Diptych Theory: Queering the Sense of an Ending in Greta Gerwig's *Little Women*

Caroline Bem

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In a review of Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (vols. 1&2, 1868/1869) published in the LGBTQ+ Condé Nast publication *them*, Michelle Kim writes: "It's as though Gerwig wanted to make *Little Women* a choose-your-own-adventure story, except the two endings are: 'Jo is gay' and 'Jo is not gay.'" (Kim, 2020) While Kim's formulation powerfully foregrounds how queerness shows up as paradox in Gerwig's film, it fails to fully account, firstly, for the multiplicity of levels (narrative, generic, gendered) on which that paradox unfolds and, secondly, for the fact that, rather than offer viewers a choice, the ending to Gerwig's film in fact exists within the (il)logical space of *as well as* (non)choice. To probe the depths of the paradoxical space of (im)possibility between marriage and non-marriage, fiction and historical account, and queerness and straightness, to which the film's ending gives rise, I find it useful to mobilize the concept of the diptych which, as I have theorized elsewhere, offers a relevant lens for an intermedial and materialist analysis of narrative films that are paradoxical in nature.[1]

I will begin by laying out how the palimpsestic ending of Gerwig's film reworks the novel's original closing by juxtaposing real and imagined episodes from Alcott's life which stand in a contradictory relationship to one another. Viewed through the lens of the diptych, I will show how Gerwig's film queers narrative form to install a paradoxical space of (im)possibility wherein Jo is both getting married and not; wherein we are both viewing an adaptation of Alcott's book and not; and wherein Gerwig lays bare both the mechanics of fiction (as turning on impossibility) and the fictionalization of the past (as possibility opened up). Queerness, in this context, is not a mere matter of representation; indeed, what makes Jo queer is not simply her masculine style of dress in certain sequences or her rejection of patriarchal family values and, above all, marriage.

As I will ultimately argue, what allows Gerwig's adaptation to illuminate the queerness at the heart of Alcott's original project is inscribed, not only within the

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[1] "Rather than a new entity—one that would positively add to a given ethical situation and thus resolve it—the diptych posits simultaneity as a space (and a time) where as-well-as logic is itself the emergent third: a new possibility for ethical inquiry" (Bem, 2019, p. 22; see also Bem, 2016)

film's narrative form, and in particular within its treatment of temporality, but also within the film's material identification with the format of the codex from which it is descended (not just Alcott's novel or text, but the material book object, or codex, that contains the novel's narrative). From this perspective, the *as well as* structure of Gerwig's narrative rejoins her film's investment in material form as another question of *non-choice* or *impossibility*: (Alber, 2006) a film that thinks of itself as a codex, a film that is *both* film *and* codex... Ultimately, as this article shows, the queering of form (of narrative tropes, of media materiality, of ending) becomes synonymous with a productive form of narrative and medial impossibility that turns 19th century narrative and gender identity tropes on their head, transforms a character into an author and, most importantly perhaps (for a 21st century film), remakes spectators into readers.

Queering narrative tropes

Unlike her fictionalized alter ego Jo March, Alcott would never marry.[2] Through the juxtaposition of lived and imagined life scenes, the ending to Gerwig's film plays knowingly on literary theories of the marriage plot and of the economic and transactional aspects of women's lives in the Victorian era (see Armstrong, 1987; Gallagher, 2006; Pateman, 1988). In addition, on a cinematographic level, Gerwig's interpretation ironically calls into question the rom com ending of Gillian Armstrong's 1994 film, the book's penultimate and (until the release of Gerwig's film at least) arguably most beloved cinematographic adaptation of *Little Women*.

