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Greta Garbo and Clarence Brown: An Analysis of their Professional Relationship in the Context of Classical Hollywood Cinema

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Abstract. This article consists of a study of the professional relationship between Greta Garbo and Clarence Brown, her most regular Hollywood director, who directed her in seven feature films—no other filmmaker directed her in more than two—and whom film critics and historians have invariably indicated as her "favourite director". Although in the late twenties and during the first half of the thirties the Garbo-Brown duo was considered the most successful actress-director team of the time, their association is virtually unknown today. Was Brown really, as so often stated, her "favourite director"? What was the reason for Garbo's reluctance to repeat with the same filmmaker more than twice? Why did she allow Brown to direct her in seven films? What was his success in directing her? Was Garbo a technical or instinctive actress? Was she a great performer or simply endowed with a magnificently photogenic face? In order to uncover the answers to these questions, an in-depth chronological analysis has been undertaken of their seven joint films, made over an eleven-year period of collaboration, by consulting a wide range of period and contemporary sources, in addition to an unpublished interview with the director.
Keywords: Greta Garbo; Clarence Brown; direction of actors; acting style; Classical Hollywood Cinema.

[es] Greta Garbo y Clarence Brown: análisis de su relación profesional en el contexto del cine clásico de Hollywood

Resumen. Este artículo consiste en un estudio de la relación profesional de Greta Garbo y Clarence Brown, su realizador más habitual en Hollywood, quien la guio en siete largometrajes —ningún otro cineasta la dirigió en más de dos— y al que la crítica y la historiografía han señalado invariablemente como su "director favorito". Aunque a finales de los años veinte y durante la primera mitad de los años treinta el tándem Garbo-Brown se consideró el equipo más exitoso de actriz y realizador de la época, a día de hoy su asociación es prácticamente desconocida. ¿Fue Brown realmente su "director favorito"? ¿A qué se debió la reticencia de Garbo a repetir más de dos veces con un mismo cineasta? ¿Por qué permitió, en cambio, que Brown la guiará en siete films? ¿Cuál fue su éxito al dirigirla? ¿Era Garbo una actriz técnica o instintiva? ¿Fue una gran intérprete o simplemente un rostro magnífico dotado de una fotogenia excepcional? Para desvelar estos interrogantes, se han analizado de forma cronológica y en profundidad sus siete películas conjuntas, realizadas a lo largo de once años de colaboración, y se han consultado abundantes documentos del periodo y actuales, así como una entrevista inédita con el director.
Palabras clave: Greta Garbo; Clarence Brown; dirección de actores; estilo de actuación; cine clásico de Hollywood.

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1. Introduction

Some of the most authoritative books on Greta Garbo start by apologising for their publication. Barry Paris (2002, p. xi), in *Garbo*, states: "Since 1931, there have been two dozen books on Garbo, plus thousands of magazine and news stories. Why more?"[2] Mark A. Vieira (2005, p. 6) begins *Greta Garbo: A Cinematic Legacy* in a similar vein: "This is a book about Greta Garbo. You are probably wondering what it can say about her that hasn't been said already."

Nevertheless, in this vast amount of printed material,[3] very few texts have addressed the important professional relationship between the star and the filmmaker who was her most regular Hollywood director, the only one who directed her in seven feature films and has always been labelled as her "favourite director": Clarence Brown.

Unlike many stars from Hollywood's Golden Age, Garbo is rarely associated with any particular filmmaker, with the exception of Mauritz Stiller, the man who discovered her in her native Sweden. The reasons for this lack of connection with a specific director were provided by Brown himself, when, quite proudly, he explained: "I made seven pictures with her. Nobody else could make over two" (McGilligan & Weiner, 1975–1976, p. 31). Indeed, Stiller only directed her in Sweden in *Gösta Berlings saga* (1924), her first feature-length film, while Fred Niblo, Edmund Goulding, Jacques Feyder, George Fitzmaurice and George Cukor all directed her twice.[4]

Brown, on the other hand, collaborated with Garbo time and time again, completing seven titles: *Flesh and the Devil* (1926), *A Woman of Affairs* (1928), *Anna Christie* (1930), *Romance* (1930), *Inspiration* (1931), *Anna Karenina* (1935) and *Conquest* (1937). He was also responsible for her first huge success that transformed her into a star: *Flesh and the Devil*. With this film he revealed himself as the first American filmmaker to take her seriously as an actress and star, endowed with a unique personality, and the first who, in close collaboration with cinematographer William Daniels, managed to elicit her potential on screen, contributing towards the

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2 Paris was referring to *The Private Life of Greta Garbo* (Palmborg, 1931), the first biographical book about the star to be published.

3 In the twenty-first century, all manner of articles and academic texts have appeared analysing Garbo's professional and personal history from the most diverse theoretical standpoints, such as feminism, queer theory, and her relationship with Art Deco (cf. Fischer, 2002; Szaloky, 2006; Horak, 2014; Banner, 2016).

4 As will be seen, although Stiller began the Garbo's second American film, *The Temptress* (1926), he was fired and replaced by Fred Niblo. The latter directed her in that film and in *The Mysterious Lady* (1928). Goulding directed her in *Love* (1927) and *Grand Hotel* (1932), Feyder in *The Kiss* (1929) and in the German version of *Anna Christie* (1930), Fitzmaurice in *Mata Hari* (1931) and *As You Desire Me* (1932), and Cukor in *Camille* (1936) and *Two-Faced Woman* (1941), her last film.

creation of her defining image—mysterious, distant and enigmatic—launching her to international stardom and, in the words of Román Gubern (1993, p. 13), transforming her into a transhistorical and transnational legend. Aside from the aforementioned film, Brown also made her delicate transition from silent to sound films with *Anna Christie*, thus securing her place in the medium. Furthermore, according to Richard Koszarski (1977, p. 162), he directed her in almost all of her key films, including, in addition to *Flesh and the Devil* and *Anna Christie*, *A Woman of Affairs* and *Anna Karenina*.

