

# KEEPING THE WAR OUTSIDE THE FRAME: ELLIPSIS AS A MEANS OF REDIRECTION TOWARD WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES IN TWO WAR NARRATIVES

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores how cinema's material discontinuity can stimulate the attention of a distracted audience and prompt reflection on historical violence. By examining Yasujiro Ozu's *Sanma no aji* (1962) and Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019), it argues that ellipsis is a powerful technique used to construct an argument about the relationship between war and women's social roles. Specifically, the article analyses how these films use the ellipsis to enhance the resistance of women who act against the official thread of History. Finally, the findings highlight the potential of cinema to challenge dominant narratives and encourage alternative approaches to representing violence and social roles.

## KEYWORDS

Ellipsis, Cinema, Attention, Women's Social Roles, Violence, Resistance

Mechanical reproducibility opened a time of creation, multiplication, and transmission of violence by technical means. The counterpart of the saturation of images is a spectator of numb sensibility who closes her eyes to memory, facts, and images.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging this potential political problem is a good reason to explore alternative ways to treat violence through audiovisual media.

It has been claimed that cinema is the “art of ellipsis.”<sup>2</sup> Through framing and montage, a film is produced by selecting and removing audiovisual fragments from their physical systems of reference and juxtaposing them on a new surface. This uprooting procedure makes the film’s space-temporal synthesis essentially discontinuous.<sup>3</sup> Still, the film’s elliptical and inorganic nature has been assumed with ambivalence. It has been hidden or shown openly<sup>4</sup> and used to dilute or emphasize contents. It can constitute a device of attention or distraction.

This text examines how the medium’s material discontinuity can awaken the attention of the public’s distracted reception,<sup>5</sup> producing an active reflection on a historical background of violence. I will expose two cases in which ellipsis is used to build an argument about the relationship between war and the position of women in a particular social context through the invisibilization of contents relevant to the plots. In the first case—Yasujiro Ozu’s *Sanma no aji* (1962)—women’s roles are configured by a war that cannot be shown due to its traumatic influence; in Greta Gerwig’s *Little Women* (2019), the female protagonists are detached from the war as a reaffirmation of independence from a male’s territory of conflict. The chosen cases are not exhaustive, and the pretense of making a general reflection on women’s social roles over time would exceed the limits of this analysis. Instead, I have chosen my subject considering the characters’ shared position on the margins of the war and that women’s protagonism is based on their potential for resistance against the official thread of History, a role enhanced by the ellipsis.

### 1. OZU’S *SANMA NO AJI*

In his postwar films, Ozu used ellipsis to stress the memory of II World War’s experience in his contemporary society. Furthermore, Ozu’s postwar cinema is about the consequences and present agency of the war. Ozu draws the viewer’s attention to a past that cannot be represented visually or verbally from the viewpoint of an ever-present time in which the linearity of narrative adapts to the successive form of film without flashbacks, flashforwards, insertions of archive material, voice-over, text, photos, or frames

that register the violence of preceding incidents. The past is materially silenced, but it is the dramatic center of gravity of the film.

Ozu's films are set in postwar Japan's urban environments of the 1950s and 1960s. There is peace, but the traditional institutions are internally damaged. Even if violence is inhibited, Ozu's work after 1945 concerns the fractured structures of postwar society. The spectator must recognize the implicit past—with the impossibility of openly referring to it—to interpret the story and aesthetics of the film.

Ozu's use of ellipsis and silence is rooted in his cinematographic style, which gets its consistency from the restrictions in framing and montage self-imposed by the filmmaker: the immobility and low placement of the camera, the absence of transitions between frames, and the patterns of the succession of long and close shots are parameters that become codes of a cinematographic grammar and syntax that unify the whole corpus.<sup>6</sup> The theme is as persistent as the cinematographic form: family bonds and domestic struggles. A typical conflict is the situation of daughters who have reached the age of marriage and must leave their parental home. Through this subject, Ozu points to the relationship between the war and the resetting of women's roles in a modern sensibility.<sup>7</sup>

We can appreciate an example of this linkage in his latest work, *Sanma no aji*. The film presents the story of Michiko and his father, the widower Mr. Hirayama. Michiko has reached the age of marriage; her father worries that if he does not push her to marry, she will eventually become a spinster and remain unhappy. Michiko, who has taken her mother's place as a homemaker after her death, is secretly concerned about leaving her father and states that she is not ready to marry. Father and daughter never openly discuss their concerns with each other, but we learn about them indirectly.

