Aimée Navarre’s film Cœurs belges: National Identities and the Exploration of Transgressive Space During and After the First World War

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When a thing is considered in terms of its beginning, a thing is always poorly judged. (Dostoevsky 91)

The post-First World War era in Europe was a liminal period with competing discursive, socio-cultural and visual practices. Two competing discursive formations regulate the female subject during and after the First World War. On the one hand, the dominant re-educative post-war discourse of family values and sexual complementarity sought the demobilisation of women and their return to the domestic environment. On the other hand, a feminist counter-discourse generated an emancipatory awareness that the social differences between men and women were constructed through social practices and institutions. Backed up by the rise of modernism and the artistic avant-garde, the female subject “drew her sword” at bourgeois discourse and its hypocritical moral codes of sexuality.

At this stage I would like to introduce the term discontinuum to describe the nature of the change in the discourse on gender identity that took place during this period, noting that discontinuum is preferred to “rift” or “assuage.” In his book, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, Jay Winter aptly points out the “continuing affinities between avant-garde artists and mainstream styles and modes of thought” (3). Winter further observes that the rupture of 1914-18 was much less complete than previous scholars have suggested. The overlap of languages and approaches between the old and the new, the “traditional” and the “modern,” the conservative and the iconoclastic, was apparent both during and after the war. The ongoing dialogue and exchange among artists and their public, between those who self-consciously returned to nineteenth-century forms and themes and those who sought to supersede them, makes the history of modernism much more complicated than a simple, linear divide between “old” and “new” might suggest. (3)

An understanding of the phenomenon of discontinuity may be deepened with reference to Michel Foucault’s discourse theory, which considers every effect of discourse—the continual process of normalising, regulating and disciplining the subject within a specific culture—to be gradually broken by its contradictory nature, by the struggle and resistance formulated at the margin, and by a counter-discourse developed at the sub-cultural level. In this context, Michel Foucault speaks of “an open and doubtless infinitely describable field of relationships” (“Politics” 55). The genealogical aspect of Foucault’s discourse theory is valuable insofar as it introduces the concept of discontinuity. Historiography thus becomes the recovery of the discontinuities of the transformations of discourses and their variable relationship to one another. As Foucault observes,

We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between dominant and the dominated one, but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. … Discourse transmits and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (History 100)

1 By avant-garde is meant the propagation of experimental techniques by artists and authors in their works of art using struggle and resistance against the established authorities. The term modernism encompasses the avant-garde as well as the intellectual, social and political impulses behind active rebellion and the search for freedom. See also Madina Eknunan, L’emblème de Genevieve WercqLoveny en let entretien van de nieuwe rijf. 13.
Foucault’s discourse theory offers a methodology for investigating the ways in which the body and sexuality are socially constructed and produced as effects of power. However, Foucault’s rather abstract treatment of social construction does not resolve methodological problems that occur when the social construction of the body is considered from the vantage point of subordinated women’s (sodily) experiences. How human subjects negotiate with their disciplined and regulated social positions, how resistance is formulated, and how struggle comes into being. So, in a way, Foucault’s methodology proves to be of limited use if one aims at investigating what Mininal Sinha calls “rethinking feminist agency at the crossroads of imperial and social history” (Sinha 16-17).

The problem is that in “traditional” discursive analysis, agency is reduced to a structural position in a hegemonically discursive practice. For this reason, my aim is to re-integrate the text within Foucault’s abstract methodological framework, for a film narrative is itself a discursive practice. As Elizabeth Cowie put it,

films are the specific sites of a circulation which is also a
(re)constituted of definitions in the particular process and play
of narration and image. A film is itself a discursive practice,
constituting “imagery” of women as definitions in circulation
which are also narrative images, and hence determining as well
as determined by other discursive practices in the social
formation. (39)

I am convinced that the researcher needs “a semiotic grip on the
central issue of representation” (Watney, cited in Jessica Evans 133).
A woman’s experience—as it is considered in this paper—entails
Teresa de Lauretis’ definition of “a complex of habits resulting from
the semiotic interaction of ‘outer world’ and ‘inner world’, the
continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality” (182),
which in this case is the dominant re-educative post-war discourse in
Europe.