2. Overview, objectives and methodology

From the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, the Garbo-Brown duo was considered the most successful actress-director team of the time ("Cal York", 1931, p. 46; Albert, 1931, pp. 33, 130–131; Howe, 1931, p. 56; Hawkins, 1931, p. 19; Valentine, 1931, p. 18; Jackson, 1932, p. 8; "MGM's", 1935, p. 3; Creelman, 1935, cited in Conway, McGregor, & Ricci, 1980, p. 132). However, over time, their prestige has faded and their partnership is virtually unknown.

The present investigation has arisen precisely to address this oversight. It consists of an analysis of the professional relationship between Garbo and Brown throughout their eleven-year collaboration and seven feature films. Was he, as so often stated, her "favourite director"? What was the reason for Garbo's reluctance to repeat with the same filmmaker more than twice? Why did she allow Brown to direct her in seven films? What was his success in directing her? Was Garbo a technical or instinctive actress? Was she a great performer or simply endowed with a magnificently photogenic face? Such questions, barely addressed in the existing literature, are the object of this work, which focuses specifically on Brown's direction of Garbo and her acting techniques.

To this end, a combined methodology of filmic and historiographic analysis has been employed to study the seven films they made together in chronological order. A wide range of documents have been consulted: the main texts and biographies on Garbo (Palmborg, 1931; Bainbridge, 1955; Billquist, 1960; Zierold, 1969; Payne, 1976; Walker, 1980; Broman, 1992; Swenson, 1997; Paris, 2002; Vieira, 2005); the only two books published about Clarence Brown (Guiralt, 2017; Young, 2018); the analysis of numerous chronicles, interviews and autobiographical sources on both individuals from contemporary newspapers and movie magazines—*Film Weekly, Hollywood Reporter*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Photoplay*, *Picture Play*, *Screenland*, *The Film Spectator*, *The New Movie Magazine*, and *Variety*; as well as an unpublished Clarence Brown interview from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA, where The Clarence Brown Collection can be found (Brown, 1973, pp. 1–3).

3. The silent films: *Flesh and the Devil, A Woman of Affairs*

As stated above, the first Garbo-Brown collaboration came about with *Flesh and the Devil*, which began to take shape in the summer of 1926. It was Brown's first film for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/Loew's, and her third. Nevertheless, this encounter was

on the verge of not happening, since Garbo refused to participate in the production. Furthermore, at the time, MGM were not that concerned about replacing her and terminating her contract, since she was a complete unknown in North America.

Based on the novel *Es war; Roman in zwei Bänden* (1893), by Hermann Sudermann, the film was not intended for Garbo, but as a vehicle for John Gilbert, who was one of Hollywood's biggest stars, earning $10,000 a week. Garbo, a newcomer, was earning $400 per week (Vieira, 2005, pp. 32–33). However, in order to understand her refusal to participate in the film, it is necessary to return to her traumatic arrival at MGM.

When Stiller and Garbo signed with the studio, both took it for granted that he would direct her, but the company separated them and assigned her to *The Torrent* (Monta Bell, 1926). Stiller was chosen to direct her second film, *The Temptress*, but he was fired little more than a month after shooting began and replaced by Fred Niblo. During filming, Garbo received news of her sister's death in Sweden; however, the studio prohibited her from travelling to her country for the funeral. Garbo finished the film feeling profoundly dejected and abandoned. Nevertheless, she was informed that her next film, *Flesh and the Devil*, would begin filming right away, on 9 August. She had to attend the studio immediately, but did not do so. Furthermore, she had not liked the script, nor her character Felicitas, as she was a femme fatale—the same kind of role she had played in her two previous films (Biery, 1928, p. 144). According to Clarence Brown, filming began with him still unaware who would play the female role.[5] Finally, faced with the threat of being fired and deported, she capitulated and took part in filming on 17 August, which proceeded without further interference until 28 September.

Garbo not only felt depressed, but following Stiller's departure, she was terrified. She could hardly express herself in English and was always accompanied by her Swedish interpreter. According to Vieira (2005, p. 31), she had an aversion to people: "She did lose her inhibitions if she allowed herself to know someone, but even then she was formal and wary. She would not trust anyone beyond a certain point."

Speaking of their first meeting on *Flesh and the Devil*, Brown recalled: "Immediately I met her, I thought Garbo charming… and thus I began an association which I prize above almost everything else in my career" (Brown, 1938, p. 48). On another occasion, he declared: "Working with Garbo was easy because she trusted me" (Rimoldi, 1990, p. 451). Undoubtedly, in contrast to her attitude towards others, Garbo instantly trusted him. One might ask why was that; the reasons are numerous (Fig. 1).

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[5] Unpublished interview with Clarence Brown by Kevin Brownlow and Donald Knox in Hollywood, 1969. The Kevin Brownlow Collection, London, UK. A fragment of which is included in the documentary *Garbo* (Brownlow, Bird, & Stanbury, 2005).

Figure 1. Publicity shot of Clarence Brown and Greta Garbo during filming of *Flesh and the Devil* (1926) © The Clarence Brown Collection, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA.

Having worked in the film industry since 1915, before Hollywood established itself as the main centre, Brown had begun his career in Fort Lee, New Jersey, with the highly respected pictorialist French director Maurice Tourneur. From Tourneur he acquired a refined and sophisticated visual style, expert photographic knowledge, and a special knack for cinematic composition. He was imaginative, innovative and an excellent technician, holding two degrees in engineering. He had recently garnered an excellent reputation as an artistic and commercial director, with a series of powerful low-budget melodramas at Universal. His most recent films, produced by Joseph M. Schenck, had been *The Eagle* (1925), attaining Rudolph Valentino's complex return to the screen, and *Kiki* (1926), with Norma Talmadge. He was not a typical director, unlike the vast majority of those hired by MGM. Considering this, it is logical that Garbo respected him.

