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## Miscellaneous

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## New forms of masculinity in Western films: The end of the Marlboro Man?

### Abstract

Westerns are one of the most masculine and stereotypical of film genres. In a social and film context where gender equality is increasingly important, it is worth looking at the evolution of the genre in recent years. Especially because, as André Bazin said, the Western is “cinema par excellence” (1966) and its analysis allows a reflection on cinema itself. Taking the figure of the Marlboro Man as a prototype, this study carries out an analysis of three selected case studies: *Brokeback Mountain*, *Jane Got a Gun* and *Godless*, two films and a miniseries with main characters that do not follow heteronormative masculinity. Ang Lee’s work broke new ground not only in Westerns but also in industrial cinema by making homosexuality visible, while Gavin O’Connor’s showed the possibility of a woman playing the leading role in a classic Western. The miniseries produced by Netflix combines both by giving leading roles to female characters, some of them gay, while reflecting on homosexuality. It was noted that the portrayal of masculinity in Western films remains valid in all three cases, but it allows women and homosexuals to access leading roles, often by acquiring typically masculine attributes.

### Keywords

***Brokeback Mountain*, *Jane Got a Gun*, *Godless*, homosexuality, gender studies, Western films, cinema, TV series.**

### 1. Introduction

Western films began their decline around 1972–1973, as they progressively lost audience as well as artistic relevance (Tatum, 2013), and eventually became almost marginal products during the 1980s. However, the last decades have seen a revival of the genre. The following are mentioned by Broughton as possible examples of the renewed interest shown by

audiences and critics of the genre after years of abandonment (Broughton, 2016: XI): *The Homesman* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2014), *Salvation* (Kristian Levring, 2014), *Slow West* (John Maclean, 2015), *The Hateful Eight* (Quentin Tarantino, 2015), *The Revenant* (Alejandro G. Iñárritu, 2015), *Bone Tomahawk* (S. Craig Zahler, 2015), *Jane Got a Gun* (Gavin O’Connor, 2016) and *The Magnificent Seven* (Antoine Fuqua, 2016). If titles such as *Hell or High Water* (David Mackenzie, 2016), *Hostiles* (Scott Cooper, 2017), *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (Ethan and Joel Coen, 2018) or the miniseries *Godless* (Scott Frank, 2017) are added to the list, we can definitely speak of a reborn attraction towards this type of productions.

In this context, it is of great interest to know to what extent these films differ from their predecessors regarding a key element of the definition of the traditional Western genre: the masculinity of the main characters (Mitchell, 1996). Hence our analysis of *Brokeback Mountain*, *Jane Got a Gun* and *Godless*, two films and a miniseries that, according to the premises of their story, clearly break with the prototypical male representation in the genre. The main objective of this study is therefore to identify the depiction of women and non-normative sexual orientations in these three modern Western productions.

## 2. Research proposal

Western, as a genre, goes straight back to the beginnings of cinema, but its rise is linked to the appearance of sound cinema. This genre basically focuses on the conquest and colonization of the American West but, as Deltell points out, the conflict between good and evil, the Christian tradition and the founding of a nation also play a central role (2009, p. 127). The Western was considered, almost from the beginning, a representation of the *American way of life* (Straehle, 2011) and of the folkloric traditional tale (González, 2010).

The narrative elements and characters have changed very little since the emergence of the genre with *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903). The most characteristic aspects of Western narrative are the long caravan journeys in search of new riches, the thread of Native Americans attacks, the persecutions and the struggle for survival, the mastery of guns as a way to organise chaos, the showdown between the hero and the antagonist, and the locations in large open spaces. Moreover, the characters are often repeated as archetypes: the cowboy, the woman –usually as a housewife or a prostitute– or the Indians as antagonists (Gutiérrez-San-Miguel, 2006).

### 2.1. Gender studies and the role of women in Western films

Due to their novelty, both *Jane Got a Gun* (2016) and *Godless* (2017) have rarely been analysed by the academy, but there is an extensive bibliography of reviews and journalistic articles about them. Their presence in this study relates to the works that analyse the representations of women in cinema, especially those by Laura Mulvey (1975). According to her, women should be represented as such, and not as an object of seduction, through a view fragmented by the camera, which turns them into a sexual object for the voyeuristic eyes of the viewer. In addition, she argues that women in cinema must not be relegated to a secondary role that accompanies the action without participating in it.