This contribution will explore the semiotic interaction and the
complex discursive network of *Cœurs brûlés* (1923), a film directed
by the Belgian female film director Aimée Navarre. In a multi-layered
post-war period with competing discursive, socio-cultural and visual
practices, Aimée Navarre took a step into the public sphere by way of
directing films. She organised film courses, and, in 1923, she let her

students act in *Cœurs brûlés*. Her independent attitude and pride, for
example, reflected in the substantive use of her maiden name in the
film credits of *Cœurs brûlés*, point to her desire to stress the legitimacy
of the principle of equality between the sexes and to valorise her
“non-female” capacities to direct films. In contrast to other
contemporary female Belgian film directors, Aimée Navarre did not
hide her female identity behind a pseudonym or behind the
phenomenon of “intimate partnership.” Nor was Aimée Navarre
interested in a mere reproduction of the dominant discourse of
nationalism that characterized the period. Her film explicitly focuses on
the grief and pain endured by women during the First World War, a
topic that was marginalised in favour of patriotic testimonies of male
war heroes.

Despite this, contemporary and contemporaneous reviews of
the film see it as a defense of women’s traditional positions in society
insofar as it emphasises the temporary, patriotic, and servile character
of the working woman outside the home. In the recently published
anthology of Belgian film history, René Michielsen also labelled *Cœurs
brûlés* as “patriotic fiction, at the time a highly profitable genre . . . [A]
sweet little project . . . [a] melodrama which boasts every last cliche”
(132). At first sight then, it would seem that the film is not worth
being investigated for “feminist agency.” However, a detailed
analysis of the film narrative brings other perspectives to the fore.

In investigating the regulating and constituting aspects of the
dominant post-war sex/gender-discourse, this paper confronts the
polonics of narration at three different levels—firstly, the plot structure
of the film narrative; secondly, the visual narrative of its mise-en-scène;
and thirdly, the polonics of narration of the reviews commenting on
*Cœurs brûlés*. These regulating aspects concern, on the one hand, the
rhetoric of patriotism, subservience and temporariness associated
with women who work outside the home during the First World War,
and on the other hand, the post-war moralising and re-educating
discourse of the restoration of the social equilibrium and
reinstituionalisation of strictly divided sexual social positions, which
restructurally constitutes women’s temporary status in the public
sphere as a fact. This analysis of *Cœurs brûlés* will point to counter-
discursive elements and investigate how visual narrative can break

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*Footnote:
The film text was revised in 1994 by the Royal Film Archive of Brussels, based on a
verbatim copy of the film archives of the National Cinematographic Centre of France.*
through the parameters of socio-cultural and discursive practice to develop a (feminist) counter-discourse.

**Plot Structure as Rite of Passage**

The main characters in *Cœurs belges* are the marquise Van Brabant and her daughter Bertha Van Brabant who live in the castle of Genval. During the wedding ceremony of Bertha and the French duke, Robert de Chavannes, a messenger interrupts the festivities announcing the general mobilization that forces Robert headlong into the war in France. Bertha—her eyes filled with tears—gives her newly wedded husband the bouquet of flowers that ornamented her wedding dress. Shortly after, Bertha also fulfills her patriotic duties by joining the French Red Cross. When the war is over, soldiers are enthusiastically welcomed home, but Robert does not return home, and Bertha is overcome with grief. However, some time later, Robert is found to be alive, locked up in a camp at Soltau, from which he was unable to let his wife know that he was alive. His sudden and unexpected return brings her joy and—despite everything—they live happily ever after. The course of time of the film plot in *Cœurs belges* is four years, equivalent to the duration of the First World War, a period during which Bertha engages with spatial, social, and moral changes. These changes are connected with her crossing of borders and transitory movements between semantic fields. Bertha is the subject and hero of a linear trajectory or rite of passage. During the mobilization, we get to know her adventures and witness her exploration of a transgressive space. Bertha’s story is clearly organised around the threefold narrative structure of a rite of passage, and is supported by the visual construction of the film, which constitutes different semantic fields.

In this context, our primary aim is to see how the signs “man” and “woman,” “femailness” and “maleness” are defined by the filmic sign system constituted, for example, by patterns of movement, character, and mise-en-scène. Cowie interprets the signs “man” and “woman” as “categories of the social world whose meaning within a film is produced by the operation of the film’s textual system” (34). In *Cœurs belges*, the categories of “maleness” and “femailness” are similarly produced, depending on their place within the threefold structure of Bertha’s rite of passage, and denote a qualitative change concerning the female subject in the film.

Arnold Van Gennep describes how the rite of passage that accompanies and regulates every individual in the transgressive moments of his life consists of three phases “marking the disruption and difficulty of change and the reintegration back into the ordered life of a community” (Van Gennep, cited in Mulvey 171). The first phase of the ritual process of inauguration involves separation (rite préliminaire or séparation), which initiates the process and figuratively—or literally—puts the individual in a state of privilege or crisis outside the norms of society and everyday existence. This initiation entails movement, a crossing of borders that is sometimes represented in a spatial or geographical way. The second phase involves transition (rite liminaire or marge), wherein the individual finds himself in a kind of no man’s land or a relatively autonomous, isolated spot, far away from his or her homelands and the traditional social order, with which the individual has a unique bond. These three phases are followed and abolished by a third phase of re-incorporation (rite post-liminaire or agrégation).

Laura Mulvey has connected the Freudian interpretation of Sophocles’ myth of Oedipus with, on the one hand, the anthropological insights of the rites of passage, and, on the other hand, with Vladimir Propp’s smallest narrative structural unity in traditional fairy tales. In other words, she connected psychoanalytical, anthropological, and narrative methodologies and concluded that the structure of the Oedipal trajectory and the leading character’s plot structure in fairy tales and rites of passage are similar and that they serve to reintegrate individuals, who temporarily find themselves in a “chaotic” moment of regression of the law, into the traditional order.

The wedding ceremony is an important aspect of the threefold structure of the rite of passage as well as the classical fairy tale (and the Oedipal trajectory). Marriage is, in the first place, a rite of passage in its own: to get married is to move from an infantile or adolescent state into the society of adulthood, from one clan to another, or, often, from one village to another (Van Gennep 166). As Mulvey observes of fairy tales, “these stories also represent another transition from

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1 “Il est aussi, c’est passer de la société enfantine ou adolescente à la société mère, d’un certain clan à un autre, d’une famille à une autre, souvent d’un village à un autre.”

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immature sexuality to marriage and manhood” (172). In this sense, the marriage ceremony is a rite that re incorporates the sexually awakening female body into the social order within the safe outlines and contours of the family. The family structure thus functions as the ordering principle of the libido, of “the motive force of sexual life” (Mulvey 31). Van Lennep himself emphasizes that rites of marriage concern less the individual union of a man and a woman than the integration of the couple into new surroundings (176-177). Furthermore, Teresa De Lauretis claims that “the incest prohibition and structure of exchange guaranteed by the name (and the no) of the Father are still the condition—the structural condition—of the subject’s rite of passage through culture” (22).

BERTHA’S CHARACTER DURING THE PRE-LIMINAL PHASE

The easy household scene at the beginning of Cœurs béjers is pre-eminently connoted as a semantic field regulated by social and patriarchal control (ill. 1).

(illustration 1)

5 “les rites de mariage … composition momentanée des rites d’agrégation définitive au milieu de nouveaux et souvent, mais moins qu’on ne le croit à l’abord, des rites d’union individuée.” According to psychoanalytical norms, the coalescence of a marriage means the resolution of the Oedipus complex, the repression of narcissistic sexuality and the reintegration into the symbolic order: “The function ‘marriage’ sublates the erectile and a final, closing, social ritual. This ritual is, of course, sex specific” (Mulvey 34).
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visual narrative of the mise-en-scène, especially when one compares this with the construction of her character in the pre-liminal phase. We now often see Bertha dreamily gazing through the hospital window. Her gaze is no longer controlled by a patriarchal instance (ill. 3).