The sixth filmic adaptation of Alcott's novel, Gerwig's *Little Women* differentiates itself from its predecessors in two central ways.[3] First, Gerwig has chosen to tell the novel's plot out of order and in ever-more-fast-paced interspersing movements. In so doing, the film cuts back and forth between (1) the 'present moment' when Jo March/Louisa Alcott (Saoirse Ronan) is initially living in New York City before returning to Concord to be at her ailing sister Beth's side and (2) moments from the March sisters' youth presented out of order as if by dipping erratically into non-consecutive "sheets of past."[4] The second innovation brought by Gerwig occurs

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[2] In a recent biography of Louisa May Alcott, Susan Cheever quotes Alcott as follows: "'Liberty is a better husband than love,' she wrote. Jo March's rejection of a marriage proposal from the adoring Laurie, with his very reliable income stream, inspired generations of women to look for something more than resources in a marriage. Alcott, pressured by readers and editors to have Jo end up with Laurie after all, refused. 'Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that were the only end and aim of a woman's life,' she wrote indignantly in her November journal while working on the second half of Little Women" (Cheever, 2010, n.p.).

[3] After two silent adaptations (1917, dir. Alexander Butler and 1918, dir. Harley Knowles), George Cukor's 1933 adaptation starred Katherine Hepburn as Jo, a role that would remain associated with this unconventional actor, while her portrayal of Jo as both 'boyish' and boisterous is an undeniable ancestor to Winona Ryder's interpretation in 1994 and to Saoirse Ronan's Jo in 2019. Meanwhile, Mervyn Leroy's meeker 1948 version is mostly noted for its casting of a young Elizabeth Taylor as Amy.

when the increasingly frenetic intercutting between ever-shorter snippets of 'past' and 'present' reaches its climax in the film's final sequence (about twenty minutes in length), when Jo's character splits herself in two, as it were.

On a first level, Gerwig's ending presents an augmented version of the 'Jo' character which weaves together Alcott's original heroine with the cumulative collective memory of all prior filmic iterations of Jo on screen and, most saliently amongst these, with the memory of Jo's most recent incarnation by Winona Ryder for Armstrong's adaptation. Thus, Gerwig's film replays the novel's ending as viewed through the lens of the penultimate adaptation's gendered inversion of classic rom com conventions exemplified, for instance, in the ending to *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, (Mike Newell, 1994) where a timid Charles (Hugh Grant) finally gathers his courage to run after Andie MacDowell's liberated and independent Carrie to make his romantic non-proposal in the pouring London rain. Conversely, in Armstrong's *Little Women,* it is Ryder's Jo who runs after Professor Bhaer (Gabriel Byrne) to confess her love in the rain, under the umbrella. It should be noted that Armstrong's film, which was widely recognized as the most openly feminist interpretation of Alcott's book at the time of its release, was the first to let Jo bear most of the weight of the final love declaration which, in the novel, rests more squarely, and traditionally, on Professor Bhaer's shoulders (in the original "Under the umbrella" chapter, Alcott's Jo only ventures into a male-coded neighborhood to look for the professor and upon finding him there 'by chance' cautiously lets him know that she will "miss him" after he leaves Concord). The feminist stance underlying Armstrong's adaptation is noted, for instance, by Camille Cauti in her introduction to the 2004 edition of *Little Women (*Cauti, 2004 n.p.). For a representative account of the film's enthusiastic early reception by mainstream film critics, see for instance Roger Ebert's patronizingly benevolent take on the film: "'Little Women' grew on me. At first, I was grumpy, thinking it was going to be too sweet and devout. Gradually, I saw that Gillian Armstrong (whose credits include 'My Brilliant Career' and 'High Tide') was taking it seriously. And then I began to appreciate the ensemble acting, with the five actresses creating the warmth and familiarity of a real family" (Ebert, 1994).

