

ANIMALITY AND FAIRY TALES IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN GIRL MOVIES: WOLF IMAGERY IN *SARAH PLAYS A WEREWOLF*

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary European cinema insistently depicts female teenagers in association with non-human animals. This chapter focuses on *Sarah Plays a Werewolf* (Katharina Wyss, 2017), which tells the story of a troubled teenager victim of sexual abuse who turns to animality as her only escape. Sarah performs animality by behaving like a wild wolf. This way, the film responds to wolf imagery popularized by different versions of the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*, in which this animal incarnates a sexual threat for vulnerable teenage girls. This idea informs *Sarah Plays a Werewolf*, but the film mobilizes its original meaning by recontextualizing the initial wolf metaphor. Lastly, the film opposes animal abjection to culture and proposes animality as an alternative to the protagonist's oppressive experience of human girlhood.

KEYWORDS: Animality, femininity, fairy tales, wolf, European cinema, feminist aesthetics, abjection.

1. Introducción

On March 8, 2018, Spain became the stage of the biggest feminist protest in its history. Though the movement had been gaining visibility progressively in previous years, the crowded streets of places like Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, or Seville greatly surpassed the impact of previous protests and made the news internationally. Among the many signs and claims, the image of wolfs circulated repeatedly, as many signs and chants included mottos such as “sister, this is our wolfpack,” “look how beautiful my wolfpack is,” “we will howl like wolves,” or even featured drawings of werewolf women. These references to wolf imagery responded to a highly controversial and mediatized case of gang rape that took place in Spain in 2016, whose perpetrators referred to themselves as “*la manada*” or “the wolfpack.” By appropriating this imagery, the protesters positively reframed the term. As Sara Molpeceres y Laura Filardo-Llamas explain, “the negative

connotations surrounding the concept ‘wolfpack’ as applied to the aggressors are nullified by the reframing of the term in the context of the protestors; a cognitive metaphor comes into play whereby women become a collective that protects the victim, thus creating a group identity of metonymic features” (7).¹ In other words, according to the protestors’ reframing, one woman is all of “us” and vice versa, and this new use of the term involves a caring and collectivizing meaning. Far from being an isolated anecdote, this incident points at a tendency in contemporary feminist aesthetics: the re-appropriation of non-human animality in an attempt to contest gender issues.

In this context, a myriad of contemporary European films strongly connects teenage girls with non-human animality. Some examples include *Raw* (Julia Ducournau, 2016, France), and *Eastern* (Piotr Adamski, 2019, Poland), and *Axolotl Overkill* (Helene Hegemann, 2017, Germany), to name a few. Despite their diversity, these films share many features in common: they all depict female teenagers experiencing oppression as part of their experience of girlhood, the protagonists are all white and cisgendered, and they come from well-to-do families. And most importantly, in all these films, animality has a crucial role: it appears in the form of violence against animals, wildlife trafficking, human/animal affective bonds, or even animal-like behavior. And in all of them, animality serves to explore both the vulnerability and potential emancipation of the female protagonists.

As the case of *Sarah Plays a Werewolf* (Katharina Wyss, 2017) illustrates, animality offers the characters ways to explore alternatives of resistance to the gender imperatives that they experience in these narratives. The film analyzed here tells the story of Sarah, a troubled teenager that finds solace in her theatre classes. Sarah hardly has any friends and she deeply misses her older brother, who has moved out of the family house to start

¹ Originally in Spanish, translated to English by the author.

college. Due to her emotional unease, she makes up dramatic stories about her life, such as her brother's in-existent suicide or her imaginary boyfriend's death. Later the film uncovers her real drama: not only is her father despotic and invasive, he is in fact sexually abusing her. She tries to express her hurt by behaving like an aggressive werewolf in her acting classes, but nobody in her environment understands this call for help. In this case, performing abject and aggressive animality serves as her only chance of escape, albeit without success. Without any mental health support, Sarah ultimately commits suicide. Through the case study of *Sarah Plays a Werewolf*, this article explores the potential as well as the limitations of deploying animality to contest gender issues in contemporary European cinema. It starts with a contextualization of how animality relates to femininity vis-à-vis abjection. It then explores the tropes of the wolf and the sexually threatened teenage girl stemming from the European folk tale *Little Red Riding Hood* and how the film deploys them within the contemporary context. Lastly, it concludes with an analysis of the film, focusing on how it juxtaposes culture and wild nature.

2. Humanness, animality and abjection

In her famous book *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti explains how the very notion of humanness is loaded with relationships of power, inclusion, and exclusion because of "Humanism's restricted notion of what counts as the human" (2013, 16). Though it has its origins in Renaissance humanism, this understanding of the human was more strongly established in European thought during the Enlightenment (Cary Wolfe 2010, XIII). Within this definition, the human is rational and agentic (XIII), which implies that they must have reason to have access to rights as a citizen (Wolfe qtd. in Braidotti 2013, 1). In sum, the definition of the human points at the hierarchies of power established between species, but also among human beings. As I have argued elsewhere, "the posthuman turn responds to this restrictive definition by thinking about what

defines our species as well as how we relate to other living creatures” (Cristina Ruiz-Poveda, 5), human or non-human. And what is more, the posthuman turn also urges us to challenge the “categorical distinction between the given (nature) and the constructed (culture)” (Braidotti 2013, 2). As the last section of this chapter analyzes, the culture/nature divide has a crucial role in *Sarah Plays a Werewolf*, as it conditions the protagonist’s experience.

In addition, the forenamed construction of the human relies on animal abjection, as it requires an irrational beast in contrast to which rational humanness can be defined. In her analysis of animality and race in this context, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson explains that, during the Enlightenment, