

## The canon reassessed: masculinity and gender transgressions at the Giornate 2019

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### I. Introduction

“Be careful not to impose our modern-day sensibilities onto movies of the past.” These were words of advice given to me by one of the guests of Le Giornate del Cinema Muto 2019. While I interpreted this as a warning against the perils of historical revisionism and overt ‘political correctness’, I could not resist challenging that perception. Removing movies from hindsight and historical perspective is to deny the art form’s uncanny malleability: the power to change its impact on an audience according to the place and time in which it is screened. The interaction between public and movie has always relied as much on an audience’s lived experience as on the series of images presented on the screen, and that relationship between viewership and perspective is at the heart of Le Giornate del Cinema Muto fe (to be referred to simply as *Giornate* going forward). The festival plays an essential role in the continuous creation of a collective film memory, allowing for a renewal of the dialogue between spectator, film and history.

And within this context we arrive at the Giornate’s Collegium programme. Besides functioning its function of nurturing the film community of the future, the Collegium acts as a platform for new and diverse voices to rediscover and reevaluate movie history. Taking inspiration from the rogue spirit of the Collegium manifesto, this essay will not take the form of an academic piece but of an assessment of the 2019 festival’s contribution to the audience’s sense of history and identity. Rather than assume a dangerously revisionist approach, this assessment will look at how select programmes at the Giornate may contribute to furthering our understanding of a wider film canon, and how these films can be interpreted through lenses that are relevant to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience’s sense of identity. This will be accomplished by exploring the following themes:

- Memory and history: exploring the Giornate’s role in building a sense of collective cinematic memory, a sample of the programme will be discussed in the context of how they relate and speak to other movies in their respective genres or subgenres. Rather than look at silent cinema as its own individualised subject matter, the objective is to build bridges between this period and the wider film canon, discussing how these movies contributed to the shaping of trends and archetypes.
- Gender identity and sexuality: while not an exclusive concern of a 2019 audience, an ever-more sophisticated understanding of how people see the world through the prism of gender identity and sexual orientation allows for an evolvingly rich discussion of how the movies helped shape moviegoers’ perceptions of themselves and society. These ideas will be intersected with the themes of memory and history.

The samples of the Giornate movies used for this analysis are based on two genres that usually exist at opposite ends of the cinematic spectrum in their tone: the ultra-masculine Western, and the often gender-fluid subgenre of crossdressing comedies. The selection of these movies was based on the following programmes:

- William S. Hart programme: arguably no genre lends itself more to being mauled by modern sensibilities than the Western. However, possibly alongside the melodrama, it provides the richest insight to how gender, sex and ethnic politics have been formed in the minds of moviegoers. The Hart programme presents an invaluable look at how certain gender conventions originated, and how the star's depiction of the cowboy would cast a long-lasting shadow on the Western.
- Comedies featuring cross-dressing: while not an official programme at the Giornate, the presence of cross-dressing in multiple titles screened this year could not have gone unnoticed. While they were limited in quantity and not presented as part of a curated programme, therefore making the analysis less straightforward, they provide rich additional material to the understanding of queer<sup>1</sup> sensibilities on film.

## II. How the West was won: William S. Hart and the genesis of the sensitive cowboy

While William S. Hart's place in film lore has never really gone away, the Giornate's retrospective of some of his major works may have served as a revelation to cinephiles looking to understand the origins of the most mythmaking of genres. It also allowed for an exploration of the makings of an early Hollywood star: with a screen persona seemingly complete and perfected from his first movies, Hart was able to craft narratives that were informed by the character (or *type*) he created, allowing his own personality to become the fabric of his movies. If by modern standards he could be considered one of the first auteurs, Hart was also a savvy star and producer who quickly realised that familiarity was a formula for success. If other star-director powerhouses such as Chaplin and Keaton thrived in creating narratives that grew from the implausibility of their established personas existing in a variety of situations (Chaplin as a prospector and as a boxer, Keaton as a sailor and a detective), Hart allowed for less flexibility in the scenarios he put his cowboys through. From early on, he had his heart set on specific themes and narrative threads that would be reused multiple times. If at times one is reminded of Debbie Reynold's cynical line in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) "if you've seen one you've seen them all", watching Hart's movies in close succession makes for an insightful examination of how the figure of the cowboy came into being.

