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GRETA GARBO, HER TRANSGRESSIONS AND UNCONVENTIONAL WAYS ON AND OFF SCREEN

Abstract

The paper discusses Greta Garbo's contribution to US film history. It argues that Garbo's role in American cinema is unique from various points of view but most of all because she was an unconventional, sometimes even transgressing (intentionally acting against what is expected or customary), filmic persona. This stance is argued for and is backed by an overview of her most outstanding cinematic performances and (some of) her most-acknowledged films with allusions to her other works as well. It is claimed that Greta Garbo's roles were mostly of a transgressing sort and the characters she impersonated were mostly unconventional or even "deviant", thus, she represented a quite specific cinematic persona through these roles of transgression such as being a prostitute, a (female) spy, a queen of ambiguous sexuality and gender etc. while she herself and her life were and still are a subject of a lot of controversies likewise.

Key words

Greta Garbo; American film history; stardom, unconventionality; transgression; gender; homo/hetero/bisexuality

Greta Garbo's cinematic as well as real life uniqueness is often the subject of discussions and argumentations. Several special terms have been applied to grasp the essence of her persona and work and to define and analyze this uniqueness of hers such as the "Swedish Sphinx", "The Face", or the "Divine Garbo" and so on. These expressions and all of the attempts at defining and analyzing her phenomenon struggle with her "beyondness". She is always somebody beyond, somebody unreachable, somebody unconventional, her actions and acting likewise, sometimes even entering the realm of transgressions. All this might find an explanation in what Marie Dressler claimed that, for Garbo, the only reality was art itself (cited in Csengery 1986: 120) implying that Garbo existed only in art exceeding all our mundane limits of grasping her phenomenon. In my paper,

my intention is to join this endeavor of discussing the Garbo phenomenon and to make an attempt to find answers, and maybe, even a resolution to her mystery that, in my opinion, lies in her unconventionality in all fields. My proposition is that her “Divinity” was due to her ability to move beyond, to be unconventional, uncommon or even transgressing and her unwillingness of ever compromising.

In this paper, I intend to analyze the role of Greta Garbo (1905–1990) in US film history. In my view, Garbo generally represented and impersonated filmic characters who were constantly on the verge of transgressing. Her filmic figures were almost always “borderline” personages who often crossed the frequently forbidden borders, or least of all, they behaved and acted in unconventional ways. With her roles as Queen Christina in *Queen Christina* (1933), Mata Hari in *Mata Hari* (1931), Anna Christie in *Anna Christie* (1930), Anna Karenina in *Anna Karenina* (1935), Marguerite Gautier in *Camille* (1936), Felicitas in *Flesh and the Devil* (1926) and so on, Garbo in her films truly “trespassed” several boundaries in terms of gender, morality, etiquette, social issues and even classes. Within the scope of this essay, I mostly focus only on these works (dealt with in chronological order thus having a certain historical and biographical linearity), performances and filmic characters because the endeavor to examine all of her films and roles is beyond the scope of the present paper. Furthermore, the films and roles discussed below constitute a quite representative sample of her filmic career and provide an overall view of her artistic achievements. Although in this paper, I primarily present and discuss Garbo’s transgressing filmic persona in terms of her film roles, however from time to time, she is also conceived as a “real” person.

The name, Greta Garbo¹, most often triggers the image of the *vamp*². She is most generally associated with this irresistibly beautiful and sexually alluring, yet, deathly and tragic female figure. However, Garbo cannot simply be classified as one of the great *vamps* of US film history; her persona and contribution to US cinema is much more complex than that. Although, it could be stated that it is impossible to separate her persona from the image of the *vamp*, Garbo did not really intend to create “mythic *vamps*” on screen in her life. In fact, she was struggling with MGM for a long time to relieve her of such roles (Csengery 1986: 85–90). Garbo wanted more complex and difficult roles – as in early American cinema the *vamp* could be termed as a female stock character that was quite much simplified and one-sided – she wished for challenges in her artistic career, and most of all, she grew tired of “being bad” all the time in her roles since this was one of the least likely and least typical features of her personality (Csengery 1986: 85). She did not want to impersonate only one particular type of woman on screen, especially not a bad one. What she aimed for were authentic roles, which represented lifelike women with real problems, sorrows, troubles and happiness (Csengery 1986: 86).

Greta Garbo indeed started her filmic career in the United States by playing *vamps*, and this helped her to establish herself in the US film industry, but she wanted to move further, to widen the scope of her work. When she got her first roles, she was labeled as a *vamp* because in *Torrent* (1926) – her first film in her new country – she had to play this role, and she excelled in it – everybody was

amazed by her realization of this female character, and she gained critical as well as commercial success (Csengery 1986: 69, Sova 1998: 63). In addition, Garbo also shared the fate of most European actresses who came after Pola Negri: they were cast as *vamps* because of their exoticism (Pola Negri was Polish and became one of the first great *vamps* in US film history – and as a consequence, in film history in general – due to her exotic beauty (Csengery 1986: 74, Sova 1998: 34–35, Haskell 1974: 82, 86, 88–89).

In *Torrent* (1926), Garbo enchanted everyone with her brilliant performance as a *vamp*. As a result, *Variety* celebrated her not only as someone beautiful, but also as someone that could act well, and she was even called an *individual* – which is a great praise – (Csengery 1986: 69) because she was a thinking type and not what was previously anticipated that like most *vampy* actresses she would be just a typically dull, beautiful, Hollywood cutie (using Csengery's own words). This great success was crucial, as this was her first film in the United States and her future career depended upon it. By that time, it had already been common knowledge in the media that she was an enigmatic person, a mysterious foreigner, a peculiar Swede, and she was already labeled as the Swedish Sphinx (Csengery 1986: 65). There was even a photo produced of her being the Sphinx, having her picture and that of the Sphinx mixed. It is very telling again that Garbo became associated with the figure of the Sphinx as a cultural icon since the Sphinx is the “most mythic of female monsters [...] whose indecipherable message is the key to existence” (Gilbert and Gubar 1980: 79). A mysterious air encased her, which was partly the result of the fact that she knew nothing about the “keep smiling rule” of Hollywood stars and how she should communicate with people, the media and her public. What is more, she behaved more like an intelligent, thinking being rather than the beautiful doll that was generally expected of her type in Hollywood (using Csengery's own words). As a result, she was considered some sort of a fairy or magical entity who had just stepped out of a tale; she was hardly considered to be real (Csengery 1986: 64–65). Dawn B. Sova also states that Garbo always remained an enigma to her public and fans (Sova 1998: 63). What is more, in the early 1930s, Hollywood capitalized on Garbo's being European, arty, mysterious and androgynous – together with Dietrich's similar attributes and the two actresses' rivalry – to exploit the possibilities of this uniqueness, “otherness” and unconventionality within the American culture (White 2000: 228). In this way, Garbo became the Sphinx of early American cinema seemingly guarding silently the secret of life, existence and reality; she became the mysterious and silent epitome of something that was inaccessible to others, somebody beyond the limits of permissible knowledge, thus her unconventionality was established.