Nevertheless, his success with Garbo was due to his directorial style. He respected her from the outset, capturing her fragility, insecurity and shyness. Whereas most directors barked instructions at actors through a megaphone, he never shouted at her, nor ordered her around. In fact, nobody else on set could hear what he said; he whispered instructions into her ear. Brown believed Garbo had an inferiority complex due to her lack of English (Brownlow, 1968, p. 146), therefore, she was grateful for his behaviour: "Well, I never embarrassed her in front of another actor or another person. Never. Everything that ever went on between Garbo and myself was under complete secrecy and whispers on the side of the set. And she appreciated that..." (Brown, 1973, p. 2). He also stated: "Greta's main thing was her shyness; a stranger on a set would upset her. I would never do anything aggressive with Garbo; nobody ever knew what directions I gave her..." (Eyman, 1978, p. 21). Thus, he gained her trust.

However, this discreet and quiet manner was habitual in Brown when directing; he always spoke to his actors in a very quiet voice or whispered into their ears. Barbara Kent, who appeared in *Flesh and the Devil*, commented: "Mr. Brown had a style that allowed us to... find our own characters. He was a very quiet man, and would talk to us in the softest voice. He was especially careful with Garbo and would almost whisper his instructions to her" (Vieira, 2005, p. 34). Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., who performed in *A Woman of Affairs*, said: "He directed by the subtlest of suggestions. He never demanded. He just kept going until we got it right" (Swenson, 1997, p. 174).

From their very first collaboration, Brown became fascinated with Garbo and her face projected on the screen (cf. Kingsley, 1926, p. C22). He explained her ability to express emotions in an extremely subtle way, using only her eyes:

> Garbo had something that nobody ever had on the screen. Nobody. I don't know whether she even knew she had it, but she did. And I can explain it in a few words. I would take a scene with Garbo —pretty good. I would take it three or four times. It was pretty good, but I was never quite satisfied. When I saw that same scene on the screen, however, it had something that it just didn't have on the set. Garbo had something behind the eyes that you couldn't see until you photographed it in close-up. You could see thought. If she had to look at one person with jealousy, and another with love, she didn't have to change her expression. You could see it in her eyes as she looked from one to the other. And nobody else has been able to do that on the screen. Garbo did it without the command of the English language (Kevin Brownlow, 1968, p. 146).

His statements are precisely the same as those made by Billy Wilder, co-writer of *Ninotchka* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1939), who endured the drastic measure of being ushered behind a black screen when Garbo caught him watching her whilst working:

> She could not stand being watched when filming. For her, it was like an intrusion into her most intimate secrets, and she had good reasons, because the miracle of Garbo could not be seen during filming, since it was miracle of celluloid. Her face transformed in the movies (Wilder & Karasek, 2000, p. 154).[6]

However, the quality of her performance, her overpowering personality and her photogenecity appeared for the first time in *Flesh and the Devil*. Brown's direction played a major role in Garbo's new way of acting. In fact, his true merit resided in how he got her to lose her inhibitions when acting. He stated: "I would never impose a performance on an actor... If I hire a star at three thousand dollars a week, he's supposed to know something" (Brownlow, 1968, pp. 150–151).[7] His way of directing was to first let his actors represent the scene freely:

> I want everything an actor knows. If it's a woman, she'll know more about playing a woman than I know. I want to get her angle on the picture. So I always rehearse without giving a word of direction. I follow them around, and watch, and listen, and I get their

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[6] The translation is mine.

[7] According to the filmmaker, that was the problem with Ernst Lubitsch. Even though Brown recognised Lubitsch as one of the best directors, in his films all the actors *were* Lubitsch, since he gave them with even the most meticulous instructions on how they should play their roles. And, of course, Lubitsch first performed the scene for them (Brownlow, 1968, pp. 150–151).

> interpretation first. If their interpretation doesn't agree with the one I have in mind, then we begin to talk. A little shading here, a little shading there, a few quiet directions —"Come down… you're going overboard there… that's a little better… that's fine"— and by the time we're through we've got a pretty good scene. (Brownlow, 1968, p. 151).

His statements are identical to those of Barbara Kent and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., and are corroborated by many sources from the time. Grace Kingsley, for example, after visiting the set of *The Eagle*, wrote:

> In directing, his players tell me, he never raises his voice to his actors nor frightens them. If an actor is stumped, he will say, "Never mind, you will get it all right." He never gets in and plays a scene for an actor. He wants each player to do the scene in his own way… (Kingsley, 1925, p. 17).

Thus, in view of the results he achieved with Garbo in *Flesh and the Devil*, it is undeniable that Brown gave her the confidence she so needed to perform her scenes without inhibitions in front of the camera. As, or even more importantly, he gave Garbo the freedom to construe the character of Felicitas according to her own criteria.

Flesh and the Devil was a product of the star system. Nevertheless, it bears the unique mark of its director, while also being an example of an avant-garde film in the style of the sophisticated German productions that were being distributed in the US at the time (Brownlow, 1982, p. 17; Guiralt, 2017, pp. 137–139). Released on 25 December 1926, it caused a furore, becoming a milestone in the history of cinema for its daring eroticism. In fact, it is credited as being one of the first to include love scenes with actors in a horizontal position.[8] In Garbo's performance, it stands out that it is *she* who seduces Gilbert, even by placing herself physically on top of him. In addition, she introduced a new way of kissing to the cinema—which the Hays Office would later ban—that of kissing with the mouth open (Gubern, 1993, pp. 11–12).

The film's success ensured that Brown would continue his collaboration with Garbo, and it was also his first film with William Daniels, with whom he would work on ten other films.[9] It also marked the beginning of the Garbo-Gilbert pairing, who would star together in three more films.