The Re-incorporation of the Heroine into the Traditional Order in the Post-liminal Phase

Despite the transformations in the second or liminal phase in all the threefold structures of transgression that are tolerated by the law, the similarities and symmetrical relation between beginning and ending are striking. Mulvey remarked that “the home that is left at the opening of a story is matched by another home established at the end, ... bounded at both ends by synchronic order” (171). In this context, narrative closure is of crucial importance. The transgressive site that is tolerated by the law mostly concerns its inversion, which too easily entails a consolidation of a binary opposition between norm and (unknown) other. An exploration of the transgressive space is not effective and is pointless when the process of transformation happens within the conceptual framework of polarised mythology, when it is constructed within “rituals of inversion that can very easily be
reversed back into ‘order’ at the end. ... Apart from inversion, shifts in position are hard to envisage” (Mulvey 165).

The threefold organisation of the narrative structure of the film plot of Cœurs belges—the pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal phases—entails a reintegration into the traditional order. The arrival of the lost husband reunites man and woman, as if the matrimonial rite of passage is finally solemnised. The fact that Bertha is demobilised and gives up her “temporary” job as a nurse, highlights the rhetoric of temporariness that accompanies the representation of women who worked outside the home. It seems that the ending of Cœurs belges formulates the restoration of a status quo and the re-integration of the heroine at the cost of her acquired “male” qualities of independence. The concept of the “happy ending” is obviously operative on the narrative level, but the re-integration of the female subject is more complex than the narrative would suggest. By contrast, the visual narrative does not herald a consolidation of the strict division of the sexes.

Because of the relatively static camera-work in Cœurs belges, the film frame is defined from the unique and frontal perspective or point-of-view of the historical spectator, constituting a mise-en-scène that remains—apart from the movements of characters and objects—more or less invariable for a considerably long time. In this way, every shot obtains a certain independence so that a confrontation of two similar shots brings spatial as well as qualitative changes to the fore. Two such shots concern the cozy household scenes in the beginning and at the end of Cœurs belges, taking place before the departure and after the return of Bertha and Robert, respectively. The repetitive structure, revolving around Bertha’s liminal phase, invites us to compare the visual narrative before and after Bertha’s exploration of transgressive space.

I have already described how Bertha was depicted in a sexually subordinate, hierarchically structured position in the pre-liminal phase. In a similar household scene in the post-liminal phase, some crucial differences come to the fore (ill. 4). The strict division of the sexes is no longer part of the ideology of the text. Bertha’s husband shares Bertha’s marginal position at the back. The clear use of binary opposition in the sexually hierarchised mise-en-scène of the pre-liminal phase gives way to a rather multi-differentiated mise-en-scène. Moreover, the female characters have changed their innocent, socially

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acceptable “female” activity of crochet for the more gender-neutral activity of reading. Keeping in mind Foucault’s theoretical writings on the relation between power and knowledge, this shift within the visual sign system is not without meaning.

(Illustration 6)

Another shift concerns the filmic visualisation of the female gaze. Whereas Bertha’s gaze through the window in the pre-liminal phase is immediately controlled by a so-called patriarchal event, a similar household scene towards the end of film depicts Bertha and Robert as equal partners, both looking out the window at the same time (ill. 5).

(Illustration 5)
The solemnisation of the rite of passage in the post-liminal phase clearly involves a “different” Bertha, a Bertha who has obviously reflected upon her regulated “female” position in society. As the film text opens the narrative structure at the moment that Bertha is incorporated into the family structure of the symbolic order, it points out that the heroine cannot possibly bind her female identity with the male’s according to the traditional norms. The beginning of the film initiates a rite of passage following the traditional norms, while the end of the film solemnises the rite of passage taking into account Bertha’s norms. She obviously does not aim at fulfilling the imposed social role of passive femininity.

THE DISCIPLINING AND NORMALISING RHETORICS OF THE REVIEWS OF COURS BELGES

When we put the film narrative in its cultural context, one is struck by the rhetoric of the reviews commenting on Cours belges. It is obvious that the conservative, post-war rhetoric of the reviews tries to neutralise the feminist agency of the film narrative. The reviews reproduce the rhetorics of the dominant discourse during and after the First World War.

-Cours belges as a Patriotic Plea?