At the very beginning, MGM conceived that Garbo suited tragedy best and that her personality mismatched happy endings, therefore she did not actually get roles in comedies at all (Csengery 1986: 70). One exception was *Ninotchka* (1939) produced almost at the end of her filmic career and which was one of the final desperate attempts at saving her career and the single attempt at trying to cast her in a comic role. The advertisement of the film was emphasizing that Greta Garbo

was actually in her very first comedy and that everybody should laugh with her by watching this unique production. In such an unusual manner – by generally being cast as a tragic heroine and not even sporadically as a comedienne – Garbo's only comic performance turned into an unconventional piece within her filmic oeuvre.

It came as a surprise to everyone that Garbo – the great tragedienne – was indeed a brilliant comedienne; one contemporary critic even claimed that she played a comic role with an expertise similar to Buster Keaton's, undoubtedly an immense praise to get (Csengery 1986: 190). In the TCM documentary made about Garbo in 2005 entitled *Garbo*, friends and relatives even claim that this was the only perfectly cast role for Garbo. Gray Reisfield, Garbo's niece even declares that she (Garbo) was like Ninotchka in real life and that she was actually a funny lady, not the tragic queen she was usually considered to be because of her roles (Bird and Brownlow 2005) since the public – in cooperation with the movie industry and as a result of the latter's machinations of image formation – usually identified the given actress/actor as a person with the role/s that s/he played which were arranged in accordance with the certain image that was created for her/him (Staiger 1991: 3–16, de Cordova 1991: 17–29) – that even happens today quite often but in the early years of cinema it was absolutely valid. Staiger notes that while the star-system had already operated on the stage for about a century before the rise of the star-system in cinema these stars were not so profitable. However, “the film industry exploited its perceived link with the masses” (Staiger 1991: 6) and as Staiger quotes Hampton: “everyone in the business was surprised by the ‘almost hysterical acceptance of personality exploitation’” (Hampton [1931] 1970: 85–89 quoted in Staiger 1991: 6). The independents having “more direct contact with their consumers' desires” in the interest of more profit invented personality exploitation, according to Hampton (Staiger 1991: 6). Staiger refers to Richard de Cordova's article saying that “film discourse about the players shifted in the early teens from information about their professional lives to their personal lives” (Staiger 1991: 14). This way, these people's two separate spheres of lives became even more combined, connected and they were melting into one.

De Cordova claims that with the rise of the star system a quite strict regulation came into force concerning the *type* of knowledge that was to be disseminated about a given actress/actor (de Cordova 1991: 17). When the *picture personality* (a pre-star persona) came into existence there was a double mechanism of concealment and revelation in connection with the knowledge about that actress/actor (de Cordova 1991: 24). Through intertextuality a certain site of restricted knowledge was created around the figure of the given actress/actor. “The most important point to make about this intertextuality is that it restricted knowledge about the players to the textuality of the films they were in. [...] The site of interest was to be the personality of the player as it was depicted in film” (de Cordova 1991: 25). De Cordova cites a writer of the *Moving Picture World* from 1910 saying that people were falling in love with matinee idols, and this proved that, for them, the idol's acting and her/his personality were conceived as the same thing (de Cordova 1991: 26). With the appearance of *stars* a new phenomenon arrived

and that was the discourse on the player's private life, her/his existence outside work (de Cordova 1991: 26).

So, private and professional become two autonomous spheres that can be articulated in paradigm. It is important to note however, that these two spheres are constituted in what might be called an analogous or redundant relation. The real hero behaves just like the reel hero. The knowledge which emerged concerning the star was restricted to the parameters of this analogy. The private life of the star was not to be in contradiction with his/her film image – at least not in terms of its moral tenor. The two would rather support each other. The power of the cinema was thus augmented by extension of its textual and ideological functioning into the discourse on the star. (de Cordova 1991: 27)

Sam Green, Garbo's walking companion and close friend towards the end of her life, shared similar ideas to the niece's. In his opinion, Garbo was honest, had a wonderful sense of humor and it was not difficult at all to get on well with her. As he had not seen her films before they met or while she was alive, when he finally did so after Garbo's death, he realized that the Garbo in the films was not the Garbo he knew – and as he had anticipated in a similar vein to most people as it is explained above. He added: “[s]he was definitely [only] acting on screen, and she was a much simpler, kinder and less affected [...] person in real life” (Bird and Brownlow 2005). Derek Reisfield, Garbo's great-nephew, declared that Garbo was not recluse at all – which was a widely-accepted and commonly-shared (mis-)information about her as a person – on the contrary, she was very convivial and vibrant (Bird and Brownlow 2005). In a *Saturday Evening Post* article from 1932, we can find similar ideas related to what have been cited above: contrary to the popular belief, Garbo is not a melancholic person always in dejection but a lively young woman with a great sense of humor (Condon 1932: 31).

Garbo's filmic persona and the person to be met day by day seemed quite in contradiction to those who knew her. Although the opinions mentioned above were given by family members and close friends – who might be quite subjective – they nevertheless reveal a side which is so little known about Garbo. These contradictory views show how many dualities and contradictions really constituted her personality and her image. One might question why it is a surprise to anyone that an actor/actress is not the person she performs on screen. It is a matter of intrigue only in that sense, as it has been suggested, that in the film industry when a new actress/actor is introduced to the public there is an image created for her/him and s/he is supposed to act accordingly on and off screen, as well. It was the rule in early film history but it is still rather relevant today.