Garbo and Brown's next film was *A Woman of Affairs*, filmed between 27 July and 11 September 1928. In the meantime, Garbo had released *Love*,[10] with John Gilbert, *The Divine Woman* (Victor Sjöström, 1928) and *The Mysterious Lady*, and had increased in status, reaching the top in Hollywood (Banner, 2016, p. 84). During that time, Brown had only made one film: *The Trail of '98* (1928), which became MGM's biggest financial failure to date. After that resounding blow, he communicated to the company his willingness to redirect Garbo and Gilbert. Meanwhile, Garbo had declared her desire to play Iris March, the famous heroine in Michael Arlen's bestseller *The Green Hat* (1924) (Guiralt, 2016, p. 84). Thus, the material was decided immediately, despite the book being among those banned by the Hays Office. With this film, Garbo played her first contemporary role. In addition, Iris, transformed in the film version as Diana Merrick, was the personification of the

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8 As it is known, these scenes benefitted enormously from the real-life romance between Garbo and Gilbert.

9 Daniels photographed a total of twenty of Garbo's twenty-five North American films, and all of Brown's films featuring Garbo, with the exception of *Conquest*.

10 This was her first screen version of Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* (1878).

modern, independent and freethinking woman of the 1920s: a flapper, daring and reckless, albeit English.

Both Alexander Walker (1970, p. 147) and Román Gubern (1993, p. 13) coincide in highlighting Garbo as a Method actress—despite never studying with Konstantin Stanislavski nor attending the Actor's Studio in New York—due to how she employed emotional memory, introspection, and the recollection of her own experiences to build her characters. According to Palmborg (1931, p. 52), Garbo herself confessed "… she knew nothing of the technique of acting. That for the time being she *was* the person in the picture. That she did not know how she got certain effects." For Walker (1970, pp. 147–148), this is especially tangible—even more than in the bedroom scene in *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933)—in the two silent films where she was directed by Clarence Brown. In fact, this style of instinctive and internalised performance, where she seems to live the character completely, to *be* the character, is especially noticeable in *A Woman of Affairs*. This was affirmed by Brown after filming, albeit in other words: "Miss Garbo loved her part. She worked very hard on it, and to me she was the character she portrayed. I was fascinated with her work" ("To Film Sudermann", 1929, p. 112). In later years, the filmmaker openly declared that Garbo was not a technical actress:

> I think she's the greatest artist we have. And I mean artist, not technician as many people suppose. I'd say Garbo knows less about camera tricks than most stars. We have to help her all we can or she'd be turning her back to the camera (Lockhart, 1938, p. 6).

From this, it is clear that Garbo prepared her roles as if she were to perform them on stage before a live audience—after all, her only training had been at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in Stockholm—and that she deeply immersed herself in her characters, forgetting about the camera and other technical paraphernalia, which also explains why she did not want anyone loitering around the set, because the slightest external movement distracted her. According to Brown, Garbo's aversion to people and her strict rule that only the crew that were absolutely necessary be allowed on set increased with the arrival of sound, which coincided with the change from orthochromatic film and intense *klieg* lights, to panchromatic film and *inkies*. The old orthochromatic film required lighting so powerful that it prevented the actors from seeing the rest of the set. However, with the widespread adoption of panchromatic film, the lighting was reduced, so Garbo could now see those on set, which distracted her (Lockhart, 1938, p. 6; Brown, 1973, pp. 1–2, Vieira, 2005, p. 123). From that moment on, she began to further restrict access to her shoots. Brown took pains not to allow anyone on set and installed black screens to prevent Garbo from seeing the crew moving around. If a curious person entered, they would have a screen placed before them, or Garbo would simply stop acting and leave the set.

In *A Woman of Affairs*, there was a total fusion between the star and her character, greatly enhanced by the casual and sports clothes that, with her approval, were designed by Adrian, in what was their first collaboration (Fig. 2). Garbo makes Diana an entirely believable character. Her interpretation is natural, spontaneous and not at all forced. Devoid of provocative looks and seductive poses, it was unlike anything she had ever done before.

Figure 2. Greta Garbo wearing casual and sports clothes for the first time in her career in *A Woman of Affairs* (1928). This was her first collaboration with the costume designer Adrian. From then on, he would be her only costume designer until the end of her career in 1941 (https://www.flickriver.com).

Featuring a song, music and synchronised sound effects, it premiered to great success on 15 December 1928. The critics praised Brown's direction and considered Garbo's performance the most outstanding of her career (cf. Beaton, 1928, pp. 7–8; Rush, 1929, p. 18). The following year, Garbo revealed that *A Woman of Affairs* was the favourite of all her films (Hall, 1929, p. X1).

It was to be Clarence Brown's last fully silent film, whereas Garbo went on to make three more: *Wild Orchids* (Sidney Franklin, 1929), *The Single Standard* (John S. Robertson, 1929) and *The Kiss*.

After *Wild Orchids*, MGM allowed Garbo to travel to Sweden for the first time. Upon arrival, she received journalists on the Kungsholm ocean liner and in answer to the question of which director she liked best, she replied: "After Stiller, I suppose Clarence Brown. He isn't such a strong personality, but he usually gets a good result" (Billquist, 1960, p. 154). In fact, these are practically the only statements where Garbo mentioned that she liked Clarence Brown as a director.[11] The actress never singled him out as her "favourite director". Moreover, if the comment is considered carefully, it can be observed that it is not flattering in the least. In fact, Vieira (2005,

[11] Towards the end of her life, Garbo was asked why she had used the name Harriet Brown for her incognito trips, and whether it had any connection with Clarence Brown. She replied: "No, not at all. I really did like Mr. Brown, but I chose Brown because it is such a common name in America" (Broman, 1992, p. 152). However, the comment was made in retrospect, and was more of a general personal appraisal than a professional one.

p. 74) describe it as faint praise for someone who took great pains to preserve the privacy that she required so much. Bear in mind, what is more, that when Garbo made the comment, they had only made two productions together.

