



The Influence of Feminism in the Construction of Female Characters in Greta Gerwig's Filmography

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Abstract. For a long period of time, female characters were not able to have their own voice to tell their stories, because of this, women in the film industry decided to create a space where the story is told by and for the understanding of women. This paper aims to analyze the influence of feminism in the construction of female characters throughout Greta Gerwig's filmography. To develop it, a qualitative methodology was used through interviews conducted with feminists who watched *Lady Bird* (2017), *Little Women* (2019) and *Barbie* (2023), films directed by Greta Gerwig. In the same way, a content analysis of the aforementioned films was applied. Said analysis was carried out through matrices belonging to the aesthetic and ethical dimension with the purpose of distinguishing visual, narrative and discursive elements corresponding to the female characters. Thus, it was concluded that Gerwig's filmography addresses aspects pertaining to feminism that were seen not only in the themes of the films, but also in the visual and ethical construction of the female characters.

Keywords: Cinematography; ethics; aesthetics; feminism; women.

1 Introduction

Throughout the years, cinema has served as a means of communication to entertain and educate [1]. Since its beginnings, it has been defined as an art that processes several frames in a cinematographic way. This is the reason why today it is considered the seventh art [2]. Likewise, it is important to recognize that the media have a tacit power; they teach and reproduce models created according to social norms. Therefore, they portray the sociocultural norms that are considered appropriate. del Barrio [3] indicates and recognizes that, through the media, a vision of society is presented that is plagued and grounded in stereotypes and idealizations. Thus, due to the massification of the media, these unrealistic messages reach millions of people and build a standardized perception of what is considered "normal" or "desirable".

For Castejón [4], it is essential that the "filmic representation of female characters" (p. 306) has a socio-cultural relevance, because although it has served to make visible issues that have not been treated much, it has also maintained the stereotypical role of women in society. According to Martínez-Salanova [1], it is important to interpret the discourses and messages that films try to communicate from the elements that compose

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them, which add depth and complexity not only to the film narrative [2], but also to the characters.

1.1 Character and aesthetics

According to Pérez-Rufí [5], the character emerges as a three-dimensional narrative unit (physical, social and psychological) and, like action and conflict, forms a major part of the film narrative. Galán [6] classifies the construct of a character in three main axes: presence, situation and action. Thus, the author explains that, in presence, everything related to the image is evaluated (height, hair color, physical complexion, clothing, hairstyle, habits, etc.); in situation, the context (setting and time) is examined; and in action, a distinction is made between those actions that are physically performed and those that are manifested in the thoughts of the characters.

Aesthetics is expressly visualized in the physiognomy, that is, the physical appearance of the character [5,7], the clothing, the props, the accessories, the metamorphosis or change of appearance and the condition (whether human, supernatural or animal) [7]. Each has an implicit but crucial role in the filmic construction. Appearance constitutes an identity support for the character, since a particularity, defect, quality or disease can have a symbolic charge and, therefore, influence the character's behavior. According to Vegas [8], art direction plays a key role in the visual treatment, since it is in charge of categories such as colorimetry, costumes, characterization of the characters, among others, and provides a graphic identity to the filmic discourse. Martin [9] specifies that, regarding costumes or clothing, it is important to know their typology, which can be: realistic, pararealistic or symbolic. These vary according to their period and, depending on their use, they can provide a certain symbolic charge. Because of this, it is possible to segregate the visual treatment according to their functions (mimetic, artifice, expressive-dramatic, symbolic, atmospheric and aesthetic-plastic) to recognize the aesthetics used [10].

1.2 Character and ethics

According to Gabriel [11], in order to understand ethics, it is first necessary to understand that people live conditioned to moral facts. That is, we live with the constant demand to evaluate our actions insofar as they affect ourselves and/or others. In the construction of a character, its role as a person is taken into consideration and, from the ethical point of view, the necessary requirement of an individual is autonomy, which supports a behavior based on authenticity [12], freedom and respect [11-13].