However, whether the more general “tragic concept” about Garbo was true or not still remains a question. Her roles were of this vein and either her roles affected her life or vice versa, but this “tragic queen” seemed to be the essence of Garbo for the public. Garbo was both a great comedienne and a tragedienne at

the same time but such a phenomenon is usually hardly graspable for a public, and since she debuted as a tragedienne, and additionally, the realm of comedy has not generally been considered to be a “high art” since Aristotle, she got linked to tragedy and pure art – which was in a tragicomic sense her own tragedy. Due to the huge success of “Garbo as a *vamp*,” MGM did not want to change anything in relation to her. They, as film studios in general, wanted to make as much money out of something successful as they could. The studios’ rule was (and probably still is) to repeat something while it provides success and money. Garbo was a success as a bad woman, a tragic female figure who makes men suffer through her lethal sexuality and causes their fall, and as a result of this, her own fall and her often ensuing death likewise – as it was (and often still is) obligatory when writing a story that involved/s a *femme fatale* or *vamp* figure (Hansen 1991: 262) –, at the end of the story the *femme fatale* or *vamp* figure has to disappear together with her dark appearance and exotic look (Hansen 1991: 275–276, Haskell 1974: 46) (this exoticism being due to Garbo’s European ancestry and roots).³ Therefore, this image of a tragic, fallen woman seemed to be a successful venture and thus, obviously, MGM did not mean to put an end to it. They were not able to understand why Garbo could not endure this figure any more and why she was not able to go on with performing the *vamp* persona. They failed to comprehend that an artist can be much affected by the roles s/he plays and that s/he can feel confined by a given one if s/he has to impersonate it all the time (Csengery 1986: 86). In this sense, Garbo was unconventional and transgressive, too, because she dared rebel against the workings of the studio system. On the one hand, she was an unconventional/transgressive actress/person as she usually played the transgressive character in the films. On the other hand, she was an unconventional/transgressive actress/person in real life, too, since she dared and could influence and shape her filmic career, her roles and how her characters should be formed in her films – which was not customary around her time.

When Garbo started her career in Hollywood she was frightened: she thought that MGM was monolithic and cold, and she did not like it at all. Cari Beauchamp, film historian, claims that the people at the studio “did not know what to do with Garbo” (Bird and Brownlow 2005). Joseph Newman, an MGM assistant director, adds that at first she did not seem very impressive; no one would have believed that she was going to be the great hit that she became (or already was). When she arrived in Los Angeles, no one knew her and no one expected much of her. MGM was one of the biggest film studios that “had the reputation of being daring and high quality” (Bird and Brownlow 2005). That is, Garbo’s employment by MGM was probably much more because of the studio’s generally venturesome character than their being impressed by her, or due to knowing what to expect of her. Yet with much probability, the greatest reason for hiring her was that Mauritz Stiller, whom MGM really wanted to get, was not willing to sign a contract without her (Csengery 1986: 51).

Not that they really cared about it that much. Karen Swenson, a Garbo biographer, explains that they were waiting for the new Theda Bara, or the new

Pola Negri (Bird and Brownlow 2005) – two quintessential *vamp* figures of early American cinema. (Sova 1998: 26, Haskell 1974: 43, 82) They wanted to find a new hit. The *vamp* was the popular image of women in film and in sexual terms, so Garbo became “the new film *vamp*” (Bird and Brownlow 2005).

This all reveals how hard it was for Garbo and the studio to find the best solution for their problems with each other. Garbo did not want to be there, and MGM did not want her to be there, either. Yet, they somehow managed to turn out to be a successful and fruitful match in the film industry, even if it was obvious that they had a lot of debates, negotiations, misunderstandings and conflicts (Bird and Brownlow 2005, Csengery 1986).

Nonetheless, Garbo generally won her great fights with MGM. Garbo’s first great victory was quite early in her American career. She was dueling with MGM for quitting the *vamp* roles and, in the end, it was “the MGM Lion [that] fell on its knees”: from that time on she managed to get roles she liked or preferred (Csengery 1986: 85–90). She got characters in the realization of which she could really make use of her capabilities and reach fulfillment. Although these filmic characters were not *vamps* in the early cinema sense, yet, the characters she brought to life on screen were still of the uncommon, unconventional, transgressive or even “deviant” sort.

The women Garbo impersonated were still frequently *vampish*, “deviant” or problematic characters, however, they were not those powerful, destructive and lethal women, whose sole concern is the fulfillment of the death drive (as Žižek suggests it concerning *femmes fatales* – Russo 1995: 47), the type which was originally introduced on screen. Garbo gave shades to this filmic figure and contributed greatly to the creation of that type of fallen woman who was more than the *vamp* of the early beginnings of film history and also more than some of those following her, for example, the *femmes fatales* of *film noirs*. These female characters were also often transgressors who did dare step over the forbidden lines in the form of spies, murderers, temptresses, prostitutes, adulteresses and so on in films such as *Flesh and the Devil* (1926), *Anna Christie* (1930), *Mata Hari* (1931), *Queen Christina* (1933), *Anna Karenina* (1935) and *Camille* (1936). They were no longer merely simplified, clear-cut versions of the lethal woman previous (and often also later) films tended to work with.

It seems impossible to understand her filmic transgressions, her transgressing characters, without falling back on the fact that Garbo herself was a quite unconventional and transgressive person. She herself was constantly crossing borders, lines and limits in a material as well as an abstract sense. Garbo was moving again and again between her home country, Sweden, and her new country, the United States; while she was also quite frequently moving a lot from one house or apartment to another one within the latter one (Csengery 1986). She was, in a sense, an “in-between” person who was never really able to find her place in either sense. Maybe, she was only at home in her abstract solitude not connected to a physical location. That is probably why she never really found her place in a physical sense: Garbo was never able to adapt herself fully to the United States

and its culture; she always lived on the “borderline” of her original culture and that of the US.