The film has a twofold structure. The first part presents both father and daughter in denial. Hirayama supports Michiko's decision to postpone her marriage. Their relatives and friends warn them about the consequences of not solving her future. Hirayama is confronted with the potential costs of his negligence through the mirroring images of other women. In the second part, the father and daughter accept their unavoidable separation. Michiko finds a suitor. After the wedding, Hirayama returns home alone and drinks sake with resignation. Human life is cyclic and trying to stop the natural sequence of time produces grief.

Scenes designed as modules define the film's architecture.<sup>8</sup> There is tension between the selective material shown on the geometrically compartmented screen and what is left outside the borders. Ozu stresses the quadrature of the frame with his closed forms. The frame is built as "squares inside squares." Moreover, the replication of modular scenes and spaces in the film's sequence allows us to reconstruct a parabolic form of settings and circumstances that mutually reverberate with narrative and formal variations. These situations and figures become means of reflection, projection, anticipation, self-critique, and reprise of the main characters' behavior. The identification of a partitioned two-folded structure is not based only on narrative criteria but also on spatial display. Unlike other recurrent scenarios (the bar, the office, the home, the restaurant), the train station appears once in the middle of the film and becomes the story's vertex. After that, the modules reset, and we return to the film's beginning. Ozu reiterates the frames, the *mise-en-scène*, the montage, the position of the characters, and even the actions of the film's first scene, but essential details have been reinterpreted. Eventually, we learn that the protagonists have changed their approach and the plot progresses in a new direction.

Before the midpoint, a trivial incident is determinant for the twist that marks the twofold partition. Hirayama encounters Sakamoto, a former navy officer who served with him during the war. They longingly recall the past in a bar and fantasize about Japan's victory, evading the reality of the defeat and hard times that followed. Only two drunken men can find solace and celebrate the shared memories of such a destructive war. Suddenly, the bartender—a woman Hirayama seems to like—offers to play a military hymn on the radio. The three characters are taken back in time by the music. Sakamoto marches and performs the martial salute with pleasure. The others mimic the gesture like automatic dolls. The moment is secluded in the bar's space, where memories are not objectively remembered but have become a playful illusion that arises from the shared experience. Ozu's restrictive framing and his stationary camera achieve the feeling of suspended time and space. He is meaningfully using the partiality of cinema to express the suspension of the politically correct reaction to the past.

The experience of the bar relates to Hirayama's change of mind. After it, he meets his children at home and talks to them about the bartender, associating her with his former wife. However, outside the parallel world of the bar, the pretended similarity becomes

doubtful. During the vague depiction, coincidences with the deceased mother seem to fade. There is no clear image of Mrs. Hirayama or photographs of her face. As the war, she is sunk in the past. According to Hirayama, she was always dressed in a kimono. Michiko corrects him: She wore Hirayama's pants during the war and evacuation. This comment undermines Hirayama's romanticized perspective of the past and compromises the mimesis pattern implicitly established between the bartender, the mother, and Michiko.

With these elements, Ozu builds a discourse about war experience without showing and barely naming it. The frame's limitations and social rules of conduct constrain the characters' words, movements, and emotions. It is through these restraints and the impossibility of ultimately uncovering the historical motives of the actions that the trauma is enhanced.

It is known that the old and young generations received the war differently. Hirayama is attached to the past. Michiko represents the future. In the middle of these figures, Mrs. Hirayama symbolizes transition. According to Hirayama, she is a traditional feminine icon in the kimono and related to the phantasmagoric woman of the bar. Michiko interrupts the chain of likenesses, pointing out that during the war, the mother changed and had to adapt to a new role. Heir of this new womanhood, Michiko cannot mirror her mother before the war, which altered everything.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, she must stop replacing her mother at Hirayama's home.

In *Sanma no aji*, modern women appear in the middle of a process of transformation that affects their life decisions. Although their role is not entirely redefined, the impossibility of following the tradition is rooted in concrete social impediments seeded by previous events. Because a new social order is arising, they are internally conflicted, as they can't make decisions simply by imitating an institutionalized social order. In this way, the war becomes the "elephant in the room," or the main idea that drives the tensions in the movie and explains how women's social position has changed over time, even though this link between events is hidden in between the frames and montage.

