

WONDROUS REALISM AND INTERMEDIALITY IN THE FILM
SILENCE BECOMES YOU (2005)

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The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen,
man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive,
nor his heart to report, what my dream was.

Shakespeare's *Midsummer night's dream*

This paper deals with some concepts of magic, wondrous, and fantastic realism as an introduction to the analysis of the film *Silence becomes you* (2005), by Stephanie Sinclair. The main objective, however, is to work the intermedial relationship of the film with the wondrous poem “Goblin market”, by Christina Rossetti, and with “Go and catch a falling star”, by John Donne. The poems intermingle in the production of the film in different ways and visibility, and the final product carries the marks of wondrous realism as well, mainly the fictional universe of the two sisters, Violet (Alicia Silverstone) and Grace (Sienna Guillory).

Irlemar Chiampi, in *O realismo maravilhoso* (1980), suggests some distinctions among manifestations of realism which overlap the limits of “normal”, everyday life. She discards the expression magic realism, because, as she explains, magic comes in second place even in Latin-American literature. Wondrous realism, according to Chiampi, registers a new way of looking at reality. Besides that, the extraordinary and the strange, everything which escapes the common course of ordinary things, are part of a wondrous reality as well. Tzvetan Todorov, in *The fantastic: a structural approach to a literary genre* (1973; 1st. ed. 1970), ten years before Chiampi, also deals with the notion of wondrous realism,

but places his emphasis on the fantastic. For him the presence of the supernatural is a *sine qua non* condition for the fantastic. To narrate events which transgress the natural laws of nature and disturb the stability of the reader is a characteristic of the fantastic, according to the critic. The fantastic work produces a hesitant response from the reader, as he or she confronts events which cannot be reasonably explained.

Silence becomes you, as a narrative (with its fairy-tale atmosphere, the apparition of dead people, magic as an apology to the powers of human beings), can be read as a piece of wondrous realism, according to Chiampi, or as belonging to the fantastic genre, according to Todorov. The film can also be analyzed according to Vladimir Propp's functions of characters, as exposed in *The morphology of the folk-tale* (1928).¹ Some of the functions are, however, subverted in the film, due to the fact that Sinclaire creates a very complex and contemporary narrative, not a folk-tale or a fairy-tale in the traditional sense. Her film uses intermedial elements in the creation of a hybrid narrative, therefore the analysis of these wondrous elements, whether they are subversive or not, are subordinated to the intermedial elements in the film hybridization process. The concepts of intermediality and hybridization used in this paper are the ones developed by Claus Clüver and by Júlio Plaza.

Clüver, in "Estudos interartes: introdução crítica" (2001, p. 340) reflects about the various relationships among the media, languages or texts. According to the author, the intersemiotic or "intermedial" relationship happens when a text makes use of two or more media and, in so doing, the visual, musical, verbal, kinetic or performative aspects of its signs, become inseparable; in a "multimedial" work, there is a combination of separable and separately coherent works, composed by different media; and in a "mixed-media" work, there is obviously a mixture of media, comprehending complex signs which will

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Propp#Morphology

never reach coherence or self-sufficiency outside that context. In *Tradução intersemiótica*, Plaza (2003, p. 65) says that a combination of two or more channels from a matrix of invention, or the montage of various media, may create another one, which is the sum of those which constitutes it. In this case, the hybridization produces a new work, a new medium not known before. This hybridization (2003, p. 206-207) can be the result of interpenetration (intermedia), juxtaposition (multimedia) or translation (intersemiotic translation).

The interpenetration of the poems by Donne and Rossetti with the script of *Silence becomes you* characterizes the intermediality, the creation of a hybrid text where at least two media interpenetrate in the creation of a third one. The fusion of the media does not happen, however, with the same visibility, result of the degrees of interpenetration of the different media or languages in the hybridization process. The various degrees of visibility seems to indicate that the medium, as an intermedial element, may fuse and be present in the final work as zero visibility (medium “visibly” absent in the final work, fusion accomplished in the implicit reader’s mind), as water mark (medium with a minimum visibility), as wall paper (medium with medium visibility), and first plane (media with similar visibility). There may be also an asymmetry between the reader and the work. In the visibility zero, the reader needs to be a naratee, an implied, educated, informed reader, because the interpenetration of the media is not visible and the fusion will be dependable on the reader’s information, knowledge, or readings. In the degree first plane, the spectator or reader will observe or see clearly the interpenetration of the different media.