Garbo was very unique and her personality hard to grasp primarily because she was quite lonely and almost no one could really reach her – in spite of the fact that she was a kind person with a good sense of humor (Bird and Brownlow 2005). One of her most famous sentences, if not the most famous one is the well-known utterance from *Grand Hotel* (1932) that became associated with her is: “I want to be left alone” or more precisely “I want to be alone” (Sova 1998: 64). No one could really get close to her and no one could really understand her because she was beyond the reach of most people. Very few people could peek over or get through the wall, which surrounded her. Marie Dessler probably guessed it the best when she said that Garbo was lonesome, she had always been and she would always be that (cited in Csengery 1986: 120).

Garbo was never much approachable because although people wanted her as a real person no one could really reach her this way: her reality did not coincide with that of the people in general. In Marie Dessler’s opinion, for Garbo, only art existed, her reality was art and acting. She was always said to be secretive and mysterious, and people did not realize that she is there in her films; she gives what people are looking for in her when she is acting. The everyday world did not exist for her, she became alive when she was acting, performing a role, enlivening a character. She lived in her characters (cited in Csengery 1986: 120). If they wanted to get to know her, they should have paid attention and listened to her persona when acting; there, she was open, revealing, and there she was to be found. Probably the only way she could reveal herself and expose her deeper feelings was in acting: acting was her secret, coded way of expressing herself (Bird and Brownlow 2005). In Daniel Selznick’s opinion, although Garbo kept a façade to the world, this very same façade opened up when she was acting. She projected vulnerability, which made people in the audience want to help her, to protect her. She let people “come close to her” in her films (Bird and Brownlow 2005). Although Garbo was somebody whom everybody wanted in real life, she was only to be got in her films. In her films, she actually crossed that certain façade she erected and she even let people come through it.

Garbo’s elusiveness and the “question marks surrounding her” undoubtedly augmented the mystery about her and made her even more unapproachable and distant. Maybe, the very term, “elusive” is which describes most aptly what she was like for the people in general, for the audiences:

[t]here was always an elusive quality about her. She was somehow lost in whatever world she happened to find herself in. And that, of course, was the great mystery of her. Why was she lost? Where had she come from? There were all these question marks surrounding her. (Bird and Brownlow 2005)

The questions surrounding her were never answered and this only made the number

of the questions double and triple. Garbo was full of dualities, complexities and contradictions and that is what was and still is so attractive about her (Bird and Brownlow 2005).

Garbo's dualities and contradictions, and her very elusiveness and complexity also made her hard to grasp for most people. James Karen, one of her fellow actors said in *Garbo* that Americans did not like her that much because of this puzzling quality: she was much more important in the foreign market. In his view, she was too sophisticated; her acting was much too subtle for the American moviegoers. She was emotionally so full that it embarrassed people in small towns because they did not behave that way. She gave herself so fully that this disturbed many people (Bird and Brownlow 2005).

The first one of the films, and more importantly, female characters I discuss in a bit more detail is Felicitas in *Flesh and the Devil* (1926). Garbo as Felicitas is the early type of the *vamp* in this film. She is a ruthless and irresistible seductress. In this film, Garbo acts out the same type of lethal woman as in *Torrent* (1926) and in *The Temptress* (1926) – her three earliest films in the United States. She plays a woman who is irresistible and almost causes the ruin of two very close and loving friends. She is the typical *femme fatale* who does not care about anyone; what matters for her is solely her own happiness and reaching her aims. She wants both men, and by this she disrupts their friendship and strong bond. They almost even kill each other, but finally, they get reconciled while Felicitas gets drowned in the icy water which she falls into when the ice breaks on the surface of the lake as she is hurrying to the men to prevent the duel on the sacred little island in the middle of this certain lake. Here, she as the treacherous woman reaches her “due end”: she has to die – in accordance with the conventional resolution pattern and logic of the *femme fatale* stories. In *Flesh and the Devil* (1926), Garbo plays a character that transgresses the limits and borders of decorum and decency as an adulteress and an evil woman whose eroticism and wild sexuality consumes both of the men loving her, and she destroys the happiness of everybody around her. As a *femme fatale* figure, she is transgressive and destructive. It is either she who reaches her fate or her victims. This time, it is her: she is punished for her transgression.

To some extent, Garbo could actually be considered the *auteur* of this movie considerably more than the director Clarence Brown. Brown, the director of this film (and several other of Garbo's films likewise) said about her remembering her performances that she was a “great gal – the greatest” (Bird and Brownlow 2005). But more importantly, he added that he had not much to do after the scene where Felicitas (Garbo) and Leo von Harden (Gilbert) met for the first time because there was a love affair unfolding in front of him. From then on, it was the development of their love affair that made the picture (Bird and Brownlow 2005). Clarence Brown's emphatically “soft” style of directing made it possible for Garbo to give more erotic performances than Hollywood had ever seen. Adela Rogers St Johns, a film writer, commented that Greta Garbo's filmic presence, while she was in love, was similar to an explosion, an explosion she had

never seen before: a violent act. A colleague suggested that Garbo was at her best when she was in love with John Gilbert (Bird and Brownlow 2005).

That is why, *Love* (1927), the first attempt at adapting *Anna Karenina*, was made (finally) with John Gilbert as MGM wanted to make use of this tremendous, violent love at their hands. People also wanted Garbo and Gilbert together on screen after they had seen *Flesh and the Devil* (1926) (Bird and Brownlow 2005, Sova 1998: 63). Thus, it is evident that Garbo's first transgressing women performances resulted in a great success, probably primarily due to this strong and violent presence the love affair provoked. These silent films made Garbo one of the greatest *vamps* of early film history – although, undoubtedly and in fact, this was what she wanted to terminate and change as soon as she could.