## 2. GERWIG'S *LITTLE WOMEN*

Ellipsis serves another purpose in Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019). The film departs from central aspects of the original story that have been included in other adaptations of Louisa May Alcott's novel. One of the most notable absences is the American Civil War, which demands the presence of the March family's

patriarch. Like in Ozu's case, war is present as the narrative trigger of the plot and cause of the conflict between the main characters, though it is actively omitted. But this ellipsis is not meant to emphasize the influence of war on the March sisters. Instead, the distraction from the war transfers the focus of attention to women's possibility of building an independent world, despite the discriminatory and narrow-minded social environment surrounding them.<sup>10</sup>

The described approach is not found in the 1994 adaptation, which opens with Jo's voice-over describing the "coldest winter of their childhood" and the poverty and lack of fuel caused by the war. The first appearance of the March women shows them reading together a letter from their father that describes the adversities of life on the war front. A BBC show from 2017 starts with footage of the father on the battlefield.

Gerwig's adaptation starts with the March sisters, already adults after the war, confronting a more persistent antagonist: the necessity of adapting to a world that, through money and social conventions, obstructs the achievement of their deepest aspirations—being a writer, a pianist, a painter, or, in the case of Meg, a well-respected elegant lady. The filmmaker's distraction mechanism is the rupture of the novel's chronological action parameters and an organization of memory and images that does not respond to the linearity of maturation that shaped May Alcott's dramatic arch. While Ozu never introduces alterations in the succession of time other than the ellipsis, Gerwig's film is a dialogue of temporalities in a parallel montage. The film begins *in media res*, with Jo presenting her writings to an editor in New York. After that, it introduces the lives of the March sisters, moving back and forth in narrative time. The sisters' youth—the time of the war—is paradoxically dyed in soft and warm colors. There is no sense of tragedy but of power, liberty, and joy in women who speak their minds and create an autonomous domain at home, distant from foreign judgment.<sup>11</sup> Life is hard, but the girls confront their ordinary troubles with wit and a practical attitude. They are more absorbed in developing their identity and talents than in mourning their absent father. There are no men in the family, and when they do appear, it is as observant admirers of the sisters' creativity and strength. The mother bears almost entirely the sense of misfortune, having learned to live constantly angry while not expressing it. She represents a victim of the rigors of her social environment, not an archetype of virtue.

Tragedy reaches the sisters when they grow and must confront society, trying to hold to the ideals forged in their precious solitude. The *mise en scène* of adulthood is blue and cold. It is not the war that brings suffering and violence to the sisters but their inevitable entrance into a world ruled by men that prescribes schemes of self-control and submission.

Without chronological succession as the structuring criteria of the film, the question of the principle that rules the assembly of the fragments in Gerwig's work is unavoidable. The selection and disposition of the narrative events are revealed in a montage that turns to the imagination and memory of Jo, the story's author in the film. It does not point only to the contents distributed in an objective cause-effect logical disposition but tracks the itinerary of Jo's inner sensibility. If, in Gerwig's view, the official novel has been organized according to external—editorial and commercial—criteria that aim to marriage and family as the socially expected happy ending for a woman, the film's argument is restructured towards the reaffirmation of the rejected conclusion: the validation of the unfulfilled desires of each sister, in relation to which marriage is at most a second-best option. Because the film's premise is that we are seeing the story of the creation of *Little Women* from Jo's unedited perspective, the alteration of the generally well-known progression of the novel becomes a hermeneutical cue that indicates that we are not just accessing the facts but also the internal associations that give new meaning and direction to the events. Men officially write History and Literature, but because the film deviates from the romantic tale crystallized by the book, the product is the point of view that confronts Jo and her editor and eventually explains the reconfiguration of the story in the film as a final statement of resistance or the publication of what was left outside the margins of the novel.

