Columbia University
Press, 1991), 2–3.
33. Kollin, 680.
34. Ibid, 688.
35. Tumbleson, 194.