Hart's persona is very much entrenched in the narratives of his movies, and that is because the values of those narratives were deep-rooted in his own identity. According to historian and festival programmer Diane Koszarski, "Hart is praised for his realism, and he prided himself on the stoic strength of his characters, and the volcanic depth of their justified anger. (...) But his true realism was an acute alignment with America's protestant ethos, both righteous and sentimental, as embedded in his well-crafted melodramas."<sup>2</sup> Hart kept this realism at the root of his tales of the West, setting him apart from contemporaries. While fellow Western stars like Fred Thomson and Gilbert M. 'Broncho Billy' Anderson relied heavily on rodeo cowboy stunts to propel their narratives, Hart favoured a subdued approach to his acting, saving spectacular cowboy antics for the climatic outbursts of violence which served as an outlet for his characters' seeming taciturnity. The stoicism in his performances could be

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<sup>1</sup> The word "queer" to be understood in its modern-day context referring to the LGBT+ community and to a non-heteronormative sensibility.

<sup>2</sup> E-mail conversation with author, 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020

described as wooden by some, yet this restraint gives room for the audience to read into the characters' underlining emotions, allowing for much of Hart's acting style to stand the test of time with contemporary audiences accustomed to emotional control over outburst.

This coolness bordering on detachment fed directly into the building of the mythos of the movie cowboy, allowing it to evolve into a stand in for a Victorian ideal of masculinity that lingered on cinema screens for much of the twentieth century: alpha males whose emotions need to be stifled rather than shown, and whose acts of violence are justified as the main outlet for such repressed emotions. Joy and laughter have no place in this persona - when we see Hart embodying a more humorous side to his archetype in films such as *Wolf Lowry* (1917) and *The Silent Man* (1917), it feels strangely out of place.

While assessing Hart's contribution to the Western, it is hard to make an evidence-based claim that he had a direct influence on specific cowboy portrayals that were to follow in the genre's golden age between the 1940s and 1960s. Still this retrospective allows us to appreciate how much his contributions were assimilated by film history and into the creation of the cowboy persona, as Hart's restrained and complex portrayals are much more in line with the darker and multi-faceted roles central to the psychological and noir westerns of the post-War years. The actor's restraint, which added to the mystique of the cowboy, would become a hallmark of the male Westerner: limited words, a shady past, few friends. This would become a favourite trope of the genre, as seen in Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954), Budd Boetticher's *Ride Lonesome* (1959), Anthony Mann's *The Man from Laramie* (1955), and eventually becoming a formula of their own with Sergio Leone's Dollars trilogy (1964 – 1966) and their "Man with no Name". On this last connection, historian Richard Koszarski links Hart to Leone by "the libertarian politics; the focus on the Western individual rather than the community; unabashed patriarchy and paternalism; the notion that the most competent and responsible men who find themselves "naturally" in positions of command have a personal duty to protect such "weaker" types as women, children and other marginalised peoples".<sup>3</sup>

Masculinity is portrayed as a lonely place in Hart's movies, and most of his narratives ensured the cowboy would remain in that isolating space. Male displays of affection and camaraderie are rarely encouraged, removing potential risks to the shattering of the alpha male persona. Not by coincidence, some of the most iconic imagery of cowboy camaraderie in film comes with their share of homoerotic undertones, from Montgomery Clift and John Ireland observing each other's guns in *Red River* (1948), to the affable camaraderie of Paul Newman and Robert Redford in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). The image of the lonely cowboy is epitomised in the iconic final shot of John Wayne walking into the distance in *The Searchers* (1956), isolated from the family and society he fought hard to protect – a scene which has a kinship to the last shot of Hart's *Blue Blazes Rawden* (1918), where the lonely cowboy rides off into the wilderness leaving everything he fought for behind.

The isolating feel of masculinity often acts as a catalyst for another Western hallmark: the lone ranger who wields violence to protect a community or a way of life. Two movies in this retrospective provide insights into this tradition and its regular intersection with race relations. The most problematic of these, *The Aryan* (1916) shows Hart isolating himself from society as an act of rebellion against the lawless and sinful community he was part of, kidnapping a local woman and enslaving her in the remote wilderness. A change of heart occurs when he is forced to confront his blood duties towards the Aryan

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<sup>3</sup> E-mail conversation with author, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2020.

race, as a gang of Mexican outlaws threaten to decimate a lost band of wagon train pioneers. While white supremacy can be read as subtext to many a Western, here it becomes actual text. Its broad brushstrokes and explicitly racist approach speaks to similar concepts in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), reinforcing the idea of the white vigilante who needs to take matters into their own hands to cleanse the land of the impurity and disorder brought about by "the other".