Anna Christie (1930) was Garbo's first talking picture. Here, she succeeded in crossing a very problematic and significant threshold since several actors – native and non-native speakers likewise – had their career ended by this turn in film production (Haskell 1974: 43). Garbo, however, stepped over this obstacle with ease and skill. To be precise, by uttering her very first words in a sound film: “Gimme a whiskey, ginger ale on the side – and don't be stingy, baby” (Brown 1930). These words are legendary ever since. (Sova 1998: 63)

In *Anna Christie* (1930), Garbo plays a prostitute of the same name, another transgressive female figure. She is not only a liminal figure because of her profession but also because she is “oscillating” between the land and the water – the symbolic representations of sanity and madness in the film as well as in the original drama written by Eugene O'Neill from which it was adapted. She is constantly struggling with temptation, with death, with madness, with the force that want to snatch her, which are out there in the mist over the sea. During her fight with this mysterious force she is moving back and forth through the frontier of good and bad, sanity and madness, safety and despair, and so on and so forth.

In *Mata Hari* (1931), Garbo plays Mata Hari who herself was a transgressing female figure. As it is quite well (not) known, Mata Hari achieved this transgressivity by either really being a spy or “simply” being an exotic dancer; and, maybe, even being, in addition, a prostitute, as well. In this film, her character is interpreted as being a spy who acts only as a dancer for a cover-up, and she prostitutes herself only as a duty being a female agent if her mission requires it. As a spy she is transgressing several boundaries: she faces quandaries concerning what morality is, what the line is someone (or she as Mata Hari) should not or is not able to cross, what the price of life and death is, what someone can or must do for love or for duty and so on and so forth. In spite of the fact that she would like to terminate her mission and job all together, and she wishes to restart her life with a love that purifies her, she cannot do so. Once she has started the transgressions there is no way out, and she is executed in the end.

In *Queen Christina* (1933), Garbo impersonates Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–1689), who was yet another outstanding and very much debated person, personality as well as filmic character. She was a queen who was supposedly a hermaphrodite and a bisexual person. At any rate, she could be said to be a

good example of “the Butlerian gender trouble.” In the Butlerian sense, being a wo/man is (only) an act of gender roles. “[G]ender is an ‘act’ which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ itself carries the double-meaning of ‘dramatic’ and ‘non-referential’” (Butler 1997: 404). Gender is done, it is “a kind of imitation for which there is no original,” (Butler 2001: 722, Butler 1990) a performance, a theatricality. “[I]t can become an occasion for a subversive and proliferating parody of gender norms,” (Butler 2001: 724) thus a masquerade. When considering Queen Christina as a character brought to life by Garbo we encounter gender bending in the fullest sense as Melinda Szaloky puts it “Christina’s ‘disrobing’ for Don Antonio in *Queen Christina* marks the peak of Garbo’s gender bending (and blending)” (Szaloky 2006: 205).

In this role, many people felt that Garbo was excellent; this was considered by many as one of her most exuberant and captivating performances (Csengery 1986: 156–163 and Bird and Brownlow 2005), some even said that this was her greatest professional achievement (Csengery 1986: 160). This was probably due to the fact that she seemed to feel this character very close to herself. In fact, everybody was discussing the striking similarities and parallels between Queen Christina and “Queen Greta” – as several critics called her (Csengery 1986: 160).

This story and the leading female character is not only unconventional because we have a powerful queen as the protagonist to whom every man pledges obedience and accepts her as their superior but she even abdicates the throne by her own free will. This is something that apparently no one can understand and no one wants to accept and acknowledge. A further unconventional or even transgressive element in the film is the fact that Queen Christina was raised as a boy in her childhood and she is dressed and acts as a man while being supposedly a woman. She is even taken for a man in the country inn where she actually meets Antonio, the Spanish ambassador, who later becomes her lover. This, however, happens only after it turns out that she is a woman. She looks like a man, yet in the pub, where they get acquainted, the drunkards are fighting over how many lovers the queen has had implying she has had quite many. The twist is that finally it is Queen Christina herself who has to do justice. Dressed up as a gentleman and allegedly someone who knows the queen intimately, s/he is asked to decide the quarrel. S/he ends the fight by declaring the exact number. It turns out that it is a much higher figure than what the drunkards were actually arguing about, which leads to the celebration of the queen.

In the film, the queen’s relationship with her old servant is really like that of a father and a son. It is a particularly striking fact that she has a male servant and not a female one since customarily female members of courts had female servants. Andrea Weiss interprets this daily ritual of getting dressed as a man helped by a male servant as – while remaining a woman still – rejecting the dominant codes of femininity (Weiss 1991: 289). Queen Christina certainly also has female company, but that relationship seems to be much more like that of a king and a lady of the court. When Countess Ebba enters her room, the Countess kisses the queen’s hand, and in return, Queen Christina kisses the countess on the mouth.

Whether it signals lesbian attachment or not is still debated, but one thing is certain: these two women are very intimate and close to each other, while their relationship points toward more than a friendship between two women. As Weiss declares this scene “expresses obvious sexuality” and she adds that their dialogue and gestures reveal “the desire of the two women for each other” (Weiss 1991: 289). A further important relationship of Queen Christina’s with another woman is the one she has with the young maid in the inn who openly and undoubtedly makes a sexual offer to her (the queen-gentleman) as if (and probably supposing that) she was a young man. Even the ambassador himself claims that the maid prefers her (the queen-gentleman) to him.

At the beginning of the film, when the little girl becomes the ruler of the country due to the death of her father, she declares in her speech that: “Queen Christina will be a good *king* to protect you all” (emphasis mine) (Mamouliau 1933). This statement is ambiguous at least, and clearly subversive at most.

A similar, but even more striking instance of gender-bending and the twisting of sexual roles happens in the scene when Queen Christina refuses to get married and the old chancellor says abashed: “But, your majesty, you cannot die an old maid” (Mamouliau 1933). In reply, Queen Christina proudly utters one of the most famous sentences of the film: “I have no intention to, chancellor. I shall die a bachelor” (Mamouliau 1933).