The incorporation or recuperation of the image of the dependent woman who works outside the home within the “safe” contours or outlines of the dominant discourse entails a shift or loss of meaning; the image of the working woman is subjected to a correcting, recuperating and regulating discourse that points out the

1 Elizabeth Cowie defines recuperation as “that process by which a progressive content or meaning has been appropriated and inserted into another context where it loses that meaning” (Cowie 39). She emphasizes that while the concept of recuperation “correctly emphasizes the circulation of images and meanings, it at the same time denies the moments of productivity in that circulation, and of possible redefinition” (Cowie 39). Rosalind Coward defined the concept of recuperation as “...an incorporation ... where some truly literary force which has no relation whatsoever with capitalism is reabsorbed back into the existing capitalist forms” (Coward cited in Cowie 325, fn. 9).

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“female” qualities of the job and emphasizes the patriotic, temporary nature of the situation. “Female” elegance is emphasised when women temporarily had to put themselves in traditional “male” positions in society, do “male” jobs and wear “men’s” clothes. Françoise Thibault aptly points out the currency of a range of figures of speech in France in those days that spoke of women threading, grenades as if they were pearls and working with metallic wire as if they were knitting. The keywords in the dominant discourse of WWI describing the typically “female” qualities in the exercising of “male” activities were grace, devotion, punctuality, and patriotic servitude (Thibault 35)

The same servile, patriotic rhetoric is predominantly operative in the criticism surrounding Cours belges, so that the film text, as well as its production process and the director, are forced into servile, patriotic parameters. The 1923 review of Cine-revue, for example, only mentions the name of the director, Aimee Navarre, twice in three pages. The frequent use of the pronoun “our” would seem to attribute the film to Belgium itself. The title of the article refers to Cours belges as a film of “our regions” (un film de chez nous) and does not mention Aimee Navarre’s name. The review is full of praise about a film that has been created on “our” soil, edited in “our” studios, interpreted by artists who are “our” compatriotes, and launched by a Belgian” production house.1 When the name of Aimee Navarre appears for the first time, it is emphatically embedded within a patriotic and servile ideological terminology. “Mme Navarre [sic] places her talent and her energy at the service of the reviving Belgian film business.”

Not only are questions of authorship and film production put in a servile, patriotic context, the review also presents the film narrative from a limited, one-sided patriotic viewpoint. The dominant discourse propagated in those days, addressing the tormented female subjects in war-time, speaks of exemplary mothers or wives who endure their sorrow and pain with their heads held high in a dignified
manner; such sacrifice, it was thought, served a legitimate, national aim.

In 1919, Tilla Feyerick in *A mes filles* wrote some rules of thumb for the tormented housewife. In this remarkable document, this woman from the high-society of Ghent sets out to transmit the Victorian ideals of her own education to her eighteen-year-old daughter. According to Feyerick, will-power and discipline were the most important bourgeois values that submit nature completely to reason. Will-power is the pre-eminent means of subjecting people’s morals and manners to the demands of the nation. Tears have never lead to anything, this view maintains. One has to hold one’s head up high and persevere.*

The reviews commenting on *Cœurs belges* obviously reproduced such rhetoric. The review in *Cinéma-en Transterrord* displays a photograph of Annette and Bertha at the moment that Robert de Chavannes has just been called to France (ill. 6). Annette is sitting down and Bertha, wearing her wedding dress, amicably puts her right hand on Annette’s shoulder. Despite Robert’s sudden departure, Bertha does not sit down in despair. The review depicts

*"D’abord c’est par la volonté que nous parvenons à nous corriger de nos défauts, à agir sur notre caractère, pour arriver à le rendre plus conforme aux exigences de notre époque,... C’est encore grâce à elle que devant les événements tristes qui se renoncent dans chaque existence, nous relevons la tête et ne cérons pas au désespoir"* (Feyerick 13-14).

*"C’est grâce à ses forces, riches et pauvres. Toutes ont fait leur devoir"* in *Cœurs belges*, journal unknown, March 1923.
during the separation. Alone, in her room, she renders to a justified amount of grief."

The effect of the photographs accompanying the text is not to be underestimated. In linguistic terms, the review may be seen as claiming to reconstruct the paradigm of the filmic sign system by means of partial ensembles that purport to represent the whole. However, a film still is not a representative part of the whole. In the different environments of a film text and a film review, the film still is operating within very different discursive and historical spaces. A film still may be said to possess its own rhetorical intention, so that its meaning consequently depends on what John Tagg calls "institutions and agents which define it and set it to work... Its history has no unity... It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces" (246).