The ideas of Alison Bechdel (1985) should also be mentioned. Her test allows us to see to what extent female characters are represented in a film. There are four questions that should be answered: Are there at least two female characters? Are the names of at least two female characters known? Is there a moment in the film when two or more women are talking to each other? Are they talking about something that is not a man?

These two authors are included in the broader field of Gender Studies. Here, we must highlight the contributions of Julia Kristeva and the post-structuralist feminism, which defends the idea of women as a rejection of what has been defined and has been established so far with “the masculine” as the norm. For Alcoff (1988), the simple replacement of the definition of women as wives with a new one, specifically that of women as heroines, would not be adequate either, since the task of feminism is to reject the existence of opposing groups, such as men and women, by going one step further and talking about diverse human beings (Castellanos, 1995). Despite the great importance of this trend, the perspectives closest to liberal feminism, where women are seen as opposed to men but with the same abilities, are the most used when analysing female figures in Western films.

Among these studies, the work of Clemente (2007) stands out, showing the different stereotypes of female characters in Western films, such as the *femme fatale*, the woman redeemer, the brothel *Cinderella* or the nation’s mothers. Another classification of female

roles in Westerns is the aforementioned by Gutiérrez-San-Miguel (2006), who classifies women either as the good housewife who fights for her children and her husband, or as the prostitute, who might be forced into that position by past misfortunes or because she is evil and uses men for her own benefit.

Focusing on the classical Hollywood period, which is the most relevant for this genre, Ricardo Jimeno points out how “women become the identification of the desire of the heterosexual male viewer or the embodiment of traditional family values” (2017, p. 56). This author analyses the existence of some motion pictures that, during this classical period, went beyond the line of a masculinised cinema, presenting empowered female characters, such as *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954). Since then, as a result of the growing visibility of women in society, some –although still a minority– Western films have featured particularly important female characters or protagonists (Averbach, 2000).

## 2.2. Queer studies and heteronormativity in Western films

Unlike *Jane Got a Gun* and *Godless*, *Brokeback Mountain* is one of the films that has generated the most academic production in recent years, both for its ground-breaking approach and for the success and acclaim of the film. There is a large number of journalistic articles as well as books and compilations, such as Needham’s *Brokeback Mountain (American Indies)* (2010), Patterson’s *On Brokeback Mountain. Meditations about Masculinity, Fear, and Love in the Story and the Film* (2008), or Stacy’s *Reading Brokeback Mountain. Essays on the Story and the Film* (2007). These publications highlight the bravery and novelty not only of Annie Proulx’s original short story, but also, and mainly, of a movie made for mass audiences. They also show how the film presents a new male role, differing from what audiences were used to seeing in the Westerns (Gómez & Pérez, 2007; Chatzipapatheodoridis, 2016). Many of the essays that analyse the film also do so from a queer perspective (Barounis, 2009). Queer theories developed greatly under the influence of the postulates of Michel Foucault (1976), his criticism of heteronormativity and his questioning of the term ‘identity,’ according to which modern society has tried to reduce sexuality to that of the heterosexual couple. This resulted in minority sexual orientations remaining hidden due to the conventionalisms determined by the state, the political powers of the day, the religious morality and social conservatism, built upon reactionary bourgeois principles (Navarrete-Galiano, 2011). This is why for the French thinker both sexuality and identity are socially constructed. And that is what queer theories are based on, since they also consider categories such as gender and sex as social constructions.

Judith Butler (2001) argues that subjects are constituted as a constant repetition of established norms; therefore, whoever does not follow the parameters of this fiction is considered abnormal, sick, weird or queer. Thus, as there are only two main sex options (male or female), there must also be a binary division of gender (man or woman). This way, the gender norm is built a priori, as well as the norm of desire: to follow the rules that are considered natural, that is, ideal dimorphism and heterosexual complementarity. This binary gender system holds the idea of a mimetic relationship between gender and sex, in which gender reflects sex and is at the same time limited by it (Butler, 2001). This was revisited by queer theory, taking as its starting point the idea of an identity in continuous construction. Hence, this theory is founded upon the questioning of the ideas of sex, gender and identity in general.

“Masculinity and femininity, just like the organisation of sexualities in heterosexual and homosexual categories, are historically specific and are socially built” (Aliaga 2007, p. 125). Consequently, the behaviour of a heterosexual man, close to what we will call later the Marlboro Man, clashes with the behaviour of a homosexual man, with an identity much closer to the feminine idea.