4. The beginnings of sound: *Anna Christie, Romance, Inspiration*

The remarkable understanding that had been characteristic of the collaboration between star and director throughout the silent era began to fall apart with the arrival of sound. With each new film they made together, their relationship became more complex, which undoubtedly had much to do with Garbo's new status as a big star. *Anna Christie* brought out the first disagreements; artistically, the two reached an impasse in *Romance*; while *Inspiration* highlighted their marked differences, which were even reported in the press. Despite everything, Brown virtually always remained loyal to Garbo, both in public and in private.

Anna Christie was one of MGM's most critical productions; the future of their most important star depended on it. When preparations for the film began in August 1929, numerous stars from the silent era had already fallen from grace after disastrous sound debuts. In September, the fall came for John Gilbert. MGM feared that the same could happen to Garbo. For that reason, they delayed her sound debut as long as possible; it was a wise decision, not only because it took advantage of her silent stardom (which could be extinguished in an instant), but also because, in the meantime, the technology was being perfected and she improved her English. In fact, Garbo was the last of Hollywood's biggest stars to venture into sound and *The Kiss* was the last silent film shot by MGM.

That Brown was chosen to direct the film emphasises the enormous confidence that MGM and Garbo had in him to carry out this difficult production. Although the star's most recent contract, signed 30 March 1927, did not give her any authority—yet—over the choice of director, cameraman or script, the company consulted her on every detail of her feature films. She approved Brown as director and Eugene O'Neill's play *Anna Christie* (1921), albeit with reservations. The choice of material was simple: the protagonist, Anna, is of Swedish origin, thus Garbo's accent could be justified.[12]

According to Brown, Garbo hated rehearsing: "She would have preferred to stay away until everyone else was rehearsed, then come in and do the scene. But you can't do that—particularly in talking pictures" (Brownlow, 1968, p. 146). She felt that she gave the best of herself in the first take and that later, in successive attempts, her performance suffered, losing strength and spontaneity.[13] Despite this, all the actors were summoned for a preliminary week of rehearsals, something extremely expensive and highly unusual. Filming began on 14 October, Garbo performed her scenes two days later, and it ended on 18 November.

The story revolves around a prostitute who, having become sick and spending time in jail, travels to New York to meet her seafaring father, who had abandoned her when she was a child. Brown and screenwriter Frances Marion planned Garbo's

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[12] After the arrival of sound, Garbo always played foreign roles in the cinema, for the same reason.

[13] Before long, the press began to mock Garbo's attitude towards rehearsals (cf. Albert, 1931, p. 130).

appearance with great ingenuity, so she is absent from the first fifteen minutes.[14] Finally, she makes her entrance. She knocks on the back door of a bar, the barman opens and she says nothing. She walks across the room, sits down at a table, then utters her first phrase, which became legendary: "Gimme a whiskey, ginger ale on the side, and don't be stingy, baby." When released, this delay caused huge anticipation among the audience, who were burning to know what the star's voice was like. In addition, MGM had worked intensely to build up the moment with a vigorous advertising campaign: "Garbo Talks!"

However, filming these first spoken scenes was complicated. On Saturday 19 October, after three days' work, Garbo went to the studio and had a long argument with Brown about her characterisation. She was unhappy with her introduction in the film, with her performance and, according to Vieira (2005, p. 109), with the director's conception of the Swedish-American character. From the first moment, she had felt that O'Neill's piece portrayed the Swedes settled in North America as stupid and vulgar (Vieira, 2005, p. 105) and it is possible that Brown was following O'Neill's text too closely. In any case, everything shot between 16 and 18 October was destroyed. Filming was postponed until the following Monday, upon which she made a new appearance, using a different wardrobe and performing another style of portrayal, as can be seen by comparing the publicity photographs that were taken during these days (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Greta Garbo's entrance in *Anna Christie* (1930). Left: an image from the first takes of the scene, filmed between 16 and 18 October 1929 and subsequently destroyed. Right: a photograph from the final version of the scene (https://www.flickriver.com).

Although Brown, influenced by a strong sense of loyalty, always claimed that Garbo was not temperamental (Jackson, 1932, p. 8; Lockhart, 1938, p. 6), at other

[14] Lubitsch employed exactly the same narrative strategy at the beginning *Ninotchka*.

times his statements betrayed him. In 1935, for example, after *Anna Karenina*, he said: "She responds very easily to direction, although she will not hesitate to put up a strong argument if she feels differently to her director concerning the way in which she should play a particular scene" (Mooring, 1935, p. 9).

Brown said he had conceded and filmed *Anna Christie* Garbo's way (Hawkins, 1931, p. 20); however, from a technical and visual point of view, the film belongs entirely to the filmmaker. Moreover, the first scene of the film reproduces his silent film *The Goose Woman* (1925). Additionally, it is worth noting that another version was made in German—starring Garbo—with German actors and directed by Jacques Feyder. Nevertheless, from a filmic perspective, the two productions are very different (cf. Guiralt, 2017, p. 168).

Although, viewed today, Garbo's performance in *Anna Christie* may appear overacted in many scenes, this was not how it was received when it premiered on 22 January 1930. Both the public and critics were elated, especially with her voice, which was described in a wide variety of terms: gruff, deep, throaty, husky.[15] It was the highest grossing film distributed by MGM in 1930, with the astonishing total figure of $1,499,000 (Paris, 2002, p. 570), turning Garbo into a sound star overnight.

The success of *Anna Christie* was such that MGM immediately assigned them to work together on *Romance*. Filmed from 17 to 25 March 1930, it was the least accomplished of their seven collaborations (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Clarence Brown directing Greta Garbo and Gavin Gordon in *Romance* (1930). Behind the camera, looking through the viewfinder, is William Daniels, and beside him is assistant director Charles Dorian © The Clarence Brown Collection, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA.

[15] There were also adverse criticisms, especially those which alluded to her "masculine" interpretation (Banner, 2016, p. 101).