The relationship between ethics and feminism are undeniable, since both are born of a process of transformation [14]. The ethical-feminist foundation defends the emancipation of women and questions the irregularity in the moral status of women, such as denying them recognition as autonomous subjects. Díaz [15] explains that denying this autonomy not only conditions women to be "passive" subjects, but also subordinates them and maintains them in a state of dependency.

Thus, from a gender approach, feminist ethics evaluates patriarchal conceptions such as naturalized inferiority or "faults of being" [16], a concept proposed by Aristotle that is used to justify sexist discourses and negatively differentiate the masculine from the feminine.

1.3 Feminism and women in film

Feminism as a movement seeks the inclusion of women in society taking into account an equal participation and visibility in the political, labor, economic and social spheres [17]. Saints & Stiegwardt [18] not only recognize the importance of women in society, but also point to patriarchy as the cause of their oppression and limitation. Thus, the authors define it as "a form of thought, action and permissions that undoubtedly sectioned and restricted the freedom of expression and the presence of women throughout centuries and even millennia" (p. 30).

According to Jenkins [19], the underrepresentation of women is identifiable not only by the way they are categorized within the film world, but also by their low participation and visibility in the industry. The same problem occurs with the roles of women on screen, who are not usually placed in positions of power, but are relegated to religious, domestic and emotionally centered roles [20]. This coincides with the concept of man as "the Subject" and woman as "the Other", De Beauvoir's theory that exposes and explains the difference between the perception of masculinity (commonly related to the universal) and femininity (associated with the secondary) [15]. According to Castro & Bronfman [21], this association is due to the social construction of women as a being close to "nature" due to their reproductive capacity, which is why they are pigeonholed in a secondary position. This differentiation is a common struggle and frustration for women [22] and is reflected in media content, which perpetuates these types of patterns and stereotypes [23].

For García [24], these facts are classified as symbolic violence, a presentation of violence within fiction, where women are pigeonholed into unrealistic gender roles and unreliable archetypes, such as the "good woman" or the "misguided woman". Feminist theory explains that these stereotypes not only contain norms and expectations, but also justify a power structure that shapes the foundations of the society in which we live [25].

Despite this, Greta Gerwig's filmography is part of a catalog of directors who have empowered their female characters. Gerwig's vision is closely linked to the interiority of her authorship [26], as she presents women who were not created solely to support male characters [4], but who have goals, dreams and ambitions. With this, the debate on gender representation and equality in cinema is expanded, and, although it is necessary to recognize that there are still contemporary productions and films that continue to normalize macho attitudes and stereotype their characters, there are also significant advances on the position of women in this industry [27]. Thus, the aim is to analyze how feminism influences the aesthetic and ethical construction of female characters in Greta Gerwig's filmography.

2 Methodology

The present research is of a basic and descriptive type, because it analyzes the impact of the feminist movement in the filmography and construction of female characters directed by Greta Gerwig. This type of research corresponds to a narrative design [28], through which two dimensions were analyzed: aesthetics and ethics. The aesthetic dimension allowed a detailed analysis of the art direction concerning the selected characters; and the ethical dimension, to explore the development, values and

objectives of these characters. Due to these analyzed dimensions, it was possible to have a greater approximation to the transformation arcs and feminist messages of the female characters.

For the development of this work, the qualitative approach was applied, thus deepening the understanding of the objects of study [29]. This aims to define and group different perspectives or experiences of reality under a social, political or historical context [28, 30] to explore a problem that requires a deeper and more complex understanding of a group of people [30]. Through this approach, qualitative data are collected to describe situations, events, among others, for subsequent interpretation [28]. In this case, the research proposes the following research objectives:

General objective

- To analyze the influence of feminism in the construction of female characters in Greta Gerwig's filmography.

Specific objectives

- To identify the aesthetic dimension in the construction of female characters in Greta Gerwig's filmography.
- To describe the ethical dimension in the construction of female characters in Greta Gerwig's filmography.

To obtain the necessary data, it was decided to perform a content analysis of the films that Greta Gerwig has directed to date. Thus, a sample of 9 female characters analyzed in 15 main sequences was selected, drawn from *Lady Bird* (2017), *Little Women* (2019) and *Barbie* (2023), which were selected due to their prominence and level of importance in the narrative of the films, as well as their female representation within the films.