It should also be noted how homosexual characters appeared in the cinema of the silent films, where they were depicted as a humorous character, fulfilling all the stereotypes, accompanying the heterosexual protagonist. Gay men used to be depicted as effeminate, squeamish, with a thin moustache and grotesque make-up. 'Sissies' used to please the viewers as, by watching them, heterosexual men could feel more masculine, while women could feel more feminine. During the 1930s, the Hays Code banned 'indecent' topics, including homosexuality, which were consequently completely dismissed and presented only through metaphors, often invisible to the eye of the viewer. In the Westerns, for example, the issue would be referred to through weapons or by alluding to San Francisco, the quintessential gay city in the United States (Straehle, 2011). Censorship of homosexuality extended until the 1960s, and then it continued to be usually represented negatively. Homosexuals were portrayed as villains or as characters who, in the end, were punished for their 'indecent,' and were usually depicted in ridiculous ways, trying to produce laughter, pity or fear (Cristóbal, 2010). Multiple studies show the evolution of this subject in cinema, from films such as the American *Lot in Sodom*, directed by James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber in 1933, or the German *Anders als die Andern* (1919) by Richard Oswald, which were censored at the time, to the current growing normalisation, which, according to Cristóbal (2010), is ahead of society in the cinema. The presence of homosexuality in films has been frequently analysed in the academia, mainly in historical reviews of different periods and countries (Melero, 2014) and in case studies (Smith, 2006; Durán, 2016), usually adopting queer theoretical perspectives (Navarrete-Galiano, 2011).

### 2.3. Masculinity and the Marlboro Man

The rise of gender studies and queer theories has led to masculinity being considered as another culturally constructed element. Masculinity is often defined by behaviour and appearance, articulated through elements such as clothing as a visual and symbolic demarcation of what is masculine (Aliaga, 2007). The masculine being is also materialised by his hyperbolic and self-protective attitude in comparison with what is considered feminine, by using typically masculine expressions such as a closed fist, an occlusive gaze, expressive restraint, or particular ways of sitting and walking. All this would make us see masculinity not as something natural, but as something that can be learnt and imitated (Aliaga, 2007).

One of the most ingrained prototypes around masculinity is the so-called Marlboro Man. Heir to the men who smoked in the advertisements of this popular cigarette brand (Michael E. Starr, 1984), it has become one of the most relevant figures to symbolise the masculinity of the white North American man. This representation of masculinity has been present in fields such as advertising (Martin & Gnoth, 2009), politics (Messner, 2007), health (White, Oliffe & Bottorff, 2012) or popular culture (Easthope, 1992). Kimmel and Aronson associate this figure with John Wayne (2004, p. 499), the classic cowboy par excellence, showing the relevance of this archetype for the genre.

### 3. Research questions

As stated above, *Brokeback Mountain* has been widely praised for daring to tell a story about homosexuality in a hostile context such as the American West and also for doing so in a film that is part of the big film industry –it was produced by Focus Features with a budget of 14 million USD (Pérez, 2015). At the same time, demystifying the space of the Western, usually represented by heteronormativity, was an important challenge in a very ideologically defined genre, in which a 'gay Western' went against the hegemonic status (Chatzipapathodoridis, 2016). Gómez and Pérez also highlight how *Brokeback Mountain* challenged the traditional stereotypes of male representation, which meant a major ideological audacity in that moment (2015). At the same time, the film avoids an urban gay lifestyle and chooses the rural

experience approach, therefore opposing not only heteronormative but also homonormative canons (Chatzipapathodoridis, 2016). It was therefore necessary to consider:

RQ1. How does *Brokeback Mountain* represent non-heteronormative male characters in a Western film?

As there is no academic research on *Jane Got a Gun*, and considering that even in the few occasions when women have main characters in Western films the traditional narrative structure usually does not change, we wondered, in the same line as before:

RQ2. How does *Jane Got a Gun* represent a leading female character in a Western film?

For the same reasons as in the previous cases, and with the goal of extending the analysis to television formats, we raised the question:

RQ3. How does *Godless* represent female and non-heteronormative characters in a Western TV series?