Gerwig's adaptation takes Armstrong's stretching of the originally relatively tame forwardness of Alcott's Jo one step further since, in the 2019 adaptation, it is the entire March family that participates in Jo's pursuit of Professor Bhaer, more rom com blockbuster à la *Love Actually* (2003, Richard Curtis) than reversed *Four Weddings*.[5] However, in addition to crafting a romantic comedy fit to give Armstrong's already high-grossing holiday movie a run for its money, Gerwig's

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[4]   Deleuze traces back to Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) the first cinematic representation of the coexistence of "sheets of past" defined, following Bergson, as "large regions to be explored" (See Deleuze, [1985] 1989, p.105).

adaptation also introduces a heretofore unknown version of Jo March (or, rather, of Alcott herself). Through the use of rapid crosscutting, the romantic plot resolution gives way to another scene where Jo/Louisa is depicted in shrewd negotiation with her editor over, first, her own character's fate within the novel (will 'Jo' marry or not, and if yes, whom?) and then, the precise economic terms of her book's publication.

Diptych theory

From its inception in the form of consular tablets in Late Antiquity to its later iterations in the art of the medieval and Renaissance periods and beyond, the diptych has consistently existed both conceptually—as a form deployed to juxtapose, that is to *both/either* supplement *and/or* contrast, two entities—and physically, as a hinged structure that could also be positioned upright to create, in the words of art historian Laura Gelfand, "'booklike' little altars." (Gelfand, 2006, p. 49; see Bem, 2016, 2019) Consequently, in their classic presentation, diptychs are fundamentally paradoxical in two ways: they are able, and indeed they are often mobilized, to hold contradiction within the visual or textual representations contained in their two panels and, at the same time, they are also forever caught between two 'object-states' at once (the two- and the three-dimensional).

While historians of the book have pointed out the formal similarities that connect both the diptych and the codex to a logic of paradox, (see Piper, 2011, p. 52) medieval and Early Modern literary scholars have explored the influence of the diptych on specific narrative forms. Britton J. Harwood suggests that "the structure of [the medieval poem] *Pearl*—the *dispositio* or the architectural aspect of form—is symmetrical as well as circular," and that, "[i]f there were an influence upon this structure, it may have come not from a verbal medium at all, but from diptychs." (Harwood, 1991, p. 60, 62) From this perspective, the diptych can be thought of as inherently connected to intermedial transfers of form across both material media formats and genres (in the case of *Pearl*, as a poem that thinks itself to be a visual object).

Building, on the one hand, on the idea that diptychs and codices share a formal disposition toward paradoxical elaboration and, on the other hand, on the notion that certain narrative texts consciously adapt the visual features of the diptych into narrative form, diptych theory allows me to investigate the relationship that Gerwig's film entertains, not only with prior filmic adaptations of its primary literary text (Alcott's novel), but also with the very status of that primary text as materially

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[5]   Marketed as a made-for-Christmas movie and building on the success of its director's previous screenplays for *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Notting Hill*, *Love Actually* accumulates declarations of a growing intensity throughout its two-hour run that culminate in a series of airport reunions between the characters taking place one year after the film's main events.

specific and separate from a filmic text. Indeed, in the words of Garrett Stewart, Gerwig's film represents *Little Women* as a *bibliobjet* in its own right (and one that carries within itself the entire history of the three-dimensional codex and serial printing, both).[6] In turn, contemplating Gerwig's film through the lens of the diptych allows me to further expand my understanding of the diptych as a conceptual form that adapts to a variety of media formats and, in so doing, makes visible how form at its most fundamental attaches to, and consequently foregrounds, media materiality as an ontology.

To the best of my knowledge, Garrett Stewart is the only scholar who has thus far proposed an approach that pursues a similar aim by combining media theory and narratology. Against traditional narratology, Stewart levels the charge of what he terms its blindness to medium and, by contrast, he positions narratography as a medium-centric approach to close analysis, "a micropoetics of one narrative medium at a time." (Stewart, 2009, p. 19) In addition to Stewart, I also take a cue from the work of digital media scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles, Lev Manovich, Johanna Drucker, and Matthew Kirschenbaum who have explored the intersection between the conceptual and the material layers of electronic media. In particular, Kirschenbaum's focus on what he calls "forensic" and "formal" materiality, (2008) has informed my understanding of media as always already blurring the line between hardware and software, and between material and formal processes.