Based on the 1913 Edward Sheldon play of the same name about the opera singer Lina Cavalieri, perhaps its most striking aspect was the studio's decision for Garbo to represent an Italian soprano, renamed Rita Cavallini, with the corresponding accent she should give the character. Neither Garbo nor Brown were happy with the result (Palmborg, 1931, p. 253). However, incredible as it may seem, when it was released on 18 July 1930, it was a great commercial success. At this time, both the trade press and the general public overwhelmingly responded positively to any Garbo-Brown creation. Nobert Lusk, for example, appears to forgive all the film's shortcomings in *Picture Play*:

> Hollywood's favorite adjective "marvelous" is the word that first comes to mind on viewing Greta Garbo in "Romance" […] What matter if Garbo's accent only occasionally suggests the Italian's efforts to speak English? […] What matter, too, if the picture as a whole is slow, even draggy, and lacks climaxes? It is nevertheless absorbing because of Garbo… (Lusk, 1930, p. 68).

Indeed, Brown's direction was mechanical and lacked imagination, which was not the case in their next joint work, *Inspiration*, a contemporary interpretation of the autobiographical novel by Alphonse Daudet, *Sapho* (1884), about the novelist's obsession for an older courtesan.

Brown and Garbo's exhaustion and fatigue, having collaborated on five productions in a very short period—the last three in quick succession, and in the case of the filmmaker, consecutive—ended up taking its toll on their professional relationship. *Inspiration* was shot between 15 October and 24 November 1930. Soon after, the press began to talk of confrontations and disputes ("Cal York", 1931, p. 46; Albert, 1931, pp. 33, 130–131; Valentine, 1931, p. 18; Palmborg, 1931, pp. 275–276). In *Photoplay*, Katherine Albert published "Did Brown and Garbo Fight?", where Brown was quoted as saying:

> I would not direct Miss Garbo again under the same conditions, that prevailed during the last picture. We would begin by having a completed script… But for Miss Garbo, personally and as an artist, I have the greatest respect and admiration (Albert, 1931, p. 131).

The article attacked Garbo in a variety of ways, while the filmmaker was reproached for barely directing her:

> … Brown directed her more in that first film [*Flesh and the Devil*] than he has since. […] Brown knows her to be the outstanding woman personality of the screen, and he now lets her play her scenes about as she wants to do them. […] he has made part of his success with her by sitting by, calmly… (Albert, 1931, pp. 130–131).

Regarding the rumours about a direct dispute between the two, something important must have happened because a significant break in their professional relationship ensued, lasting five years, until *Anna Karenina* in 1935. At the time, Brown spoke of an unfinished script as the root of the problems, but later, in an unusual burst of sincerity, he said of their separation: "My principal objection to continuing at the time was that she wouldn't learn the English language. I was kept so busy teaching her, we had no time left for histrionics" (Scheuer, 1935, p. A1).

Nevertheless, none of this tension transferred to the resulting film. Brown's direction is very creative and ahead of its time (sequence shots, subjective camera movements, extreme long takes with camera movement) and Garbo is totally believable as Ivonne—a role that clearly anticipates her portrayal in *Camille*, which is generally considered to be her most refined screen performance.[16] The film premiered on 31 January 1931. On this occasion, the criticism was unfavourable. However, like all her feature films, it was a hit at the box office.

During their years of separation, Brown discovered Clark Gable in *A Free Soul* (1931), made extremely profitable films for the studio, such as *Emma* (1932), and devoted himself, above all, to directing Joan Crawford.[17] For her part, Garbo starred in *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1931), *Mata Hari*, *Grand Hotel* and *As You Desire Me*, which all made a profit, despite not being great artistic triumphs.

After *As You Desire Me*, Garbo's contract expired. On 8 July 1932, she signed a new agreement with MGM for two films. This gave her an enormous amount of control over her films, a very high salary—at the rate of $250,000 per feature film—and, for the first time, official power to choose the story, the director, and four of the main actors (Paris, 2002, pp. 284–285; Vieira, 2005, p. 174).

The first project she made—a highly personal film—was *Queen Christina*. On 29 March 1933, Louis B. Mayer, vice president and general manager of the company, offered Robert Z. Leonard and Edmund Goulding as directors. Twenty-four hours later she cabled "Goulding. Regards. Garbo" (Paris, 2002, p. 294). The following day, the magnate informed her it was possible to get Lubitsch, who was linked to Paramount. On 1 April Garbo answered: "Prefer Lubitsch. Also happy for Goulding" (Eyman, 2000, p. 265; Paris, 2002, p. 294). Neither Lubitsch nor Goulding could take charge of the production, so Mayer then proposed Clarence Brown, Rouben Mamoulian and Josef von Sternberg; Garbo chose Mamoulian. In parallel, from 1929 she had made MGM aware of her desire to be directed by a true artist, citing only Erich von Stroheim[18] and Lubitsch (Hall, 1929, p. X1; Eyman, 2000, p. 265; Guiralt, 2017, p. 35).

After *Queen Christina*, Garbo starred in *The Painted Veil* (Richard Boleslawski, 1934) and then, under a new contract similar to the previous one, *Anna Karenina*. Nevertheless, even then Brown was not chosen as director, with George Cukor being selected initially.

5. Their final films: *Anna Karenina, Conquest*

Filmed between 25 March and 14 May 1935, *Anna Karenina* was a difficult venture given that, since July of the previous year, the Production Code Administration (PCA) had been rigorously applying the old 1930 self-censorship regulations—the Motion Picture Production Code—and it was well known that the central theme of Tolstoy's novel is adultery. The PCA's restrictions were substantial. Among them,

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16 Even Clarence Brown himself considered this to be true (Lockhart, 1938, p. 6).

17 Brown is known for being Greta Garbo's director, but he actually directed Joan Crawford on the same number of occasions, and Clark Gable nine times.