#### 4. Methodology

Three case studies were selected for systematic analysis, focusing on the portrayal of non-prototypical male characters. It was developed within the conceptual-theoretical framework of qualitative methodologies and feminist studies.

The films *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) and *Jane Got a Gun* (Gavin O'Connor, 2016) show, in their protagonists, significant changes in what is considered common in Western films. The former became a cinematographic phenomenon because of the rupture involved in telling a story about homosexuals in a Western film (Chatzipapathodoridis, 2016); thanks to its awards and its cultural significance, it is considered one of the most iconic gay films and, specifically, gay Westerns ever made, hence its relevance for inclusion in the analysis. The latter “claims for the exceptional prominence of the female figure in such a masculine genre” (Casas, 2016); its inclusion in the study is mainly due to its similarity with traditional Westerns despite being starred by a woman. Although other Westerns have included leading female characters –*The Quick and the Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1995), for instance–, *Jane Got a Gun* is the most recent relevant release to date with that feature. Finally, the Netflix miniseries has been defined as feminist (Travers, 2017) at a time when the debate on equality in the audiovisual entertainment industry –and in society as a whole– has gained importance. Furthermore, its presence in the analysis is interesting because of the relevance that streaming services such as Netflix or Amazon have in the current television context and because of the window they offer to new or abandoned themes and narratives. As in the case of *Jane Got a Gun*, *Godless*’ interest also lies in how, in addition to being considered a Western with several classic elements (Chaney, 2017; Travers, 2017), it includes a wealth of characters that allows a deeper analysis of their characteristics, relationships and evolutions.

In short, the selection of these three Westerns instead of others is explained by the presence of main characters who are far removed from masculine normativity and by the different representations and characteristics of these characters, which allows a broader and richer approach to the leading roles that can appear in Western films apart from the Marlboro Man.

The study does not focus on the number of films or series starring non-male characters, but rather on the representation of women and homosexuals in these particular cases in order to, through an inductive method, offer exploratory conclusions that could be extrapolated to other current Western films.

The analysis was conducted after watching the three contents, adopting the perspective of different film theories and others on masculinity and character representation, so as to be able to understand whether less traditional characters are depicted differently or whether they can be equated to the traditional representation of prototypical heterosexual men in Westerns.

## 5. Results and discussion

### 5.1. Brokeback Mountain

We must start by highlighting the moment when the plot takes place: it begins in 1963, that is, the era of free love and sexual revolution had already begun; the story develops over two decades, reaching the moment when homosexual or queer activists started to fight for their civil rights. This means that the action begins with a certain temporal concession that facilitates the relationship since, even though the intransigence in regions such as Wyoming or Texas was still enormous, it was much less than during the time of the conquest of what we know as the 'Old West' (second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>). In fact, this temporal approach extends social criticism and reflection to the present day, when these homophobic attitudes are still present in many rural areas of the United States. In this sense, Annie Proulx herself stated after publishing her story in *The New Yorker* in 1997 that she received numerous letters from men who claimed to identify with Jack and Ennis (2006).

Actually, as already discussed in many press reviews after its release (Cooper & Pease, 2008), this film is not a pure Western, and authors such as Spohrer (2009) argue that it should be seen as a romance rather than a Western. Rifles, horses, cowboy hats, and locations remain, but it is definitely not a common cowboy film, but a reflection of the genre and its connection to masculinity and the rural society in the US; Barboza (2010) sees the debate on this rural environment as the backbone of the story. In his study of this film, Chatzipapathodoridis (2016), notes that it challenges to what extent a film that includes references to classic Hollywood Westerns and homosexuality can be considered neo-western.

Therefore, and following the description of the genre by Gutiérrez-San-Miguel (2006), it can be noticed how this film does not rigorously obey the postulates of classic Westerns; partly because in the Old West it would not have had the same meaning nor the same effect on the viewer, but also because the film adapts an already existing story, which limits its space-time location, since it is given by the literary source.

It should be mentioned here that, even if the story already existed since 1997, Ang Lee's film was a landmark because it addressed a subject often hidden in mainstream Hollywood cinema and in Westerns in particular, that of homosexuality. The value of the film in this sense is undeniable, which has been highlighted both by critics and by academic researchers (Patterson, 2008; Needham, 2010; Barboza, 2010; Thomas Piontek, 2012; Gómez & Pérez, 2015).