At its most general, this strand of media studies understands mediality, in the words of Jonathan Sterne, to designate "*a quality of or pertaining to media* and the complex ways in which communication technologies refer to one another in form or content." (Sterne, 2012, p. 9) This conceptualization of mediality is also central to the work of scholars affiliated with what is increasingly coming to be known as the Montreal School of Intermedial Studies whose epicenter is the Centre de Recherches sur les arts, les lettres et les techniques (CRIalt), based at Université de Montréal, which also houses the international bilingual journal *Intermédialités* (see Besson, 2023; Tadier, 2021, pp. 9–26; Froger and Bem, 2023; Bem and Froger, 2021). In a foundational text which was published in the first issue of *Intermédialités*, Éric Méchoulan outlines three separate levels of intermedial analysis: 1) the observation of relations between media, 2) the study of the emergence of one specific medium out of an interaction amongst several media, and 3) the very milieu where a variety of media take shape and come to make sense (Méchoulan, 2003, p. 22). At its most

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[6]   Coining the term "demediation" as a play on Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept of "remediation," Stewart is interested in *bibliobjets* or book-objects that have turned away from their "medial function" (to transmit a message) and are, instead, considered purely for their formal and material characteristics: "The act of remediation implies that the transmissive function of the original has been retained despite its new overlaid means. Computers, say, borrow the data-storage impulse from bibliographic culture. Instead, demediation lifts away from the mission of transmission itself, from the medial *function*, so as to contemplate the space between cancelled means and new manifestations" (Stewart, 2011, p. 113). For a detailed definition of remediation, see in particular Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 21-50.

fundamental, intermediality is defined by Méchoulan as a doubled-up science of the 'in-between;' (p. 11, 15) one that is always already concerned with the *inter*—the *between*-ness but also the difference—between two media or two milieus (p. 22). Following these definitions, all media are always already engaged in dialog with other media (as the closely related concept of remediation further illustrates) (see Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 45). Moreover, the liminality of mediality is especially central to discussions of film since, as Stewart points out in *Framed Time*, there is something doubly medial about cinema specifically:

> For it is exactly the betweenness of the moving track in respect to strip and screen, to material base and its projected materialization as image, that makes film a privileged site for the *medial* in both its overtones—pertaining to a medium, but also navigating a mean between separate terms: a midpoint, a median. (Stewart, 2007, p. 9)

Here, liminality is not simply taken as the *inter-* of intermediality to designate a relation between two media, but it also points to the quality of existing *intrinsically between* media. Filmic texts, then, are uniquely positioned to offer a commentary on their own mediality and also, as noted by Noël Carroll, D. N. Rodowick, and Marshall McLuhan before them, to function as singular points or nodes where intersecting media realities meet (see McLuhan, 1997, p. 152). Echoing Deleuze's cryptic assertion, made in relation to a new direction in French cinema he terms "post-New wave," that "the diptych became the fundamental form of cinema," (Deleuze, 1989, p. 197) film (much like the codex) is thus revealed to entertain a privileged rapport with the diptych. This rapport highlights cinema's investment in a fundamental sort of duality as much as it makes clear film's far-reaching relationship to media materiality. *Little Women*'s narrative organization as a diptych (through Gerwig's presentation of two contradictory endings which are held side-by-side) partakes of and contributes to the film's shifting medial awareness of itself as *both film and not* (i.e. as *both film and codex*). Moreover, this medial in-betweeness is also profoundly queer, both politically and formally (see Savoy, 2005; Sulcer, 1999; Simmons, 2013 and 2022).

