

**Round table: *Domestic Violence in American Drama and Film
in the First Half of the 20th Century: A Cultural Perspective***

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In this round table we have tried to review how American drama and film contribute to exposing cases of domestic violence from a cultural perspective that encompasses different sociological, gender and genre analyses. Violence is seen as a means to exercise power that was doomed to be hidden in the domestic realm, out of shame for the victims and as a result of a twisted notion of male authority on the part of the victimizers.

In the Old South the domestic sphere was shared by white mistresses and their domestic slaves, which favored the development of an intimate contact between them, although this hardly ever meant the establishment of truly affective relationships. especially in the moments of friction which were not unusual since they lived and worked in such close contact (Jones 1995: 27). This historical reality was apparently erased from the memories of most members of the white southern society in the 1930s-1940s when David O'Selznick's movie *Gone with the Wind* was first released. In these decades the new southern white middle class looked backwards to "the antebellum golden age of romanticized southern race relations" (Hale 1999: 107), as a model of racial harmony. Unfortunately, from their perspective the Reconstruction had made this integrated idyll impossible but only in the public sphere: in contrast, this integrated utopia could still be recreated within the domestic environment of the white homes, where African American domestics replaced the slaves of the old times (Hale: 32).

Within this context, the scene of Scarlett's slapping Prissy was controversial because it reflects the violent treatment to which domestic slaves were actually exposed, thus bringing into question "the idyll of the Old South's integration": if we interpret this moment as a display not only of racial but also of domestic violence, the scene becomes an overt expression of the fallacy of both the Old Southern integration, and the dream of integrated domesticity which was becoming one of the pillars of the New South.

The importance of *The Little Foxes* (William Wyler, 1941, based upon Lillian Hellman's eponymous play published in 1939) in this round table dwells in its protagonist Regina Giddens and her attitude with respect to the topic of domestic violence. On the one hand, she has been a witness of this kind of violence since her childhood because her own mother was a victim of her father. Thus, we would expect Regina to show, at least, sympathy for the other victims we find in this film, basically, her sister-in-law Birdie Hubbard. However, far from showing sympathy, complicity or even compassion, Regina turns out to be not a victim but rather a victimizer. Thus, this film shows the 'atypical' example of a woman abusing a man.

From the very beginning of the film, she occupies a position of power, always looking down on people from the top of the stairs or the balcony and always doing

whatever she pleases. Her obsession with keeping control over things leads her to become a cold woman, whose only interest is the accumulation of money that will help her maintain her power. Perhaps, the scene I included in this round table describes her well: Regina Giddens, on her rocking chair, beholds unemotionally how her husband dies. This is the last trait to define this character as a victimizer of domestic violence: after abusing her husband psychologically, she lets him die of a heart attack, in other words, she kills him by failing to give him his medicine.

The analysis of *Carousel* (Henry King, 1956) adds new points of discussion to the main objectives of this round table: the issue of domestic violence appears in a cinematographic genre in which serious topics such as these are rarely present. The film was released in a period in which musicals were almost always comedies, and never presented dramatic situations or tragic endings. Nevertheless, in *Carousel* we have an explicit allusion to the case of a man who beats his wife and daughter. The film provides an interesting analysis regarding the different reactions of the characters against this type of physical abuse: while both women understand and tolerate their situation, the rest of the characters condemn these actions although they prefer not to interfere within the 'domestic' sphere of the protagonist family. More interesting from the perspective of genre theory, is the way in which the expectations and the conventions arisen by the musical genre are capable of shaping and transforming this type of social disease. The audience must sympathize with the protagonists, and the plot must fulfill the conventional pattern of a romantic story in which love finally conquers death.

Lastly, the story recounted in *Suddenly, Last Summer* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1959) has all the dramatic ingredients of a case of family violence: a scandal, a mysterious sex-charged death, good social position and wealth, greed, ambition. We spectators are shocked not only by the fact that Mrs. Venable, the millionaire, wants to have her niece-by-marriage lobotomized. The shock is even greater when we find Catherine's mother and brother willing to support the rich aunt's decision, so that Catherine's brother George may inherit \$100,000 that Mrs. Venable has clearly offered them as a bait. The truth Mrs. Venable wanted to suppress through the "little operation" performed on her niece implies pederasty, male prostitution and cannibalism. Catherine mentions them in very clear terms when she explains why her cousin Sebastian made her wear an immodest white swimming suit that becomes transparent under the water, because she was 'procuring' sexual partners for her cousin.

Even though Elizabeth is 'saved' from being lobotomized, Sebastian ends up as a victim of violence, as the victim of a cruel and horrific death: he is followed uphill by a menacing band of musicians –the children and teenagers who had previously been his sexual partners– as he walks out the restaurant close to the beach. He tries to escape, but they catch up with him on top of the hill, in what appear as the ruins of an Aztec temple, where Sebastian is murdered, seemingly 'devoured' by the gang.

Thus we have seen how various films that adapt literary texts to the screen showed, from the end of the 1930s onwards, cases of domestic violence, where both female and male characters were the victims of episodes that involved increasing amounts and forms of violent acts. Violence was visualized as a sign of family dysfunctionality that was socially accepted, as part of a social system that demanded masters and mistresses to be cruel to the servants, and also as the only way to regain individual power for the female. Drama and film in America seem to be the art forms where domestic violence was first exposed and made visible.

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