18 Although Garbo never managed to be directed by Stroheim, she did succeed in having him included in the cast for *As You Desire Me*, against the wishes of MGM.

they demanded that references to the illegitimate daughter of Anna and Vronsky be eliminated, the inclusion of continual condemnation of their illicit relationship from the other characters, and the removal of scenes where they were shown as happy or romantic, since they were required to be depicted in constant suffering. The constraints were so numerous and substantial that David O'Selznick, the producer, went as far as to state: "I challenge anyone to demonstrate to me how the picture can be made" (Black, 1994, p. 210). In fact, they were the reason behind George Cukor's departure, who became disillusioned with the project.

Surprisingly, Garbo then suggested Clarence Brown. He was immersed in preparing an autobiographical film of great personal importance, *Ah, Wilderness!* (1935), which was to be his first attempt at the Americana genre. Nevertheless, upon being summoned, he accepted (or was made to accept) and postponed his film.

Selznick was extremely pleased with Brown's direction and how he brushed aside the impediments of self-censorship, writing: "The direction of Clarence Brown is, in my opinion as a producer, masterly, and whatever fine qualities the picture has are largely attributable to his work" (Behlmer, 1981, p. 80).

The director also gave the star one of the most mythical entrances in the history of cinema: Garbo, as Anna, emerges from a cloud of steam at the Moscow train station (Fig. 5). Her entrance—a ghostly portent of her tragic demise—has been copied on numerous occasions throughout the history of cinema: in 1948, Julien Duvivier had no reservations about incorporating it in the British version of *Anna Karenina*, starring Vivien Leigh; Elia Kazan confessed that he had deliberately plagiarised the idea for the entrance of Blanche Dubois (Vivien Leigh) in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) (Kazan, 1988, p. 384); and, although Billy Wilder did not reference the scene, its mark can be observed in Sugar's (Marilyn Monroe) entrance in *Some Like It Hot* (1959).[19]

Figure 5. Greta Garbo's ghostly entrance in *Anna Karenina* (1935), a scene which has been copied numerous times throughout the history of cinema © Turner Entertainment Co. and Warner Bros. Entertainment.

Garbo's performance in *Anna Karenina* is one of the subtlest and most delicate in her career, on par with that she would give the following year in *Camille*. As

[19] Prior to all of these, Brown had already reproduced it in his film *The White Cliffs of Dover* (1944).

Brown pointed out, with the faintest facial movements—sometimes just by slightly raising her eyebrows—and with the mere expression of her eyes, she manages to convey the intense range of emotions her character experiences throughout the film. According to Vieira (cited in Brownlow, Bird, & Stanbury, 2005), she knew that the camera would exaggerate her movements and, consequently, minimised them as far as possible. Likewise, in the last third of the film, she perfectly expresses the depiction of a transformed, jealous and irritable woman who, despite her great beauty, has even made her lover tire of her.

The film had its world premiere on 30 August 1935. It obtained mixed criticism, but was an incredible commercial success.[20] It was judged to be Garbo's best performance in many years and she was awarded the New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Actress in 1935.

Despite the film's success, and that the relationship between star and director seemed to have fully recovered, Garbo again chose George Cukor to direct *Camille*.[21] After the triumphs of *Anna Karenina* and *Camille*, another period film for the star was immediately set in motion: *Conquest*, about Napoleon's illicit love affairs with the Polish Countess Marie Walewska.

Queen Christina, *The Painted Veil*, *Anna Karenina* and *Camille*, orchestrated by the screenwriter Salka Viertel, a close friend of the actress, had all been very expensive films with high production values. According to Walker (1970, pp. 149–150), these ostentatious, principally historical, films led to Garbo becoming distanced from her audience, specifically, from American viewers. In fact, they grossed most money in Europe. With the start of the Second World War and the loss of the foreign market, this situation would bring about the end of her career.

Despite this, *Conquest* would surpass them all in scale, splendour and budget—which led to its resounding failure. It cost more than any other film filmed by MGM in the sound era: $2,732,000. Even though it grossed a substantial $2,141,000 dollars (mostly from abroad), it made a loss of $1,397,000, achieving the status of the biggest flop in the studio's history (Guiralt, 2017, pp. 236–237).

According to Brown, the appeal of the project was the combination of Garbo and Napoleon (Lockhart, 1938, p. 7) (Fig. 6). However, his conception of a grandiose epic, designed to go down in history, led him to meet with one of his greatest failures. It is too colossal and lavish, full of dances and receptions in gigantic halls, where the star is obscured by the immense sets. In addition, Garbo appears excessively thin, languid and weary throughout the film. Nor is she convincing at the beginning: supposedly playing the part of an eighteen-year-old, she resembles her real-life age of thirty-two (or even older). Subsequently, the plot moves forward considerably in time, but neither her appearance nor her portrayal alter in the least. In *Conquest*, she was not photographed by William Daniels, but Karl Freund. This may have influenced the way she appeared on screen, but not her performance, which is notable for its lack of imagination. In turn, this problem owes much to the script as the dramatic construction of Marie Walewska is so flat. Garbo portrays her as being overly submissive, passive, and devoted to Napoleon that the character lacks any appeal throughout the entire film.

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[20] It was Garbo's biggest grossing film since *Anna Christie*, surpassing it by two million dollars (Paris, 2002, p. 572; Vieira, 2005, p. 216).

[21] Cukor's prevalence was twofold, since he was offered the possibility to choose between *Camille* and *Conquest* (Vieira, 2005, p. 218).

Figure 6. Clarence Brown directing Greta Garbo and Charles Boyer in Conquest (1937). Next to Brown, standing, is the cinematographer Karl Freund (https://www.flickriver.com).