Focusing now on the representation of the characters, we can see how some changes are introduced around the typical cowboy, who is usually a wandering, strong, brave, and adventurous man, who lives according to his own principles of justice and integrity and who is often incapable of loving after having his heart broken by a "bad woman" (Gutiérrez-San-Miguel, 2006). In *Brokeback Mountain* the association of cowboys survives, in this case sheep shepherds, with constant references to the rodeo and the "cowboys." Elements showing the rupture with the archetype of the brave, accurate and combative cowboy are, for example, the moment when Jack tries to shoot a coyote in broad daylight and misses the shot, or the sequence in which Ennis encounters a bear, which makes him fall off his horse, that flees with the mules that carry their food (Chatzipapathodoridis, 2016). Moreover, unlike traditional cowboys, the values of justice, righteousness or adventure do not play a relevant role. Nor is there any sincerity or rejection of formalisms, something that González (2011) highlights as archetypical of traditional cowboys. This is clear, as both protagonists, especially Ennis, repeatedly hide their feelings (Gómez & Pérez, 2015).

However, the masculinity of the characters, despite their sexual orientation, is never questioned. As the story progresses, those "codes of masculinity" are built in a different way to what was common (Chatzipapathodoridis, 2016), but a great deal of stereotypically masculine elements remains. This is relevant, as male homosexuality has often been associated with traditionally female characteristics: less strength, effeminacy in manners,

interest in activities typically associated to women such as fashion or gossip, etc. *Brokeback Mountain* does not only shatter the stereotype of the heterosexuality of cowboys, but also that of the femininity of homosexuals, allowing two rough, strong, drinking and rude men, that is, purely prototypical, to escape sexual conventions.

Furthermore, Ennis and Jack could be perfect examples of the Marlboro Man, the male prototype conceived by the famous tobacco company which, curiously, is mentioned in a scene of this film. The association of this figure with the Western proves how, apart from their sexual orientation and certain particularities, the characters played by Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger would easily fit in most classic Westerns. And not only in those, but in most of the prototypically male roles of cinema and, in fact, of American culture.

The protagonists' masculinity and testosterone are reinforced after their first sexual encounter, in which both behave in a brutal and almost animalistic way, letting all the repressed emotions flow. This is also reflected in their games, their fights, and their sexual relations, always full of the aggressiveness men are supposed to show, as if they wanted to behave as manly as possible as a way of denying their feelings. This is particularly true for Ennis, for example, when he pejoratively states "I am not a faggot" or his constant refusal to live with Jack.

These behaviours are due to the dominant homophobia in the society around them, with Jack's father-in-law as a clear example, using expressions such as: "'The Stud Duck' do the carvin' around here!" or "You want your boy to grow up to be a man, don't you, Dolly?" Other examples could be when Ennis tells Jack about a man of his village that was killed after leaving the place with another man or the rejection of one of the clowns at the rodeo when Jack tries to buy him a drink, something that was allowed with a woman but not with a man. This homophobia prevents a further evolution of the arch of the characters of Jack and Ennis, something common in the classic Westerns, in which the adventures of the hero make him evolve (González, 2011).

Another evidence of these repressed feelings can be found in the behaviour of both protagonists –once again, Ennis shows it more sharply– with their wives: they clearly behave as *machos*, which is in line with the standards of the rural American people of those decades. Except for Jack and Ennis's wives and the latter's eldest daughter –all secondary roles–, women have an almost irrelevant presence. Both Alma and Lureen are secondary in the film, just as they are in their husbands' hearts; they, especially Alma, are treated with indifference, and their role is reduced to being mothers and wives, although Lureen, as the owner's daughter, has a more or less relevant job in the company. In this respect, *Brokeback Mountain* is similar to many traditional Westerns, as it would not pass the Bechdel's test and by Mulvey's standards, women would be clearly relegated to secondary roles.

## 5.2. Jane Got a Gun

If homosexuality has been a taboo topic in Westerns until very recently, the same has not been true for women; although very seldom in main roles, women have generally been present in these films. But in the West, we can find, basically, "good girls, mothers, spouses and loyal companions; and bad girls, manipulative and corrupters of men" (Clemente, 2007, p. 2). Until recently, this could be extended to most genres and societies, but in Westerns it was particularly true. Jane fits into both categories: she is mother, wife and loyal partner, but also a bad girl, responsible for Dan's suffering after she abandoned him. If we add to Jane's description her condition –brief, thanks to Hamm's intervention– of prostitute, we can see that she fits the female archetypes of Gutiérrez-San-Miguel (2006): sweet housewife, prostitute and bad woman.