The filmic narrative in *Silence becomes you* is essentially rhizomatic and many times the spectator is lead to question about the many branches in the development of the diegeses. The narrative is inconclusive, the planes are vague, the motivations not always

clear, the path taken, questionable. The film begins with a voice-over recitation of the first line of the poem “Go and catch a falling star”, and adds other verses which do not belong to the poem. The poetic voice in Donne’s poem affirms that there is no honest woman to be found in the world, and if there is such a woman, while trying to reach her, she would have had the opportunity and time to become dishonest. In the film, dishonesty is first connected to the male character, then to Grace, the oldest sister. The spectator senses that there is a strong feeling of love between the two sisters, and they do depend solely on one another to survive. They were brought up away from any contact with other children or people outside the small family: the father and the mother (already deceased), Grace and Violet. Before Luke (Joe Anderson) comes to the mansion, the sisters have a plan which is never overtly stated, but is understood as a seduction trap: they plan to attract a young man into the mansion so they would have a chance to become pregnant. There should be no other kind of involvement with the man however, only a physical one. As soon as one of them became pregnant, the stranger should be discarded, and the two sisters should go on with their lives as before. Inside this fairy-tale realm, the sisters, under the father’s influence, have built a world of their own and practice their powers to exhaustion. Grace, the oldest, most powerful and passionate is related to fire: her hair is deep red, her powers are great. Violet is related to water. She is called a mermaid by her sister and when she gives in to Luke’s desire, her image is shown as going deep into the waters to join Neptune.

The most remarkable element in *Silence becomes you* is, without doubt, the direction of art – costume and scenery, mainly the sisters’ costumes – Violet’s and Grace’s – and the inner decoration of the mansion. The costumes are based on the medieval fairies’ and are in various, vibrant, strong, and saturated colors. The rooms of the mansion where the sisters live are also decorated with curtains, covers, pillows in varied and saturated colors. The

colors of the walls follow the same pattern (see Fig. 1). The furniture is antique and, in the bedrooms of the two sisters, above their beds, there is a curving canopy of crystal beads. The male character, however, a man from the ordinary world, dresses like a common young man of the 21st Century.



Fig. 1: Scene of the film *Silence becomes you*, by Stephanie Sinclair.

Violet, the youngest sister, who goes in search of the young man, breaks this initial agreement when she falls in love with Luke. It seems, however, that he is the perfect man for the plan, because he answers her: “Wrong guy. I don’t do love”, when she says, contrary to the plan, that she wants him to fall in love with her. When she **leaves home** (the first of Propp’s functions) to find a man, the sisters ignore that this is also the beginning of the **conflict**, because there is an **interdiction** (they should not fall in love with the man), but Violet **violates** the agreement, and, by doing so, the sisters’ plan seems to be doomed to failure. Luke, the anti-hero, who is brought drunk to the mansion, begins to wander about the room the following morning in an attempt to find where he is and takes the money Grace puts inside one of the drawers purposely, to check his character. Once again, this

young man seems to be a villain who has fallen into the sisters' trap. In relation to Donne's poem, Sinclaire seems to have subverted the roles, because in the film Luke is the incarnation of dishonesty, not the women, until he becomes Violet's **involuntary accomplice**. Then the role of the villain in the story is played by Grace. Several transgressions have already occurred: the hero is an anti-hero; the anti-hero is a villain; the role of the antagonist shifts hands; the villain ends up by taking the role of the hero (when Luke falls involuntarily in love with Violet and tries to save her from Grace's powerful evil influence).

A question arises in the spectator's mind: Where do these peculiar sisters come from? They are from "The goblin market", by Christina Rossetti, according to Stephanie Sinclaire, the film producer. The poem, in its second edition (1862), has the cover illustration by Christina's brothers, the painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Illustration by D. G. Rossetti 2. ed. of *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, published in London, by Macmillan, in 1862.