The reviewers' attempt to reduce the text to its "essential" meaning—that of the dominant discourse—entails a shift or loss of meaning, a regrettable abstraction of the complex, multi-layered narrative and visual construction of the film text. This abstraction is a camouflaged attack on the creative function of the spectator, as it creates presuppositions and clusters of attention that mediate the interpretation process. The review tries to streamline the different, non-compatible possibilities for interpretation to fit the dominant, patriotic post-war discourse, at the cost of the textual spectator that is at work in the film text itself.10

10 "Courageux et digne, se faisant violence, Berthe de Braham refusa ses larmes et assista muette à la séparation. Seule, elle finirait cependant et se laissera, dans sa chambre, gagner par le plus juste désir d'adorer" in "Ce que nous verrons sur l'écran: Courir Belges, un film de chez nous," Ciné-revue: organes officiel biogîne de l'art cinématographique, 3 (1923) 69-70.

11 The film text always produces a "textual" spectator (see Annette Kuhn), also called a "hypothetical" spectator (see E. Ann Kaplan), "the subject constructed by the film's textual strategies, its mode of address, and its activation of psychoanalytic processes such as scopophilia and identification" (Filmmen-Lewin 9). Annette Kuhn defined the difference between textual spectator and social audience as follows: "The textual spectator... is a subject constituted in signification, interpolated by the film or TV text... A group of people seated in a single auditorium looking at a film... is a social audience. The concept of social audience, against that of spectator, emphasizes the status of cinema and television as social and economic institutions" (Kuhn 23).

Following Annette Kuhn, I interpret the distinction between spectator and audience not as being total "because modes of subjectivity which also operate outside spectator-text relations in film or TV are activated in the relationship between spectators and texts... Social audiences become spectators in the moment they engage in the processes and pleasures of meaning-making attendant on watching a film or TV programme..." In

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According to Roland Barthes, any message or form of communication, such as a review, transforms the "truth" of the dominating discourse into a self-evident, universal truth by way of a mythologising process (230). In this case, the reviews under discussion and the accompanying film stills present an ideal interpretation of the film text and an ideal image of the director of the film, an image that is normalised and regulated according to the dominant discourse.

In sharp contrast with the review, the film does not reduce the female experience of WWI to an exemplary function. The film text provides space for close-ups of Anna's terrified face as she receives bad news from the front and fears for her husband's life (II. 8). It is also remarkable that the reviews do not breathe a word—nor an image—about the character of Annette, who desperately turns around and falls down on a chair, her eyes full of tears when her fiancé leaves for the front with the words, "be reasonable, Annette. Is it not true that our country needs all its children now?" This scene in fact confronts patriotic duty with the more realistic experiences and emotions of women during the First World War and does not represent—as the reviews did—the patriotic aim as unquestionably justified and self-evident.
The reviews of *Cœurs belges* reduce the female experience of WWI to an “exemplary function.” Following dominant discourse, female memories were absent in history and in collective memories. Marjan Schwemman aptly points out how the meaning attributed to wartime experiences are ordered in a sexually hierarchical manner (147-148). Traditional representations of WWI consequently did not provide space for female grief, as it was held to be inferior to the death of man. If the dominant discourse did provide space for female grief, it was always in connection with the death of a man—a husband or a son. In this context, Bernadette Kester speaks of female heroes who wear crowns of suffering ("Hélistèmes du Roi des Leudes tragés") (55). Rather, *Cœurs belges* presents a more differentiated palette of “female” suffering insomuch as it provides space for the experience of those women at the home-front, who do not appear in the history books, but who all the same experience the torment of grief and violence and the humiliation of military occupation. The sub-plot of *Cœurs belges* relates the story of Bertha’s mother, the marquise, who lives in the castle of Gerval and is humiliated and expelled from her house by German soldiers. The image of the soldiers playing darts with the marquise’s portrait symbolises the pain she powerlessly has to endure. She flees from her home and finds shelter and comfort with Anna, the gardener’s wife.

Aimée Navarre considered these female experiences as important enough to be visualised. Even more, the fate of Bertha, working at the Red Cross in France and of the remaining women at the home-front constitute the main part of the film’s narrative. The (documentary) shots of the soldiers at the front are reduced to a minimum and are only inserted when it was thought necessary for the development of the main plot—that is, Bertha’s exploration of a transgressive space.