The female characters selected were as follows:

- Christine "Lady Bird" McPherson, main character in *Lady Bird* (2017).
- Marion McPherson, mother of Christine, main character in *Lady Bird* (2017).
- Jo March, main character of *Little Women* (2019).
- Amy March, supporting character in *Little Women* (2019).
- Aunt March, supporting character from *Little Women* (2019).
- Margaret March, supporting character from *Little Women* (2019).
- Barbie, main character from *Barbie* (2023).
- Gloria, secondary character from *Barbie* (2023).
- Sasha, secondary character of *Barbie* (2023).

Likewise, the following sequences were selected:

Barbie:

- Sequence 1: Party in Barbieland (00:11:00 - 00:14:20).
Barbie's and Ken's enjoy a routine party they have every night in Barbieland. As the night progresses, Barbie has a question related to death, a concept that does not fit with the reality in which they live.

- Sequence 2: Visiting Weird Barbie (00:19:21 - 00:24:23)
Barbie consults Weird Barbie about her "malfunction"; however, when she hears that she must go to the real world to fix it, she is forced to accept responsibility.
- Sequence 3: Back to Barbieland (00:55:57 - 1:16:00).
Barbie returns to Barbieland, but, seeing that the patriarchy has established itself in her world, she gives up. It is thanks to Gloria's help that she pulls herself together and gets ready to take back her home.
- Sequence 4: Taking Back Barbieland (01:32:00 - 1:39:00)
Barbie is confused about what role she should play now that Barbieland has been reclaimed. However, after talking to Ken, she realizes that they are both much more than what is expected of them.
- Sequence 5: Barbie Becomes Human (01:41:00 - 1:45:29)
Barbie tells Ruth Handler, creator of the Barbie doll, of her desire to become human. Ruth warns her of the responsibility that this entails and, after a brief conversation, her wish comes true.

Little Women:

- Sequence 1: Reading Day (00:34:00 - 0:37:00).
Jo reluctantly reads a book to her Aunt March. The aunt, noticing this, hints that if Jo behaves well she might take her to Europe. During their conversation, Jo makes explicit her idea of making a name for herself as a writer.
- Sequence 2: Money and Marriage (01:03:00 - 1:07:00).
Meg, fed up with people feeling sorry for her and, in the middle of a conversation with her husband, expresses to him how difficult the economic situation they are in is for her.
- Sequence 3: Haircut (01:10:11 - 01:13:35)
Jo gives money to her mother to travel to help her sick father. Shortly after, she reveals without much significance that she sold all her hair. As night falls, Amy, her sister, comforts her as she cries over it.
- Sequence 4: Laurie's Return (01:40:00 - 1:45:00)
Jo ponders the idea of returning to writing; however, upon hearing that Laurie is returning, she reflects for a while on the marriage proposal he made to her that she turned down.
- Sequence 5: Jo negotiates with Mr. Dashwood (02:01:48 - 02:06:27)
Jo and Mr. Dashwood negotiate payment and the fate of Jo's book. At first, she refuses the proposed changes; however, shortly thereafter, she makes it clear that in exchange for meeting one of the publisher's conditions, the publisher must also give in financially.

Lady Bird:

- Sequence 1: Danny goes to the coffee shop (00:44:12 - 00:46:28).
Lady Bird and her ex talk at the back door of her work. He mentions that Marion, his mother, is scary, to which she defends her and mentions that she is a kind woman.
- Sequence 2: The Prom Dress (1:07:00 - 1:09:00)

Lady Bird wants to find the perfect dress for her prom. Accompanied by her mother, she tries on various designs and colors until she finds a coral colored one. She decides on that one until Marion makes a comment that hurts her.

- Sequence 3: Prom Night (1:09:00 - 1:14:00)
Lady Bird is anxious about her prom. However, her date's comments and other plans make her decide to break away from them to find her best friend, Julie.
- Sequence 3: Lady Bird apologizes to her mother (01:15:00 - 01:16:20)
Marion discovers that Lady Bird applied to several private colleges behind her back. She knows she hurt her mother's feelings and accepts that she could have acted better, so she apologizes repeatedly to her mother's silence.
- Sequence 5: Lady Bird at college (01:22:00 - 01:29:00)
Lady Bird finally leaves her hometown and goes to college. During her stay, she realizes that nothing is as she idealized it, despite having obtained the autonomy she so desired.