Not without its share of racial insensitivity, *Blue Blazes Rawden* (1918) makes for a more sophisticated narrative and exploration of the themes of race and society. Here, the character of Jim "Blue Blazes" Rawden operates in a society of frontier misfits, made up of natives and émigrés. He is once again confronted by his loyalty to his white heritage by the arrival of the family of a swindler he has recently killed. Rawden sees them as superior people to their marginalised group, their status as civilised and gentle individuals being subtextually linked to their ethnicity. The narrative culminates with Rawden saving a white man from being lynched by his angry gang of misfits, as the cowboy single-handedly fights against mob mentality to install order in society. The theme of mob mentality would surface at the core of William A. Wellman's *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1942), as groupthink results in three men being unjustly hanged by a crime they did not commit. The idea of the man fighting alone against the odds of a community that has turned their back on him would be famously explored in Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952), where a town is under the threat of "the other" in the form of outsiders who are about to disrupt the established order. Like Hart, Gary Cooper fights alone, in a standoff that reinforces the recurring theme of the macho cowboy as a superman, a social reformer whose responsibility and sense of duty to civilised society are much bigger than any personal motivations such as romance or the need to belong. In *Blue Blazes Rawden*, Hart makes a sacrifice that is echoed in the final scene of George Stevens' *Shane* (1953) – wounded, he rides off into the wilderness alone to face a likely death, leaving behind the woman he loves.

For all his contributions to the making of the alpha male cowboy, there is a surprising and subversive sensitivity to Hart's portrayals that transgresses the genre's ideology of machismo. Hart's strive for grounded realism set his movies apart not only in terms of aesthetics, but also of narrative and development: he was careful to give his characters an emotional arc, and many of these arcs are stories of redemption in which the morally ambiguous outlaw is redeemed by the healing influence of a woman. If the "Good Badman" persona eventually became a formula, it also allowed Hart to perfect a certain taciturn melancholy and emotional vulnerability that would anchor his performances. The melancholy of his "stone face" betrays the macho exterior - for all the heroic individualism, what his characters really seem to long for is a sense of belonging. There is a surprising tenderness to many of his movies, showing the star knew the value of romance and was not afraid to use it - see the poster of *The Return of Draw Egan* (1916), in which a courtship scene is given priority over any of the film's action set pieces. Scenes in which Hart's characters declare their love to a woman abound in many of these films. *Wolf Lowry* (1917) is the most sensitive of these and can be classified as a romantic western, in which the emotional denouement has Hart making the ultimate sacrifice of giving up the woman he loves to another man.

While Hart's characters were multi-faceted individuals who transform over the course of the narrative, most women in his movies had to contend by fitting into the stereotypes of the saint or the whore. Of this duality, Koszarski comments: "alpha male meets pure woman and sacrifices all to protect her, whether she be a child, a widow, a grandmother or a pretty maiden. Saloon girls in all but a few stories are not worthy of such sacrifice. They are soiled doves who do behave badly towards the hero. He may

have had relationships with these fallen women, but that is overridden by duty to the good woman.”<sup>4</sup> This outlook plays into the sexual politics of these relationships, as Hart’s association with the “good” women in his narratives tend to favour paternalistic feelings over sexual undertones, reinforcing the idea they were too good and pure to be stained by the prospect of intercourse. This is underlined by the fact that his leading ladies, from Bessie Love to Margery Wilson, were visibly much younger than Hart and portrayed with a child-like innocence and saintliness.

The characters may not always be multifaceted, yet the women in these films play roles that are essential to the development of the narrative, rarely being present for mere adornment. Some, like Margery Wilson in *The Silent Man* (1917) and *Wolf Lowry* (1917), are even allowed some Hawksian-like spark. While still playing upon archetypes, one of the most sophisticated female characters can be seen in *The Narrow Trail* (1917). The prostitute played by Sylvia Breamer is allowed not only to be redeemed at the end of the narrative but also to remain by the hero’s side once both face the reality of their disreputable pasts. Throughout these narratives, it becomes apparent that while Hart’s westerns have a male façade, they have a beating female heart.