Queering film form

Gerwig's film continuously sets up not only an intertextual, but also a fundamentally intermedial, expectation when it obviously counts on viewers' inherent sense of the history of mechanically reproduced media, as the film's emphasis on the transference between book and film makes clear, and on their extensive knowledge, not only of Alcott's novel and previous film adaptations, but of some of the most

well-known findings of feminist scholarship on the 19th century 'women's novel.' Beginning with the film's opening scene (a mirror image of its end sequence), Jo/Louisa's New York editor unceremoniously advises her that "if the main character is a girl, make sure she is either married or dead by the end," while on their European travels, Laurie (Thimotée Chalamet) and a grownup Amy (Florence Pugh) wax philosophical about women's unlikeliness to be granted access to the category of 'genius.' Going further still, the interweaving of plot and gender roles appears in a remark made by Professor Bhaer during his critique of Jo/Louisa's work early in the film. As he ponders her overtly expressed hope to turn writing into a "mercenary endeavour," he asks rhetorically: "with plots like this?"

Beyond standing in for contemporaneous criticisms of 'women's writing,' Bhaer's phrasing appears to directly, and patronizingly, question Gerwig's own formal choices from within the syuzhet itself. However, the film's most striking theoretical reflection on its own, conflicted, relation to its *ur*-text occurs when Jo/Louisa tells her publisher, in the final sequence: "if I'm going to sell my heroine into marriage for money, I might as well get some of it." This is where Gerwig's adaptation offers its most radical departure from both the novel and previous filmic adaptations to date and, through Gerwig's repeated insistence on Jo's refusal to marry throughout the film's final sequence, the 2019 film's ending gives rise to a conceptual split screen of sorts: while earlier scenes had Jo state, in turn, that she "would rather be a spinster and paddle [her] own canoe" and that she "d[idn]'t believe [she'd] ever marry," the final sequence juxtaposes, on the one hand, the enforcing of 19th century narrative tropes upon a reluctant character (it is her assembled family that talks a rather skittish Jo into the rom com ending) and, on the other hand, that same character's rejection of those very tropes. As Jo/Louisa, dressed in a man's suit, tells her editor with authority: "She has spent the entire book not wanting to marry anyone."

Ultimately, however, Jo/Louisa will have no choice but to give in to the editor's categorical refusal to publish a young women's novel whose heroine ends up neither marrying nor dying. Yet, she nonetheless triumphs, in the film's end-sequence, by negotiating her publishing contract on her own terms (a victory that is further reinforced visually by the film's *mise-en-scène* of her watchful gaze over the book's production process). Of course, the real Louisa May Alcott never did marry, and Gerwig's choice to dress this version of the character in masculine-coded clothing when the fruit of her intellectual work, her book, is placed into her hands, evidently wants to pay tribute to Alcott's refusal to live a conventional life—pay tribute, if not to Jo/Louisa's gayness, as in the words of Kim's *them* review, then at least to her queerness. As Gerwig's film insists on cinema's longstanding split sense of its own mediality, the queer form of her film-diptych reinforces the sense that the film not only orginates from Alcott's novel, but also from within the entire history of

the bound book, itself originally born from the diptych (i.e. a form that fundamentally holds meaning and materiality in suspension).

Offering a revisionist take on what is known of Alcott's publication process, Jo/Louisa ultimately refuses to sell her publisher the copyright to her novel for 500$ and drives up the royalties on future sales from 5 to 6.6% (see Cheever, 2010). The deal is sealed, quite literally, when the film culminates in a sequence that cuts between the opening celebration of Jo March's Plumfield Academy and the accelerated and condensed representation of the production process of *Little Women*, the physical book, in New York City. At Plumfield, Jo happily carries a flowery cake out into the garden where she is joined, in turn, by Amy and Meg, while in New York, Jo/Louisa looks on as masculine-coded hands typeset, then print, her book, before it is bound into a leather cover. After one final step—the apposition of a gold-dusted imprint of the words "Little Women" onto the red cover—a singular copy (the first it seems) of her published opus is handed to Jo/Louisa. Holding that first exemplar close, she then watches on as piles of identical copies are being produced in the same way, a soft smile of contentment on her lips. Meanwhile, several copies of what might or might not be her book are also strewn across the table on which Jo sets down her cake in the matching Plumfield sequence, while Professor Bhaer (now her husband, as Gerwig's imagined reader-viewer audience is evidently expected to know) is happily teaching music to Plumfield pupils in the background. The emphasis placed not only on the novel's adaptations, but on the filmic representation of the gloriously bound red leather codex which is handed to Jo/Louisa personally, evidences how both film and book, in their intermedial intertwinement, are organized around the figure of the diptych: the ending to Gerwig's film is so entirely preoccupied with the making of Alcott's novel into a *bibliobjet* that its existence within the space of *as-well-as non-choice* can be seen to extend from the realm of narrative organization into that of media materiality, since it belongs neither entirely to the space of the novel, nor to that of the film itself.