Jane is a woman who asks Dan, a former lover, for help to save her husband, Hamm. In this way, we can see a woman as the main character, but only thanks to her status as a wife: if her husband had not got into trouble, she would still be at home taking care of her daughter,

as shown in the beginning of the film. In fact, Jane needs the help of another man, as she is not able to face the gang that is trying to kill her husband on her own. This is reminiscent of another Western in which a female character takes on a leading role, but only thanks to a man can she survive and get revenge for her father's death: *True Grit* (Henry Hathaway, 1969; The Coen Brothers, 2010).

The man helping Jane, Dan, is in fact the hero of the film, the one who best fits the characteristics of the typical cowboy of Gutiérrez-San-Miguel (2006): he is strong, fair, brave, adventurous, lonely and incapable of love after the villainies of an "evil woman" –Jane herself–, and he is also the one who organises the defence of the house, the one involved in some of the confrontations with Bishop's men and the one who finally ends up with the girl. He is, indeed, a "real man," easily associated with the frequent male figures of the genre.

With these ingredients, we can see this as a more or less classic Western. It follows the aforementioned of Gutiérrez-San-Miguel characteristics of Western films, but also meets most of the elements of modern Westerns included in *The Post-2000 Film Western* (Paryz & Leo, 2015).

From a technical perspective, it is also a traditional Western. *Jane Got a Gun* shows a much clearer Western aesthetic than *Brokeback Mountain*, with frequent Extreme Long Shots –showing large desert spaces, rides and backlit compositions–, American Shots –iconic of the genre– and Extreme Close Ups –focused on the use of weapons. Mandy Walker's cinematography approaches the standards of the genre: lighting with a strong ratio between high and low lights, strong contrast and deep shadows, colour temperature around 3000K, which Wyszecski and Stiles consider "warm-desert" (1982).

Considering all the above, the classification of *Jane Got a Gun* as a prototypical Western is undeniable. The female roles that have already been mentioned and that have been maintained in the film are among the most common elements of this genre. Thus, despite assigning the main role to a woman and showing a slight evolution within the structures of the genre, this picture does not present a complete break with the established conventions of female representation in this type of films. This is confirmed when the Bechdel's test is run: we find more than two female characters –Jane and her daughters–, but there is almost no dialogue among them. The female presence is, in fact, limited to Jane as the main character. But she is not fragmented by the camera, she is not presented as a sexual object for the male eyes and she does not just accompany the action, but she takes an active role in it, thus fulfilling Mulvey's conditions. We can definitely talk about an empowered woman, perhaps less by herself and more by her husband's incapacity, but she acquires some features that could belong to the Marlboro Man: independence, courage, fighting skills. This makes her evade, at least partially, traditional gender roles in this film genre.

Before concluding, two aspects should be noted. Firstly, the film was initially supposed to be directed by a woman, Lynne Ramsay, which could have influenced the portrayal of the protagonist. In fact, even if it does not play an important role in our analysis, the film suffered several delays and setbacks, including the rejection of Ramsay herself and Jude Law (Child, 2013). And second, we should briefly think about the title: *Jane Got a Gun*. It is an intertextual game that inevitably reminds us of *Johnny got his gun*, written and directed by Dalton Trumbo in 1971. The only change is the indefinite article 'a' instead of the possessive determiner 'his.' In that film, Johnny is a soldier who, of course, owns his gun, whereas Jane is a woman who gets a gun, maybe for the first time. In fact, we see Jane practising her shooting with Dan, because even though Hamm showed her how to hunt with a rifle –again, a man teaching a woman–, she does not know how to shoot with a pistol.

### 5.3. Godless

All the differences between men and women dealt with so far dissolve in the miniseries created by Scott Frank, in which the women of La Belle had to take over the village after the

death of most of the men in a nearby mine accident. These women, who before the accident could have been included in Gutiérrez-San-Miguel's classification of housewives and prostitutes (2006), escape from it after the disappearance of the men. The most paradigmatic example is Callie Dunne, a former prostitute who now becomes the village teacher. However, most women in secondary roles maintain typically feminine characteristics, and wish that their men were still in the village to "look after them."