In the same way, the semi-structured interview technique was applied in order to obtain data that could add and/or contrast the findings obtained from the content analysis. The instrument used was the questionnaire, which was applied in a limited sample of 7 women who met the following characteristics [30]:

1. They are all feminists. They may belong to an NGO or be independent.
2. The interviewees must have seen *Lady Bird* (2017), *Little Women* (2019) and *Barbie* (2023), films directed by Greta Gerwig.

Based on these characteristics, the following sample was obtained:

- Catherin Joyo, feminist belonging to the NGO Kuisqa (CJ/Kuisqa).
- Gianela Pinto, independent feminist (GP/Independent).
- Marycruz Huamani, feminist belonging to the NGO Warmi Kuyay (MH/Warmi Kuyay).
- Alejandra Bermejo, independent feminist and film critic (AB/Independent).
- Carol Hernández, independent feminist (CH/Independent).
- Mary Sue, feminist belonging to the NGO Voces Violeta (MS/Voces Violeta).
- Monserrat Rivera, feminist belonging to the NGO Manuela Ramos (MR/Manuela Ramos).

Both the matrices and the question script were validated by experts. All interviews were conducted using the Zoom application between October and November 2023. After reviewing the 15 sequences, the data presented in the tables were compiled, for a total of 30 matrices: 15 for the aesthetic matrix and 15 for the ethical matrix. This information, in turn, was interpreted and organized in a table of findings in order to synthesize the data. Parallel to this, the in-depth interviews were conducted, which is why the participants were given the necessary time to elaborate on their answers. In the same way, some questions were rephrased and examples were requested to validate their answers in order to obtain more information. After this, the data were transcribed and coded. Finally, the information obtained was used to answer the research questions [31].

The analysis of the dimensions was carried out following the categories presented in Table 1. For the elaboration of the matrices, the base previously created by Monleón [7] was used as a reference.

Table 1. Categories, dimensions and indicators for content analysis.

Category	Dimensions	Indicators
Character construction [5]	Aesthetics [7]	Physiognomy [5, 7]
		Characterization [5, 8, 9]
		Color [5, 7, 8, 10]
		Condition [7]
	Ethics [7]	Narrative approach: beginning, middle and end [5-7]
		Discursive approach: message, perspective, and tone [5]

Source: Own elaboration

3 Results

3.1 Aesthetics in Gerwig's filmography

In the first place, *Lady Bird*, *Little Women* and *Barbie* presented different aesthetic proposals in terms of color, costumes and makeup. However, in almost all the sequences analyzed, the physiognomy and condition of the characters remained similar. On the one hand, physiognomy reaffirmed the use of stereotypical bodies and physical characteristics, with "snub nose", "full lips" and "slender body" being the aspects most frequently visualized in the female characters. "It's a hegemonic, European, white beauty. There is a norm that is being fulfilled" (CH/Independent). Despite this, the films do not focus much on this aspect, as they show more interest in the character's self-discovery than in her appearance. "They are not characters one hundred percent outside the hegemony, but neither could I say that they are looking to set a trend or affiliate themselves to a beauty trend" (AB/Independent). On the other hand, the age conditions that were most repeated in the characters were "adolescent" and "young", which is related to the physiognomy and the way in which young women tend to be expected to fit the canons of beauty that society imposes.

Regarding characterization, not all films had the same type of costumes. In *Lady Bird*, the most used costumes belonged to the "realistic" and "symbolic" categories.

This tells us that the clothes worn by the female characters serve to bring us into the everyday life of both mother and daughter and, in turn, generate a closeness with the story of both (MS/Voces Violetas). In the same way, the selection of their clothes and the way they wear them contributes a certain symbolic charge to the narrative, as they present more private aspects of their lives, such as their profession, personality, etc. An example of this is Marion, the mother, who at times is seen wearing her work uniform, or Christine "Lady Bird", the daughter, who usually wears looser clothes and presents more "masculine" characteristics (AB/Independent).