Gerwig's queer sense of an ending

Queerness, then, is inscribed in a multiplicity of ways within the conceptual diptych structure of the ending to Gerwig's film. In addition to the obvious queerings of Jo that occur throughout the film's flashbacks, such as when she is dressed as a man after cutting off her hair for money, or when Laurie tells her that one day she will "find *someone* and marry *them*" (emphases mine), formal queering occurs, on a first level, in the interplay between past and present that structures the film by rejecting linearity and following a temporal logic all of its own; secondly, and most importantly perhaps, queering also occurs at the level of fiction itself, in the

juxtaposition between Jo (the character), Jo/Louisa (yet another character), and the (unknowable) historical figure of Louisa May Alcott. In relation to the Jo/Louisa character, played by Saorise Ronan also, we might ask: who negotiates the publication of *Little Women* at the end of the film, and what narrative space does she occupy? At first glance, she might function as a classically postmodern representation of the I that writes when I write fiction.[7] However, the emphasis of Gerwig's adaptation does not appear to rest purely on positionality and on the authority of the auteur-author, but also on binary opposition or, rather, on the rejection of binarisms.

Through the rapid alternation between sequences that depict diametrically opposed realities and outcomes, the ending of the 2019 adaptation juxtaposes the fictional Jo March getting married against her will (against the character's will, so to speak) with the no-longer-quite-fictional version of Jo-as-Louisa fighting, first, for her character's right to remain unmarried and then for adequate financial compensation for herself. As this juxtaposition makes clear, those negotiation sequences (the film's opening and end scenes, faithful to plot circularity as yet another hat-tip to narrative theory both performed and digested) are located both outside of binary time (they are situated neither in the time of the novel, nor in the time of history) and outside of the gender binary (to negotiate 'like a man,' Jo/Louisa has dressed like a man).

Cinematic diptychs, I have argued, introduce "a longue durée, a suspended temporality that extends far beyond the film's time frame and where no sense of an ending is in sight." (Bem, 2016, p. 22) That is to say that, beyond the literal queering of Jo's gender performance, it is the entirety of Gerwig's *Little Women* that, rather than offer a "choose-your-own-adventure-story," as Kim suggests, in fact rejects the very possibility of choice itself, choosing instead to remain forever in a suspension of opposites. Gerwig's queering of Jo March is itself queered, precisely because resolution will forever remain absent. Just as, in Gerwig's treatment of Alcott's text, Jo gets *both* married *and* not; Jo/Louisa is *both* queer and not; intermedially, she is *both* a film *and* a literary heroine; and, narratively, she is *both* character *and* author, spectator *and* reader. As a result, the oppositions the film sets up between past and present, medially adapted fiction and historical fiction, as well as queerness and straightness, cannot be thought to give rise to a neat resolution; instead, they are deployed to queer the very sense of an ending.

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[7]   I am thinking here of J.M. Coetzee's "He and his man" Nobel Lecture, an extension of his novel *Foe* where narrator and author meet impossibly in the multiple spaces opened up by Coetzee's rewriting of Daniel Defoe's novel. https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2003/coetzee/lecture/ (December 7, 2003) (last accessed December 20, 2022).

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PLAN

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