Some of the few male figures left in town are Sheriff Bill McNue, who is losing his sight, and his young apprentice Whitey Winn, no more than a boy. These figures contrast with the powerful and determined Alice Fletcher, an outcast living outside town with her indigenous mother-in-law and her son, or Mary Agnes, the sheriff's sister and *de facto* ruler of La Belle. Both show strength, independence –Mary Agnes changes back to her maiden name after her husband's death– and eagerness to use their guns, attributes more common in male figures, while McNue and Winn show weakness. For these female characters, romantic love also has a strong relevance, something that is not usually so present in the masculine ideal, as the cowboy leads his life with solitude and inability to love (Gutiérrez-San-Miguel, 2006).

At the same time, McNue is, together with Alice Fletcher, one of the two most important figures acting as a parent. This role, usually relegated to women, is addressed in the series with two parents forced to raise their children after the death of their partners. Alice Fletcher, on the one hand, is the mother of a half-Native American teenager who is afraid of horses and needs to learn "to be a man," for which he needs a father figure. McNue, on the other hand, is a widowed father who blames his youngest daughter for the death of his wife and, even though he often leaves his children with his sister Mary Agnes, he also acts as a father, which is rare given the traditional loneliness and virility associated with a sheriff.

Also, some father-son boundaries are shown between Frank Griffin and Roy Goode. It is Goode's abandonment of Griffin's gang and his arrival to La Belle that triggers the events depicted in the seven chapters of the series. Both Griffin and the bad guys in his band conform to the stereotypes of the genre; so, does Roy Goode, who, after finding shelter in Alice Fletcher's house, becomes a male role model for her son.

The story shows, mainly through the journalist's character, how the female kingdom of La Belle is an anomaly, i.e., a village run by women with a scarce male presence is never considered normal in that context. In fact, as also happens in *Jane Got a Gun*, the strength and importance of women is only acquired after the forced absence of men; without the accident in the mine, the women of La Belle would continue to be limited to their roles of mothers, wives and prostitutes.

In general, the richness in the development of the characters in the series avoids considering them in the narrow definitions of traditional roles. As an example, the prostitute is no longer just the prostitute, but also the teacher and the homosexual lover of another woman. *Godless* breaks with the representation of masculinity in Westerns, featuring strong independent women and weak men. Although characters in the leading roles are still associated with traditionally masculine characteristics –something understandable in a violent and dangerous environment like the Wild West–, these characters are not always men and, at the same time, not all men behave according to these features.

Neither this, nor its self-conscious feminism –feminism is a theme in the very content of the script, as the characters discuss what it means to be a man or the vulnerability of women– prevent Scott Frank's series from offering a classic Western, easily identifiable in the aesthetic elements, with warm colours and long shots of open spaces, and in its content, with classic Western tropes such as rides, duels or dusty towns.

All the innovations in the representation of masculinity, which are analysed here, must be contextualised regarding two aspects: firstly, as a Netflix production. For some years now, the audiovisual entertainment industry has been facing a new paradigm in which video on demand (VOD) platforms, such as Netflix, HBO, Amazon or Hulu, are responsible for the

largest number of films and series, at the expense of the once almighty production companies, which must adapt their business model. The launch of Disney's own platform and the importance of Alfonso Cuarón's *Rome*, or Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman*, among the most relevant films of 2018 and 2019, respectively, both produced by Netflix, show the dimension of this new situation. According to Heredia (2017), Netflix and its competitors have brought about a transformation in distribution and, in general, in the entire cinema and television industry and market. These new groups and their huge amount of contents make room for authors, topics, narratives and products that had no possibilities in the former system, which has led to the deconstruction of some genres –in this case, the Western– (Heredia, 2017). One of the reasons for the new spectrum of options is the ability of the audience to participate in the conversation, moving from a passive to a more active entity, introducing their criticism, reviews or likes into different social media, and thus influencing the new productions, which must take into account what the viewer wants.

Connected with the previous one, the second element is that *Godless* was released in November 2017, during the peak of the #MeToo movement and in the midst of a surge of feminist movements. Although its shooting and production had begun long before and were probably not directly inspired by those movements –which were already gaining in importance anyway–, its performance and marketing campaign did actually exploit its feminist and gender role-breaking side.