It is unfortunate that Hart’s complex character pieces would fall out of flavour in the 20s and 30s as the Western would give preference to spectacle over introspective character-led narratives. From the silent era’s *The Covered Wagon* (1923) and *The Iron Horse* (1924), to *The Big Trail* (1930) and *Cimarron* (1931) in the early talkie days, Hollywood used the Western as a showcase for all the expensive pyrotechnics it could afford. While John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939) represented a return to a more psychological type of Western which favoured character development, it was also the big breakout movie for John Wayne. Wayne would become the epitome of cowboy virility on screen until his death, with most of his roles avoiding the overt sentimentality of Hart. The tradition of the sensitive cowboy would continue in the hands of actors such as Dana Andrews in *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1942), Henry Fonda in *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and Montgomery Clift in *Red River* (1948). Whereas it is up for speculation whether they were aware of Hart’s indirect contribution to their work, the retrospective at the Giornate invites spectators to build that bridge.

### III. Opening the celluloid closet: crossdressing and gender transgressions

Marion Davies was the luminous poster girl of this year’s Giornate, continuing the revaluation of the work of this most talented artist and comedienne who has for far too long lived in the shadow of the alleged caricature portrayed by Dorothy Comingore in *Citizen Kane* (1941). Judging by her glamorous lady-like appearance in the festival’s marketing campaign, many walked into *Beverly of Graustark* (1926) unsuspecting that they would spend most of their time with Davies cross-dressed as a young Prince from the fictional kingdom of Graustark.

Unlike William S. Hart, whose screen persona was nearly perfected from the beginning of his career, Davies’ path to finding her screen magic took longer, contributed by the insistence of romantic partner and empresario William Randolph Heart to place her in serious dramatic roles. While Davies had already displayed her lighter side in *Little Old New York* (1923) and *Lights of Old Broadway* (1925), the role of Beverly is a key one in her filmography as it provided further confirmation that comedy is

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<sup>4</sup> E-mail conversation with author, 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020.

where she really shined. It is not without irony that the part of the girl pretending to be a boy provided a platform where Davies could be an authentic performer, being much more effortless at embracing her tomboy side than labouring over being a Hollywood glamour girl.

Performing in male drag was not new to Davies, as she had already donned men's garbs in *When Knighthood Was in Flower* (1922) and *Little Old New York* (1923). Her Beverly-turned-Oscar still manages to stand apart from previous roles: in her elegant Austrian-like uniform complete with military cap, Davies cuts a most dashing figure. Gracefully fluctuating between genders, she makes most effective use of her androgynous look to seduce an audience potentially unaware of the sexual implications of the game she is playing.

In the documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), author Susie Bright memorably recounts her experience of watching Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco* (1930): in her mind she completely discarded that movie's heterosexual romance, as she could not stop thinking about her own alternative narrative centring on Marlene Dietrich and the lady she kisses on the mouth in the iconic cabaret scene. One cannot claim *Beverly of Graustark* to be as radical as the Dietrich vehicle, but it is possible to imagine it eliciting similar reactions from queer spectators in 1926. While the heteronormativity of its narrative is rarely ever questioned - the only way for Beverly to fulfil her romance with Antonio Moreno's Danton is for her to assume her gender as a woman - the sexual tension played out between a very attractive Davies dressed as a man and an equally attractive heartthrob Moreno is palpable through the masquerade. The audience is subconsciously invited to participate in the game of deception and create their own narratives about the different ways in which this relationship could go.

The actual act of cross-dressing is only one of the elements that identifies this film as candidate to the "celluloid closet" canon – movies with a queer subtext or sensibility, as identified by Vito Russo in his seminal 1981 book. The duplicity of Beverly's gender role, and the concept of masquerading one's real identity in order to navigate a society that sees the characters as an outsider, are themes in narratives that have historically appealed to gay audiences, from *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935) to *The Little Mermaid* (1989). This is further augmented by the knowledge that the crossdressing device came as a very knowing addition to the film by screenwriter Agnes Christine Johnston, being absent in George Barr McCutcheon's 1904 novel of the same name. Johnston played up the gag to the fullest, using it to continuously satirise rituals of masculinity, such as Beverly in disguise having to drink her way through gallons of beer at an all-male dinner party.