It is true that, finally, Jo negotiates with the editor and renounces her original story for the sake of publishing her novel. But the film is not uniquely mirroring the book but the author's creative process and May Alcott's ambivalence towards her work.<sup>12</sup> The film shows the means of validation instead of the validated product by transferring the perspective backstage. While producing her final manuscript, a scene shows how Jo materially displays the written pages on the attic's floor as pieces that can be rearranged in new configurations. This intradiegetic gesture echoes the cinematographic montage procedure—more so because it is an exhibit of fragmented sheets—and reflects the potentiality of transforming a narrative by modifying the assemblage of facts. It

reveals that artistic works are not closed formations but open to multiple interpretations and readaptations. In her cinematographic adaptation, Gerwig appropriates the fragmented episodes to highlight values and facts that were present in the original novel but obscured because of the socially expected happy ending.<sup>13</sup> In this way, she shows us the typical process of re-contextualization and juxtaposing recycled materials that constitute cinema and emphasizes its elliptical nature to leave the narrative causes outside the frame. Now the war is discarded in favor of the relevance of the “little stories about domestic struggles and joys,” which, according to Jo, “are not important” for most readers. The film authentically vindicates the sisters’ feminine perspective because artworks are not just mimesis of historical conditions but actively productive. Amy states that writing these little stories “will make them more important.” However, Gerwig’s film is not just about telling facts but how to tell and retell them over time using new media and techniques.

#### CONCLUSION

The previous cases of cinematographic ellipsis exemplify how omission can be used for distraction or attention in war narratives. Using ellipsis, Gerwig and Ozu create tension between what is inside and outside the frame. Ozu does it to connect their characters to violence, while Gerwig questions events that have habitually earned a hierarchy of importance in cinematographic narratives. Ozu’s omission of war is directed to focus the receptor’s attention on it; Gerwig distracts the receptor by emphasizing a new perspective that develops outside the eye of History.



- 1 Harun Farocki, *Desconfiar de las imágenes* (Buenos Aires: Caja Negra, 2013), 19.
- 2 Marcel Martin, *El lenguaje del cine* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2002), 83.
- 3 Cf. Pierre Francastel, "Espace et Illusion," *Revue Internationale de Filmologie* 2, no. 5 (1949): 71–72; Jacques Aumont, *La imagen* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1992), 182; Jean-Louis Déotte, *La época de los aparatos* (Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo, 2013), 36.
- 4 David Oubiña, *Una juguetería filosófica. cine, cronofotografía y arte digital* (Buenos Aires: Manantial, 2013), 23–24.
- 5 Cf. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, and Other Writings on Media (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2008), 40–41.
- 6 Cf. Donald Richie, "The Later Films of Yasujiro Ozu," *Film Quarterly*, 13, no. 1, (1959): 18; Donald Richie, "Yasujiro Ozu: The Syntax of His Films." *Film Quarterly*, 17, no. 2 (1963–1964), <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.1963.17.2.04a00040>; and David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1211232>.
- 7 Cf. Mauricio Castro, "Vanished Men, Complex Women. Gender, Remembrance and Reform in Ozu's Postwar Films," in *Ozu International*, edited by Wayne Stein and Marc Di Paolo (New York-London: Bloomsbury, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501304743.ch-003>.
- 8 Cf. Richie, "Yasujiro Ozu: The Syntax of His Films," 11.
- 9 The gesture of Ozu's film can be related to accepting change after trauma, Cf. David C. Stahl and Mark B. Williams, "Introduction," in *Imag(in)ing the War in Japan. Representing and Responding to Trauma in Postwar Literature and Film*, edited by David C. Stahl and Mark N. Williams (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2010), 6.
- 10 When Gerwig leaves this symbolic incident outside the frame, she displaces the story's dramatic tension: "Civil War is an obvious metaphor for internal conflict," Fetterley writes, "and its invocation as background to *Little Women* suggests the presence of such conflict in the story." Cf, "*Little Women: Alcott's Civil War*," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 2 (1979): 370, and 378 on the father's patriarchal figure, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177602>.
- 11 Cf. Judy Simons, "The Afterlives of Louisa May Alcott: Greta Gerwig's *Little Women*," *Adaptation: The Journal of Literature on Screen Studies*, 13, no. 2, (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apaa014>.
- 12 Cf. Simons, "The Afterlives," 279; Fetterley, "*Little Women: Alcott's Civil War*." Simons adds that Jo and May Alcott's creative experience is an image of Greta Gerwig's career in "The Afterlives," 279.
- 13 These values are the covered message of the novel, according to Fetterley, "*Little Women: Alcott's Civil War*," 376.