In this narrative poem of the 19th century, selected by Harold Bloom to be published in *Stories and poems for extremely intelligent children of all ages: Autumn* (2003), two sisters, Lizzie and Laura, live by themselves in an isolated place. They dedicate their lives to working at home and wander around the fields and by the stream. Afternoon after afternoon, the two sisters see the goblins, with animal faces, and listen to their cries, offering their delicious fruits. Lizzie, taken by desire, ends up by exchanging a lock of her golden hair for the goblins' offer. After savoring the delicious fruits, Lizzie does not see the goblins or hear their cries anymore. Taken by uncontrollable desire for the goblins' fruits and unable to fulfill it, Lizzie becomes sick and, as the days go by, she lies in bed waiting for death. Laura, in a desperate attempt to save her sister, goes in search of the goblins. She offers them a silver coin in exchange for some fruits, so she can take them to her sister, but the goblins want her to taste them there and then, or else they will not sell them to her. Laura is adamant in her determination not to succumb to the seduction of the fantastic beings and closes her mouth tightly. The strange little creatures, taken by wrath, throw the fruits against Laura and smash them against her face and body. Covered by juice and pieces of fruits, Laura runs back to her sister, who is finally cured after tasting the fruits again. The poem has a very strong sexual connotation, because Lizzie becomes well again after licking Laura's face and body.

When Luke says that "he doesn't do love", he is similar to those creatures with animal faces – his attitude is animalistic: he relates to women who are willing to pay for his sexual services. When he involuntarily becomes in love with Violet, Luke changes and stops playing the role of the villain. Grace, the most powerful and the father's favorite girl, becomes then the incarnation of evil, the witch, in the film, and starts the process of Luke's destruction. Conscious that he is sensible to her mental powers and intent on showing that

he is not worth of Violet's love, Grace plans to seduce him. She begins by entering his dreams and seducing him with oniric images. After that, Luke becomes an easy prey and, when Violet is away, Grace consummates her seduction. When Violet returns, after some moments of uneasiness, she implicitly forgives Luke and impetuously goes away with him. Grace does not desist, however: she brings, by the power of her mind, Violet back home, while Luke is asleep in the car. So Violet and Grace are together again, just for one night, as Luke demands. Violet goes to the market again to help Grace prepare a farewell dinner. Grace pretends she wants to finish her painting of Saint Sebastian, having Luke now as a living model. Her plan is indeed to destroy Luke while Violet is away from home. When they, Grace and Luke, walk into the atelier, a sacred place in the mansion, she asks him to take off his shirt and has his hands tied up in the back, as a perfect reproduction of Saint Sebastian's position before his martyrdom. Quite impressive the imaginary reproduction of Luke's body and face by Grace in the painting which is almost done. As the tension begins to mount between Luke and Grace, she takes the bow and arrow to kill Luke. Inadvertently, he hits a candle whose flame, increased by Grace mental powers, ends up by killing him, under her victorious gaze. Violet cries in despair when she watches Luke being burned alive through the glass of the locked door. Like Saint Sebastian, Luke does not die pierced by arrows; he dies in Grace's element – fire. Again, a summary of the diegesis as such, may lead the reader to believe that the film narrative is linear and simple. This is not the case; the narrative in *Silence becomes you* is complex, fragmented, rhizomatic, and inconclusive.

Grace's power goes beyond the limits of the sister's mansion and the relationship they have seems to be typical of identical twins. Several times, during the film, Violet suffers the consequences of Grace's power. The first indication that the sisters are united by

more than blood happens when Grace, enraged by Violet's ride with Luke, burns the note that Violet has left saying that she will return in twenty minutes, and with the note she burns the tip of her finger. Violet in the car, distant from the mansion, feels a similar pain in her finger. Later, when Grace seduces Luke, while they are having sexual intercourse, Violet, in town, feels terrible and knows that something is wrong. When she finally decides to go away with Luke, her sister takes one of Violet's pictures and begins to burn it, starting by the lower border. Violet feels sick and breathless in the car. This awful sensation stops only when Grace, knowing the consequences of her action, throws water over Violet's burning picture. This is also the occasion in which Grace brings Violet back home through her mental powers and convinces Luke to spend one night in the mansion, the night he dies. Now, if we, as spectators, believe that Grace has special magic powers, we are entering the fantastic, wondrous, magic realm. If we choose to see these events as ordinary coincidental happenings, we are being taken by what seems to be an unjustified credulity. We may consider the dead father's apparitions the same way.