This film raised a lot of questions in connection with Garbo’s gender, sexuality and her sexual preferences. The debate is ongoing and very far from being settled. Nevertheless, it seems safe to claim that at least the more reliable and conclusive evidence seems to favor an interpretation that would see Garbo as a similarly sexually controversial person. Karen Swenson, a Garbo biographer, comments on the events in this film in the following vein: “[t]his was the moment when both sexes reevaluated what they saw in Greta Garbo” (Bird and Brownlow 2005). Gore Vidal, himself a close friend of Garbo’s, says that she thought about herself as a boy. He even adds that for Garbo the ideal variation of this would be as a boy with another boy, it was a kind of a sexual fantasy of hers (Bird and Brownlow 2005). Patricia White – while elaborating on the ideas expressed in Eve Sedgwick’s *The Epistemology of the Closet* – claims that “Garbo’s secret connection with the question of homosexuality is ‘indicatively male,’ or at least butch, or, in the parlance of the time, ‘mannish’” (White 2000: 243). White also adds to this that “Garbo’s ‘masculinity’ connects her to ontological definitions of homosexuality (qua inversion) as something one *is* rather than something one *does* – even if she wasn’t one” (White 2000: 243). White quotes Parker Tyler saying that whenever Garbo took a glamour part and melted into the arms of a man she ‘got in drag’ (Tyler 1968: 12,15 quoted in White 2000: 243).

Charles Busch, an actor and playwright, analyzing Garbo’s roles in the love scenes of her films, claims that Garbo “would bring out the lesbian in most heterosexual women” (Bird and Brownlow 2005). Dr. James Lax, one of Garbo’s friends admits that “[s]he would sometimes refer to herself in the masculine” (Bird and Brownlow 2005). Sam Green, another of Garbo’s friends, is much

less cautious in his handling of the topic. He claims that “[s]he was constantly playing with those kind of phrases and gender confusions in an effort to amuse people” (Bird and Brownlow 2005). At the very least, it seems safe to conclude that “Garbo had no objection to being the role model for those who intended to change convention and this has led some to question her sexuality” (Bird and Brownlow 2005).

Although Scott Reisfield, Garbo’s great-nephew declares that to say that Garbo was bisexual or lesbian would be just conjecture and that, clearly, she had a set of relationships with some very interesting men over time, and he thinks that is the actual focus of her interest (Bird and Brownlow 2005), it is questionable to what extent his assertion deserves credit. Firstly, considering his age, he must have known Garbo mainly as a young boy only, so very probably he could have had much less knowledge about Garbo’s sexual life than any of her friends quoted above. In addition, as a member of Garbo’s family he is obviously very much interested in keeping Garbo’s image in the accepted, normative, heterosexual tradition. Furthermore, his denial cannot even be considered an outright challenging of the opinion that Garbo’s sexuality was less than evidently heterosexual: that Garbo had relations with men says nothing about her not having relationships with women. Plus, the fact that he talks about a focus of interest sounds like a latent admission of non-central, but just as tangible *other* relationships, in all senses of the word. Finally, the strongest blow to his defense of Garbo’s heterosexuality is the article by Patricia White that quite convincingly argues that Mercedes de Acosta was the lover of both Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich at the same time, the three of them having a love triangle (White 2000: 226–265), naming the triad as: “Mercedes, Blonde Venus, and Swedish Sphinx” (White 2000: 229). Andrea Weiss also reveals this information concerning the rumors about d’Acosta and Garbo’s love relationship in her article entitled ‘A Queer Feeling when I Look at You’ – in addition to Dietrich’s and d’Acosta’s more open liaison (Weiss 1991: 283). Another person Weiss mentions as a great love of Greta Garbo is Salka Viertel with whom Garbo had a very strong and close relationship (Weiss 1991: 286). Weiss states that the dominant culture generally requires to make homosexuality invisible and unspeakable, and it was so in Garbo’s time, as well; however, the studios meant “to keep the star’s image open to erotic contemplation by both men and women” to gain more public (Weiss 1991: 285–286). Weiss adds to this that

What the public knew, or what the gay subculture knew, about these stars’ ‘real lives’ cannot be separated from their ‘star image’. [...] This star persona was often ambiguous and paradoxical. Not only did the Hollywood star system create inconsistent images of femininity, but these images were further contradicted by the intervention of the actress herself into the process of star image production; certain stars such as Katherine Hepburn, Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo often asserted gestures and movements in their films that were inconsistent with and even posed an ideological threat within the narrative. (Weiss 1991: 286–287)

Molly Haskell also claims – however without discussing her gender and sexuality questions – that Garbo (similarly to some other actresses) was really the *auteur* of her films, the *raison d'être* and guiding spirit of these films and her own image-production (Haskell 1974: 82).

Probably Gore Vidal sums up the question of (possible) lesbianism/bisexuality the most pointedly: “[w]omen loved her, men hated her. She wasn’t their ideal of a real woman because she was androgynous and that did not appeal and because she was too grand and too elegant. Her androgynous charm which was the lesbian side of her nature projected enormously in film for those who would pick upon it” (Bird and Brownlow 2005). Charles Busch, while analyzing the role Garbo played in the love scenes of her films argues that Garbo put the men into the feminine position in the kissing scenes. He is describing Armand’s (Robert Taylor) and Marguerite Gautier’s (Garbo) lovemaking in *Camille* (1936) in the following way: “[i]mmEDIATELY she kind of puts him in the feminine position. I think she tends to do that a lot in her love scenes. She is not the aggressor, the man puts the moves on her but then she takes over” (Bird and Brownlow 2005). According to Patricia White, George Cukor, the director of *Camille* (1936), “captured Garbo’s articulation of the ‘ontological lesbian’ at the very moment that the type was circulating culturally” (White 2000: 244). While Dietrich’s lesbian style was performative, Garbo’s was ontological (White 2000: 245). These two explanations are two versions of interpreting the same performance and filmic presence. Gavin Lambert claims that it permeated all her love scenes that she was enjoying the game of love foreplay; and that probably, she was much more interested in the foreplay than what came after (Bird and Brownlow 2005).

Derek Reisfield, another of Garbo’s great-nephews, claims about her cinematic contribution as a woman – quite expressively – that “[s]he broke tremendous ground for women in the film world as a professional and in terms of depiction of women on screen. Up until Garbo one could not be feminine and assertive at the same time and with Garbo it was a revolution” (Bird and Brownlow 2005).⁴ Patricia White declares “that Hollywood was not ready for a major female star to be involved with another woman – it still isn’t” (White 2000: 254). White concludes with saying that “[r]egardless of her actual sexual choices, Garbo contributed enormously to one key historical figuration of what” she is “referring to as lesbian representability – the conditions under which lesbianism comes to be encoded and decoded in representations, whether movies or modes of dress” (White 2000: 254).