## 6. Conclusions

In response to RQ1, we must say that although *Brokeback Mountain* breaks the stereotype about men's sexual orientation and the taboo of showing gay cowboys in a mainstream film, the traditional-style masculinity of the protagonists is undoubtedly present. In fact, the cliché that was really broken with this film was the lack of masculinity of gay men, by depicting two homosexual men as 'real' cowboys, very close to the ideal of the Marlboro Man. Therefore, this film portrays non-heteronormative male characters in a way that does not strongly differ from the traditional cowboy stereotypes.

We can also see how *Brokeback Mountain* offers a break with previous Westerns, not only because a story about homosexuality is set in the West, but mainly because a commercial film approached this subject so directly in 2005. In fact, it is arguable whether this is a proper Western; it would be more accurate to consider it a dramatization of cowboys and the masculinity associated with them but escaping the strict definition of the genre. The debate around the masculinity of cowboys and the masculinity of gay men featured in the film shows how relevant masculinity and its representation are in Western films, although not exclusively in this genre. It also helps to open a wider discussion about repressed homosexuality or repressed behaviour associated with homosexuals in a homophobic environment such as the American Midwest; a debate that was valid in the 1960s and during the conquest of the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, but may also be valid nowadays.

As a response to RQ2, it cannot be claimed that *Jane Got a Gun* promotes a turning point in the representation of female characters in Westerns, although the film directed by Gavin O'Connor helps to normalise the presence of women in the leading roles within this genre, something that is still quite innovative today and goes against the traditional Western schemes. This representation of women, following Western standards quite closely, proves how women can be active and protagonist in a Western that perfectly fits into the definition of its genre without changing the traditional depiction they have had in this kind of film.

However, the actual hero and leader during the final confrontation is a man. In fact, except for a brief dialogue with her daughter at the beginning of the film, the character played by Natalie Portman is the only female role that speaks in the entire film, and even she remains strongly defined by her role as mother, lover and housewife. This agrees with the study by Gilpatric (2010), which showed how the presence of Violent Female Action Characters (VFAC),

although it could be a sign of equality, only reinforces gender stereotypes when they are submissive and defined by their romantic relationship with a man. Therefore, we can also affirm that in this film femininity is not necessarily a barrier to leading the narration, but masculinity helps to gain presence and active roles.

The third RQ can be answered by stating that the representation of men and women in *Godless* shows a clear change in comparison with traditional Westerns, sometimes reaching the point of an exchange of the characteristics that have traditionally been assigned to each gender. In general terms, masculinity loses most of its significance and, whereas the men in Gavin O'Connor's and Ang Lee's pictures reproduce almost perfectly the typical patterns of the Marlboro Man –although for different reasons–, this is not the case in the Netflix production, where some relevant male characters follow less archetypal descriptions, closer to what would traditionally be considered feminine.

At the same time, this miniseries is aware of these issues and emphasises its feminist condition. Even though the characters are aware of the anomaly of a village ruled and defended almost exclusively by women, the presence of several strong female characters makes the series go a step further than *Jane Got a Gun* or other works in which a woman must make her way in a world ruled by men.

Finally, the presence of homosexual figures is more secondary than in *Brokeback Mountain* and does not present significant challenges to the representation of masculinity, mainly because those showing this sexual orientation are women.

We can conclude that traditionally masculine behaviour is no longer restricted to heteronormative men, but can also be found in homosexual men (*Brokeback Mountain*) or women (*Godless*) and that these characters can play a leading role in Westerns that clearly adhere to the classic aesthetics and narrative of the genre (nonetheless, this applies mainly to *Jane Got a Gun* and *Godless*). However, it seems that a certain level of masculinity is still necessary to lead or play a relevant role in a Western film: even if they are women or non-heterosexual men, all characters in the main roles –except Jane, who actually needs male help– follow, at least partially, a traditionally masculine behaviour. This could be explained perhaps by the lack of acceptance of these changes by such a traditional genre or maybe because the reality on which these films are based –a particular historical event, the Conquest of the American West– was mainly dominated by men, despite the existence of isolated relevant female figures, such as Calamity Jane or Annie Oakley. However, it is not the goal of this study to dig into these reasons, but it would be interesting for future work to delve into this.

It is impossible to deny that the Marlboro Man still rides the broad scene of the American Western, but his prominence is increasingly challenged, which demonstrates that this genre has room for leading characters who do not always stick to the prototypical description of masculinity.

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