Different is the costume in *Little Women*, which belongs to the "pararealistic" category with the purpose of locating the characters in a certain time and place. Despite the similarity of the dresses worn by the March sisters, the wardrobe manages to mark characteristics of each one's personality (MH/Wasi Kuyay). Thus, the art direction manages to visibly differentiate Jo March, the eldest of the sisters, with a wardrobe "less detailed, with less lace, less flowers, or less things that are classically feminine" (AB/Independent).

On the other hand, the most used costume categories in *Barbie* were "symbolic" and "pararealistic". This combination arises because the costumes seek to create an aesthetic of their own in Barbieland, characterized by the use of dresses and garments with striking patterns. Because of this, when the humans, Gloria and Sasha, enter Barbieland, their wardrobe adapts to this new context. Another aspect that was taken into account as part of the characterization was makeup and hairstyle. These aesthetic aspects varied depending on the sequence and the film. However, the most used category was "simple". With this, female characters who seek to be real and free are presented.

Finally, color played an important role in the films' narrative. Its use not only allowed us to give a different aesthetic to each film, but also gave visibility to different themes for each character (GP/Independent):

In *Little Women*, a color palette of earthy and dark tones was used, which, in one way or another, provides a more classic and homely aesthetic. In the film, the colors that stand out the most are blue, brown, black and beige. They serve a symbolic function throughout the film and have different meanings for each character: Meg left the light and intense colors for darker ones as an indicator of her growth, maturity and economic situation, while Jo constantly clings to blue, a color that represents her determination and desire for freedom.

In the case of *Lady Bird*, the color palette was divided into locations and characters. Dark tones were used for the setting of the scenery, and warmer tones for the characters, as everything happens through their actions. In the film, two important colors are identified: coral and blue. For *Lady Bird*, coral represents her adolescence and her yearnings; and for Marion, blue symbolizes the authority and maturity she enjoys.

In *Barbie*, different proposals were used to differentiate Barbieland from the Real World. Barbieland had a color palette with different shades of pastel colors, while in the Real World darker and grayish colors were used. This dichotomy between the two color palettes served an expressive and symbolic function, as it not only separated the two worlds visually, but also developed Barbie's construction in very different ways. Thus, a progression was distinguished in the wardrobe of Barbie and Sasha, who gradually left their identity colors to represent identity crisis and acceptance, respectively.

3.2 Ethics in Gerwig's filmography

Although the three films have different aesthetics, the ethics in all of them are similar: the female characters want to be free. Narratively, we took into account the role changes of the characters and, although they occur at different times, they all go through one. In *Little Women*, the character who had the most role changes was Jo March, who spent most of the film questioning herself and the decisions she made; in *Lady Bird*, it was Christine, who had to deal with several disappointments; and in *Barbie*, it was the Stereotypical Barbie, who upon meeting the Real World realizes that nothing is as she imagined. In one way or another, all the protagonists go through an arc of transformation that is not proposed as a kind of "punishment", but as a form of self-knowledge (AB/Independent).

In the narrative approach, not all sequences end under the category "empowerment" or "gaining autonomy". In fact, most of them fit under the category "irrelevant ending". However, this change in the female characters is noticeable if one compares the opening and closing sequences of the films. Thus, it was observed that in the final sequences, Jo is hopeful, *Lady Bird* is in a process of coming to terms with herself and her mother, and Barbara, formerly known as Barbie, manages to feel comfortable being her.

In terms of discursive approach, all the female characters were candid in talking about their experiences as women. Despite the different contexts and times in which the films take place, the speeches of all the characters were made from the collective questioning and from a gender approach that varied between positive, negative and neutral tones: in *Little Women*, the sisters talk about the inequality in conditions between men and women; in *Lady Bird*, they delve into the relationship with mothers and the idealization of certain moments of life; and in *Barbie*, they make visible the never feeling enough and the contradiction in gender roles (MH/Warmi Kuyay). In the same way, other discourses such as the family, the relationship of women with others (GP/Independent), everyday life (MS/Voces Violeta), liberation and autonomy (CJ/Kusisqa) are also addressed. These discourses, although made from a social perspective, also have a political and economic factor in a subtle way (GP/Independent). This is recognized, above all, in those parts of the films where the characters confront authority (MS/Voces Violeta), criticize large corporations or mock the system (CH/Independent).