It is evident that there is a considerable confusion and disagreement about whether Garbo was feminine or masculine, heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual, whether she was womanly or manly; one thing, however, seems certain: she was androgenous, and probably this feature of hers added a lot to all of the gender and sexual controversies about her. One of the most explicit proofs of her androgyny was her face, according to Roland Barthes. He states that Garbo’s face was “‘almost sexually undefined, without however leaving one in doubt,’ ultimately leaving sexual definition in doubt and implying that this constitutes her image”

(White 2000: 243). This famous quotation from Barthes also contains another significant notion in the first part of the sentence saying that Garbo's entire figure being sexually undefined reflects the Platonic Idea of a human being implying that she was the Idea and Essence incarnated in her androgyny: "Garbo offered to one's gaze a sort of Platonic Idea of the human creature, which explains why her face is almost sexually undefined, without however leaving one in doubt" (Barthes 1992: 628). Barthes adds that the snowy thickness of Garbo's face is like that of a mask that is not painted but set in plaster and that her extreme beauty is perfect and ephemeral (Barthes 1992: 628). His elaboration of the subject as follows still emphasizes her "beyondness", her beyond-human perfection – her androgenous body – that was generally implied in one of her other names: the Divine Garbo. As Barthes puts it: "[t]he name given to her, *the Divine*, probably aimed to convey less a superlative state of beauty than the essence of her corporeal person, descended from a heaven where all things are formed and perfected in the clearest light" (Barthes 1992: 628–631). Writing about several "immortals" of cinema Sam Walton discusses Garbo's divinity, in an 1978 *Saturday Evening Post* article, saying that "[a] generation of eyes realized her perfection was not of the earth", and that she owned a lunar beauty (Walton 1978:36).

Thus it is evident that Garbo is generally linked to abstraction and especially Barthes emphasizes her beyond-humanity as follows: "[a]s a language, Garbo's singularity was of the order of the concept, that of Audrey Hepburn is of the order of the substance. The face of Garbo is an Idea, that of Hepburn, an Event" (Barthes 1992: 631). Molly Haskell also connects Garbo to abstraction and to "the beyond" when saying that she was timeless and "enchained to the idea of absolute love" as well as saying that "Garbo's body may have belonged to the twenties, but her heart was already yearning for the thirties. She belonged [...] to the magic [...] by which body would be converted into spirit, lust into love, sexuality into romance" (Haskell 1974: 89). Melinda Szaloky even goes beyond the thirties when she says – while discussing the aspects of Garbo's divinity – that Garbo pointed towards the future, our time, and still encompassed the mentality of her age – implying that she was past, present and future in one.

Matching to marvel the physicality of the moving image, Garbo's mercurial – *photogenic*, even 'crystalline' – acting style and eloquent, polyphonic silences have constituted this star as the incarnation of the transit mentality of her age. 'The Divine Garbo' responds both nostalgic yearnings for (waning) human transcendence, and to futurist [...] aspirations. (Szaloky 2006: 205)

Lucy Fischer – when claiming that Garbo was an Art Deco diva and a prominent symbol of the Art Deco style that was prevalent of the era – also connects Garbo to all of the concepts expressed by Barthes stating that she was a concept, an Idea and an abstraction. Fisher discusses Garbo as the embodiment of Art Deco (Fischer 2001: 83–110, 84, 85), which is again of an "androgenous type", a style and concept that was modernity to its core including (a wide range of) elements

(but quite importantly) that implied androgyny since this was the “skyscraper style” (Fischer 2001:86), which resembles the figure of the *flapper* – the quintessential female figure of the era that was rather androgenous looking like a human skyscraper as opposed to the pervious (and numerous later) human ideals when femininity and female form was strongly distinct and distinguished from masculinity and male form with its curvilinearity. So, Garbo was the concept, the symbol, the idea of this rather unisex human figure, the essence of androgyny. Haskell also emphasizes that Garbo was really a great androgyne (Haskell 1974: 107) and adds that it is no wonder that her leading men became weak or invisible, to say the least, since “as a figure who combined elements of both sexes, and the essence of love itself, she usurped the whole screen” (Haskell 1974: 108).

Stella Bruzzi, when discussing androgyny, articulates similar ideas to what was said about the studios’ policy – concerning showing homosexuality on screen to attract more viewers – saying that there is eroticism in androgyny and that it is connected to desire since it combines the two domains of gender and sexuality by representing both of them intrinsically and by bordering the two spheres of reference at the same time (the real and the imaginary) (Bruzzi 1997: 175). She claims that “[t]he androgyne is a potent figure of fantasy because s/he [...] pertains to both the real and the imaginary, and it is a coalescing of the two which generates the eroticism of the image” (Bruzzi 1997: 176). Bruzzi also states that androgyny is a fusion of genders and that the androgyne is often associated with the abstract: the pre-sexual Platonic ideal, universality, superiority, totality and perfection (Bruzzi 1997: 176).

The lack of visible and concrete femininity, plus, her elusive, conceptual abstractness was what made Garbo’s categorization so difficult in Hollywood since she did not fit into the “rigid dichotomy of mother versus whore” (Fischer 2001: 91). In spite of the fact that she was cast as a *vamp* at first sight being a foreigner with exotic look, she was beyond definition as Barry Paris claims “she was ‘neither virgin, vamp, nor flapper, but an entirely new female animal’ with ‘personality enough to make free love sympathetic’ to a Puritanical American public” (Paris 1995: 117, 112 cited in Fischer 2001: 91). Fischer adds to this that “[r]ealizing the uniqueness of her screen persona, Garbo wrote home to Sweden: ‘They don’t have a type like me out here’ (111)” (Fischer 2001: 91). Fischer declares later that Garbo’s cinematic unconventionality lay in the fact that she often brought to screen the independent woman which was beyond conventions and definition still around that time. “The specter of the independent woman is apparent in numerous Garbo films of the period in which she plays a female who is unconventional on both the sexual and moral plane” (Fischer 2001: 91). Garbo as a screen persona is not only unconventional in sexual and moral terms but also because she is generally stripped of the maternal female image since she is a Deco woman which is a modernist category and never associated with maternity. “Garbo and the screen characters she incarnates are both compelling and troubling – like modernity itself” (Fischer 2001: 106), in addition her aloofness and independence was in stark contrast to “the requirement for women to be ever

cordial and social” (Fischer 2001: 107) again highlighting her non-femininity, non-maternity and independent modernism of androgyny.