In the context of similar gender bending narratives, *Beverly of Graustark* has a kinship to other sex farces of the silent period such as *A Florida Enchantment* (1914) and Lubitsch's *I Don't Want to Be a Man* (Ich möchte kein Mann sein, 1918). Its rare screening at the Giornate also allows the public to acknowledge its place in the unofficial canon of cross-dressing in film, a favourite trope in many silent comedies that became rarer in the talkie years. In the 2019 Giornate alone, Davies is in excellent company: in the short *Kri Kri e Lea militari* (1913) screened as part of the Nasty Women programme, Lea cross-dresses as a man to join her husband in the army. On the male front, Reginald Deny and Otis Harlan looked so attractive disguised as matronly ladies to escape imprisonment in *What Happened to Jones* (1926), that they were chased down the street by two male admirers. Stan Laurel also had a stint in the opposite sex as he pretended to be Agnes the maid in *Duck Soup* (1927), giving him permission to be in the same room as Madeline Hurlock as she undressed for her bath. A sense of camaraderie between men (or between men and women pretending to be men) was central to these narratives,

something lacking from Hart's movies which emphasised romantic heterosexual relationships over same-sex friendship. This set of movies celebrated homosociality, playfully joking with macho rituals and allowing their characters to transgress these conventions and the gender implications of heteronormative society.

From Chaplin in *The Masquerader* (1914) to Reinhold Schünzel in *Heaven on Earth* (Der Himmel auf Erden, 1927), cross-dressing played a significant part in narratives of the silent era, allowing heterosexual audiences to laugh with (or at, in less sophisticated narratives) these characters in the private darkness of the cinema. At the same time, the best of these movies could knowingly wink at the queer spectators in the audience who were alert enough to understand subtext when they saw it. Restrictions imposed by the Hays Code in Hollywood would ensure such representations were kept mostly in the closet from the mid-1930s until the early 1960s, and while European and British titles like *Victor and Victoria* (Viktor und Viktoria, 1933) and *First a Girl* (1935) continued the tradition in the early days of the talkie, in the Code era feature film which embraced cross-dressing in all its glory and which had widespread audience appeal became much rarer – see *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949) and *Some Like it Hot* (1959) as key examples.

Ever since two men were seen waltzing next to a phonograph recorder in *Dickson Experimental Sound Film* (1894), cinema has been filled with imagery that could be read or appropriated as queer. While the contribution of many LGBTQ+ artists has been largely erased or ignored throughout time, in its own way the Giornate helps restore missing pieces of the puzzle from this erratic history of representation. Whether through subtext in movies like *Beverly of Graustark*, or by exposing a modern audience to gay icons such as Ivor Novello and Joan Crawford, this serves as a reminder of why the dark space of cinema acted as a safe space where marginalised audiences could project their hopes and dreams on a large canvas. And while crossdressing ran rampant throughout the festival, probably the best bit of queer imagery was saved for last: the sight of comic duo Pat and Patachon sporting leather cowboy chaps complete with an embroidered heart in *Film Heroes* (Filmens helte, 1928), which may as well compete with anything in *Cruising* (1980) as some of the most fetishist images ever to be seen on film.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In its 38<sup>th</sup> edition, Le Giornate del Cinema Muto still thrives on the nostalgic connective tissue that moviegoers have with an era that most of them have never actually experienced. Nostalgia may only take you so far, and this is where the Giornate takes a forward-looking approach that secures its vital place in the film scene: it provides cinephiles with a platform to keep the discourse alive, connecting new audiences and inspiring renewed conversations. By offering a space where stars as different as Marion Davies and William S. Hart can coexist, the audience is invited to expand their view of cinema, make their own connections, and create their personal narratives where movies of completely different universes can speak to each other and to our current times.

Reassessing the past through a modern perspective will forever present a challenge that relies on one's ability not to rewrite history, but to look for answers that support a more sophisticated understanding of our present. The Western may forever be a polarising genre as much as crossdressing may long live in the margins of movie storytelling, yet their reevaluation shows how relevant they are to the understanding of our modern sensibilities and to the expansion of what is accepted as the film canon. For a festival

seemingly embedded in tradition, the Giornate challenges any notions that film history is static and embalmed by keeping the conversation alive. Like a rescued strip of film that has been spliced back into the main narrative, in its function of filling in the blanks of our cinematic memory the festival ensures the continuous reshaping and revaluation of our history and our own sense of identity.