4 Discussion

Since her directorial debut, Greta Gerwig has been gaining more and more presence in the film world. Although in previous years she was already actively participating as an actress, it was not until 2017 with the release of *Lady Bird* that the world finally had a glimpse of her authorship [26], which is highly linked to an introspection and interiority with her creations [32].

Through her films, Gerwig exposes and makes visible some of the problems that women face to this day. Thus, in the results of this work it could be seen that the three films present female characters with feminist traits. Regarding the aesthetic dimension, this is the stage in which the appearance of the characters is constructed [5, 7]. The process is part of an important work within the art direction, since the graphic identity of the film depends on it, so it is common that each film has a different treatment [8].

Following these authors, this research confirms that the art direction in each film had a different aesthetic. For this reason, the visual identity of *Barbie* is very different from that of *Little Women* or *Lady Bird*. However, similar points are also rescued, such as the use of natural light, color palettes with earthy and dark tones, and the addition of pink/melon for contrast. This last similarity is an important factor in Gerwig's filmography, as throughout her films there is evidence of a resignification of what is universally and stereotypically considered "feminine" to add a message of strength and empowerment.

In the same way, the results coincide with the research of Pérez-Rufi [5] and Martin [9] regarding characterization, since the costumes of the protagonists suggest hints of their personalities, through which they express their femininity in a different and unique way. It was possible to appreciate the use of three types of costumes: realistic, pararealistic and symbolic. This is consistent with the work of Martin [9], in which it was determined that each of them is part of the characterization work of the characters. However, the latter two typologies were employed more subtly and implicitly.

In addition to this, the use of color was used not only to capture the psychology of the characters, but also as a tool for narrative progression. Tamayo & Hendrickx [10] argue that this is due to the functions that color confers to the image. However, unlike the six functions that the authors compiled, the results of the research indicate that Gerwig prioritizes the symbolic function to create meanings, ideas and concepts within the filmic narrative. Because of this, the use of dark colors to generate a serious and tense atmosphere; the use of brown and cream colors to associate them with naturalness and realism; and the use of pink colors with the purpose of representing femininity are visible.

Narratively, it became evident that the role changes in the female characters are not developed in the same way in all of Gerwig's films. This is because the characters' motivations differ from one another. However, they all yearn to be free. The research concluded that the transformation arcs of the protagonists were motivated by their decisions and disappointments when facing reality. These falls are not taken as punishments, but as life lessons that helped them develop as characters, so it is possible to visualize the change in them by contrasting their initial sequences with the final ones. This comparison is also made in a playful and notorious way in the slogan and the first part of the film ("She is everything, he is only Ken"), which resembles De Beauvoir's theory ("He is the Subject and she is the Other") that explains the secondary role to which women are relegated in society [15]. Although *Barbie* intends to reverse the roles, narratively, the film compiles the awakening of all Barbie's and Ken's in the face of a patriarchal world they do not want to be part of.

Discursively, all the female characters were open to sharing their experiences as women. Although these discourses are more direct and evident in *Barbie*, it is important to clarify that in all the films the established norms and gender roles are questioned. In the results of this research it was possible to appreciate the different themes addressed

in Gerwig's filmography, such as gender inequality, family, liberation, among others. Finally, it is recognized that, even though not all the characters have a similar construction due to age, context and time, the protagonists share a social, economic and political perspective on their problems, which encourages them to confront authority in the process of searching for themselves.

As a general conclusion, Greta Gerwig's filmography has made her relationship with feminism visible not only in the way she writes and constructs her female characters, but also in the themes she chooses to address in her films. In this way, Gerwig consolidates herself as one of the feminist directors who, despite having certain limitations in the representation of the movement, tries to create a space of visibility and questioning for both men and women.

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