It was released on 22 October 1937; this time the critics showed no mercy. In *The New Yorker*, John Mosher, referring to Charles Boyer's portrayal of Napoleon, said: "I think that for the first time Madame Garbo has a leading man who contributes more to the interest and vitality of the film than she does. She is, we may assume, grateful for such assistance" (cited in Conway, McGregor, & Ricci, 1980, p. 142). While Frank S. Nugent (1937, p. 19), in the *New York Times*, said: "Miss Garbo's Marie Walewska is a creature built upon illogic." It was the first time her performance received no praise.

Brown was criticised, above all, for his non-existent direction of Garbo, a criticism that had hovered over his work since the start of the sound period (see Albert, 1931, pp. 130–131). Subsequent critics and film historians have surmised that he left her to wander through the film as she pleased, without offering any kind of direction, as at this point in their collaboration Brown was completely fascinated by her. In truth, a more realistic explanation is that the filmmaker was not in the least bit interested in *Conquest,* nor in continuing to direct Garbo, given that his filmography had veered towards the Americana genre, which would later give him his greatest successes.[22] The film's scriptwriter, Salka Viertel, corroborated this:

> During the whole of *Anna Karenina* Clarence Brown could not have nicer to work with. (…) he was inventive on the stage, an excellent technician and competent in handling the actors. Napoleon and Marie went much against his grain, and we had to fight on two fronts. The one was Bernie [Hyman]'s sentimentality… The second was Brown's disgruntled obstructionism against the screenplay (Viertel, 2019, pp. 215–216).

[22] Among them: *The Human Comedy* (1943), *National Velvet* (1944) and *The Yearling* (1946).

In view of the artistic and financial failure of *Conquest*, it was to be their last collaboration and the last Garbo film MGM would produce on a grand scale. The actress only starred in two more feature films: *Ninotchka*, which was a modest success, and *Two-Faced Woman*, for which she received the most scathing criticisms in her career.

Despite having directed *Conquest* almost against his will, and without any enthusiasm, Brown declared that he wanted to direct Garbo again—naturally, in a film in the Americana vein, to which MGM flatly refused. In 1938, he declared to the British magazine *Film Weekly*: "But there is one story Garbo and I both want to do. It's called 'A Woman of Spain.' The heroine rides over the mountains from Mexico on a mule, and is just a sturdy pioneer woman until she falls in love with a sailor" (Lockhart, 1938, p. 7). After which, he very frankly stated: "They won't let us make it. They say Garbo must always be glamorous" (Lockhart, 1938, p. 7).

In the same interview, he explained his long and recurrent professional relationship with the actress in very simple terms: "Miss Garbo doesn't like strangers around" (Lockhart, 1938, p. 6). For him, that was all.

6. Conclusions

Having thus studied the professional relationship between Greta Garbo and Clarence Brown, there appears to be no indication that the filmmaker was her "favourite director". The proclamation was invented by the fan magazines of the period and echoed by subsequent film historians, but it is not consistent with the facts. It is true that Garbo stated she liked Brown as a director—if this were not so, their ongoing collaboration would be incomprehensible—but she said it hesitantly, and only once during their association, when they had only worked together on two films. Subsequently, the star enjoyed a high degree of control over her productions, very rarely choosing Brown as the first option. As previously mentioned, in 1933, for the film *Queen Christina*, she initially picked Ernst Lubitsch or Edmund Goulding and, given the impossibility of either, opted for Rouben Mamoulian, even though Brown was also offered as director; in *Anna Karenina*, she decided on George Cukor, electing Brown only when the former left the production; and later, she let Cukor choose between *Camille* and *Conquest*, an option she did not give Brown. It is thus confirmed that her preferences leaned towards Lubitsch, Cukor and Goulding (probably in that order). In addition, it should be remembered that she alluded on several occasions to Erich von Stroheim and Lubitsch as true artists—a term she never used when referring to Brown.

Therefore, the filmmaker's continued collaboration with Garbo can be explained by the simple reason he gave to *Film Weekly*. On the other hand, the star's apparent refusal to work with the same director more than twice was not really the case; the fact was that her favourite directors could not always assume direction of her films. Furthermore, it can also be understood why she repeated the same names—Stroheim, Lubitsch, Cukor and Goulding—since she was unwilling to work with strangers. Thus, that Brown directed her on seven occasions was partly due to the lack of availability of others; however, her choice undoubtedly owed much to the extraordinary sense of security he gave her. Consequently, it would be more accurate to highlight Brown as her most trusted director: someone she knew she could always

rely on when others failed. Furthermore, there is no doubt that Garbo valued the privacy Brown gave her, and his respectful and discreet conduct when directing her, through whispers, without correcting or embarrassing her in public, which fostered their collaboration.

Brown's success in directing her, therefore, can be attributed to two aspects, the personal and the professional. Regarding the first, his deep knowledge of Garbo the person is what stands out. He instantly recognised her self-conscious and withdrawn nature, understanding he must treat her with special care. Although this was his usual way of directing, he accentuated it for Garbo. Thanks to this, and the intimate atmosphere on his sets, he inspired her with the confidence necessary to become uninhibited in front of the camera for the first time. In terms of the professional aspect, although she was virtually unknown in 1926, he instantly recognised her extraordinary potential, her magnetism, her photogenicity—by all accounts, magnified when captured on celluloid—and her immense capacity as a performer. Hence, he gave her a great deal of freedom to develop her characters and build her roles according to her own criteria and intuition, with minimal interference.

As for her acting techniques, Garbo has been shown to be a highly emotional and instinctive actress. Finally, in answer to the initial question of whether Garbo was a great performer or simply endowed with a rare and magnificently photogenic face, while there is no doubt about the latter, her seven feature films with Brown reveal inconsistencies in her performance—virtually always coinciding with the periods when the professional understanding between star and director was at a low point—which are apparent in *Anna Christie*, *Romance,* and especially *Conquest*. Notwithstanding, her performances in *Flesh and the Devil*, *A Woman of Affairs* and *Anna Karenina* are clearly among the most outstanding of her career, and, moreover, constitute some of the best films by their director.

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