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*Notes:

40 Marjan Schwemman wrote this article on the occasion of the working group “Gender and the memory of the Second World War” (1995) at the conference Memory and the Second World War held in Amsterdam, April 1995.

41 See “Cœurs belges”, *Journal unknown*, March 1923.
But, it is important to notice that the transgressive movements of the female characters are not limited to geographical or spatial transgressions, such as Bertha’s joining the Red Cross and, thus, leaving the private sphere so far regulated to women. The concept of mobility in the film narrative is not only operative on a spatial level but also on a social and moral level. Every female character thus experiences a transgressive movement that is embedded within a complex dynamic context. As their male guardians have left for the war—there only remains a priest—they conquered a certain amount of freedom with regard to their place and function within the structure of the initial semantic field.

While the changing configuration of this home-front is generally “forgotten” in mainstream war-cinema, in favour of the heroic stories of the men who fought at the front, Courrs belges relates the heroic stories of the women who stayed at the home-front. Navarre characterizes them as mutually supportive and allied. There is a striking scene where Bertha seeks consolation from Annette after the departure of her husband. When Bertha leaves the castle to join the Red Cross, she explicitly asks Annette to take care of her mother. Annette keeps her promise and they stand shoulder to shoulder when the Germans invade and occupy the castle. They find shelter with Anna, the wife of the gardener, and are actively engaged in spreading secret information. There is a revealing scene where a mad German soldier tries to find the forbidden journal La libre Belgique that the women have hidden. It is remarkable that the marquise acts as spokes-person, while the priest turns away, as timid as a hare.

CONCLUSION

The ideology of the bourgeoisie wants to present society as a coherent whole; “the project of this ideology is indeed to conjure up a coherent picture of a world and conceal contradictions which in turn conceal exploitation and oppression” (Mulvey 39). It seems that Aimée Navarre imagines a coherent picture of the world, but she reveals the paradox that haunted women in the twenties; the “exemplary” function of the female experience of grief during and the demobilisation after the First World War often ran counter to their experience or their desire for independence.

Aimée Navarre’s Film Courrs Belges

On the one hand, Aimée Navarre re-writes the female experience of the war into history. To remember, Jolande Witsius has observed, is a process that is sustained by (changing) social identifications (Witsius, cited in Schwegman 146). Claire Johnston has also pointed to “the need for oppressed people to write their own history . . . Memory, in understanding struggles of the past and a sense of one’s own history constitute a vital dynamic in any struggle” (Johnston, cited in Mulvey 115). In this sense, Courrs belges is an important hinge-joint in the development of a feminist counter-discourse, because it allows female subjects to identify with female characters on the screen. Female war-victims could identify, name, and express their experiences. The fact that Aimée Navarre preferred to focus on the female victims of the First World War tears open the trauma of the war that, fixed in an official historiography, appears to block rather than to mediate specific female experiences. Navarre’s Courrs belges is in this sense a “liberation” of the female body from the curb that is called “official historiography,” a curb that does not provide space for female traumas nor for self-expression.

On the other hand, the film text entails some emancipatory principles resulting from, among others, the specific situation of the First World War. The historical spectator does not get to see the status quo. While the criticism surrounding the film text emphasises the temporariness of the situation and the restoration of the traditional order, everything on the visual level of the film text goes to show that Bertha’s re-integration in the traditional order does not encompass the restoration of a passive, dominated subject. A number of essential changes within the traditional order itself prove to be necessary to be able to recuperate the (female) other. The regulating and hierarchically structured binary opposition in the sexual relation of the dominating man and the dominated woman is being deconstructed along the way; the end of the film reconstructs the image of a woman that finds herself positioned on the same level as men. Bertha’s disruptive desire and her exploration of a transgressive space provide space for more ontological values for the female subject within the symbolic order. Courrs belges expands the number of available codes of behaviour for women within the dominant discourse and, thus, signifies a subtle, almost invisible breeding ground, a hinge-joint for further counter-discursive developments, in this case, within the “feminist” realm of equality.
WORKS CITED


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