The spectator is led to hesitate every time the father appears. His presence may be the projection of Violet's and Grace's minds or the memory from the past, when they remember moments with their father during childhood. It is also like a woman, in the present moment of the narrative, that Grace "lives" moments as such. The father seems to come from the dead to be with his favorite daughter. These apparitions of the father and mother (less frequent) and of the little girls can be psychologically explained, but the ones that involve Grace as a woman with her father cannot. Well, we may say that Grace relives as a woman some of her childhood experiences, but yet how are we to explain the little girl, apparently Violet, who takes Luke by the hand and leads him to Violet's room? Frightened

by the apparition, Luke asks: “You are just a child. Who looks after you?” and the little girl answers: “I look after myself”.

The film is also crowded with out-of-body experiences in the sister’s daily experiences. There is even exchange of looks between the person and its own image in the process. The camera suggests this manifestation through the breaking of images: while a clear image moves or stops, another image, blurred and shadowy, stops or moves, building by doing so a sequence of fragmented double images. At one occasion, while looking at a multifaceted mirror, Grace sees not her face only, but the face of her mother and father as well, which in a way reveals her complex personality. Violet’s is a less complex being, but she is the character who suffers constantly out-of-body experiences, while awake.

Being her father’s favorite daughter, Grace finds being jilted by Luke quite difficult, and her hostility grows beyond her control. Violet was harshly criticized by the father because, to her father, she seemed to lack passion and power. After she meets Luke, her love for him becomes passionate and finally it sets her free. After Luke’s death, when Violet enters the car to go away, the objective camera facing the car captures him sitting by her side. From Grace’s angle, Luke is not with Violet.

According to Propp’s listing of the functions of the characters, there are some others which are also present and others which are subverted in the film. Luke, the anti-hero of the filmic narrative, leaves, and abandons Violet without knowing that she is pregnant. The **departure of the hero** in this case is not to act against the enemy. He has invited Violet to go with him, but she does not find enough strength to abandon her sister Grace yet. Luke leaves the mansion, but he is not the same man anymore. He realizes that he can no longer “sell his love” to other women, therefore, he cannot help but return to the mansion. Violet rejoices upon his **return**, but Grace is enraged and she plans to prove he is still prey of

uncontrollable sexual desires and not worthy of Violet's love. When he **departs again**, he takes Violet with him, only to be driven back to the mansion by Violet while he is asleep in the car. He is finally convinced to stay that night in the mansion, and Grace attains her objective when Violet is away. Grace becomes directly responsible for Luke's death. His **transfiguration** goes beyond a new appearance, he is burned alive. There is **no wedding** in the end of the narrative, and the villain – Grace – is at the same time **punished** and **rewarded**, because she loses Violet, but is pregnant with Luke's child (the result of her seduction, while Violet was away), and the heroine – Violet – is also **rewarded** and **punished**: she is finally set free from Grace's power and dominance, but she loses her baby (the result of her love relationship with Luke). Both sisters have failed to follow the initial plan: to use a man for reproductive purposes, make him go away, and return to their previous life of mutual dedication. In the film, those who love, Violet and Luke, are not rewarded with a life of happiness together, and the one who hates is not simply punished.

In “Goblin market”, the goblins' black magic (fruits that kill damsels) is broken by Laura's love for Lizzie and the poem remains as a lesson, has a didactic twist. In *Silence becomes you*, Grace's magical powers are in service of evil as well – they create pain, suffering, and death. Grace does not belong, however, to an enchanted world as the goblins'. She is one of us, but she has been severely educated by a magician, her father. If we need a “willing suspension of disbelief”² to read and enjoy Rossetti's poem, we also need it to watch Sinclair's film. Without a “willing suspension of disbelief” it would be difficult to be open to all the suggestions that the diegeses, which overlap the limits of quotidian reality, offer in the film. The hesitation remains, for sure, but the enchantment created by the characters in the rooms of the mansion, with its intense, saturated, and

² Expression created by S. T. Coleridge, English romantic poet.

vibrant colors in contrast with the cold colors of the winter outside, lead the spectator to a wondrous world, where everything is possible and nothing happens by chance. As concerns the spectators, to appreciate a work of creative imagination like *Silence becomes you*, they are supposed to suspend their disbelief, trusting their eyes to hear and their ears to see, assuming the role of the dreamer bewitched in perplexity.

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