The unconventionality and transgressivity of the female characters portrayed by Garbo, however, goes beyond gender and sexuality. In *Anna Karenina* (1935), as the title suggests, Garbo impersonates Anna Karenina, an adulteress again. In the figure of Anna Karenina we find another famous, and at the same time, ill-famed female character in world literature and history. *Anna Karenina* was written by Leo Tolstoy between 1875–77 and it has already been adapted to screen several times (and will probably just as well be in the future). In this adaptation, Garbo gives her interpretation of this character as being an overtly pure and loving woman who is lost by her misstep. What new could still be said about this tragic female figure, one of the greatest ones of the literary world together with Madame Bovary and the like? Garbo as Anna Karenina perfectly reveals and presents Anna’s fight with temptation and her fall. She is transgressing forbidden borders: those of marriage, decency, sexual license, and so on. In addition to all this, she also has to face losing her son due to her actions, she also crosses the boundary between being a mother and being deprived of this status, and in the end, she is deserted by her husband and her lover, as well, and she is left alone to die as a punishment for all her transgressions.

In *Camille* (1936), Garbo plays Marguerite Gautier, a prostitute again. The film is the adaptation of Alexandre Dumas, fils’s 1852 novel entitled *La Dame aux Camélias*. This is a classic story again with several adaptations and a lot of discussions about the novel and the film adaptations, as well. The story is about a prostitute, a transgressive female figure, who falls in love with a decent man, and she struggles with having a “normal and decent” life and/or pursuing her profession. In this film, Garbo as Marguerite does not only struggle with her being as a prostitute and loving a man she should not and by this way constantly transgressing limits of morality, decency, social boundaries, but she is also constantly exceeding her financial limits, as she spends much more than she can afford – for example, by buying camellias every day – and she is always disregarding her limits by all means. This can be said about her health likewise, because she has consumption and she is always on the verge of sickness and death; eventually dying as a result of this.

With the help of these films, my aim was to present that Garbo was able to interpret, impersonate and play almost any kind of problematic characters no matter how complex or multi-layered they were. In *Flesh and the Devil* (1926), she had to play the *vamp* of early film history; she gained immense success with her performance but she wanted to get out of this label, that she is a *vamp*. In her later films: in *Queen Christina* (1933), in *Mata Hari* (1931), in *Anna Christie* (1930), in *Anna Karenina* (1935) and in *Camille* (1936) (among several others) Garbo had the possibility of performing more challenging female characters who were always on the verge of crossing or transgressing, who were liminal figures or outsiders but by all means unconventional. Garbo, in her films, truly “trespassed” several boundaries and lines in terms of gender, morality, etiquette, social issues

and even classes, just the way she happened to do these in her real life occasionally. She breathed life into these fallen or transgressive and unconventional women who, while struggling with their problems and transgressing boundaries, did not become those demonized and libelled bad women whom they could have been turned into in accordance with the filmic traditions. Garbo was able to present and express the essence and functioning of unconventionality and transgressions with understanding, depth and openness in spite of the myth that she was secretive, closed and unapproachable; in her roles, she was none of these, and she lived these roles. As Leatrice Fountain, the daughter of John Gilbert, claims in *Garbo*: “Garbo was always an extremely independent person. She did not give herself to anyone easily and probably she never could. She was the antithesis of the little arch-Hollywood dressed up doll. She was lanky, she moved well. She had an aura. There was magic around her” (Bird and Brownlow 2005).

Notes

- 1 It was Mauritz Stiller, a wonderfully gifted, committed, almost obsessed and visionary director who became Greta Louisa Gustafson’s mentor and, in fact, who created her, this divine filmic persona (Csengery 1986: 34–46). It was also him who christened her Greta Garbo, because in his opinion, her name was too common (Gustafson) and did not reflect her grandiosity, did not express her potentials, and in case she managed to achieve an international career, she needed something easier to be remembered by. According to John Bainbridge’s researches, the name derives from the Hungarian male name, Gábor, because Arthur Nordén – a colleague and a friend of Stiller, who had a wide knowledge of literature and history and who wrote an essay about Gábor Bethlen – was captured by this name and suggested it due to its alliterative nature. Stiller was thinking: Gabor...Gabro...Grabo...Garbo and he came up with Greta Garbo, which sounded the best. In *Gösta Berlings Saga* (1924) – The Saga of Gosta Berling –, she was already listed by this name in the cast (Csengery 1986: 43). *Gösta Berlings Saga* (1924) was Garbo’s first great film (while being a drama student in Sweden), which brought appreciation and recognition to her. One of the critics remarked that in the figure of Greta Gustafson/Garbo Mauritz Stiller, so to speak, painted his own Mona Lisa (Csengery 1986: 42, Sova 1998: 63).
- 2 The word *vamp* has its origins in the word *vampire* since it is the latter’s shortened version and this villainous female is a *femme fatale* figure who as a sexual vampire drains the life out of her male victims and leaves only the frame or the shape of this previously virile, independent, strong and powerful male lover (Csengery 1986: 85). The term, *vamp*, was an American slang word created by Hollywood to signify the *femme fatale* (Heller 1981:11), the creation of the *vamp* was the Americanization of the European *femme fatale* (Haskell 1974: 102). “[T]he vamp exuded a desirable but destructive sexuality that proved fatal to her male victim” (Sova 1998: 85). The *vamp*’s appearance is dark and sultry (Haskell 1974: 46).
- 3 It might seem strange that Garbo as a Swedish person – with light-colored hair and eyes – has a dark countenance in these films as *vamps* generally do but she did appear as such in her *vampish* roles.
- 4 It would probably also be interesting to analyze in what relation the pictures her great-nephews have of her are to each other. They obviously seem to have rather contradictory views that emphasize the key elusiveness of Garbo even more.

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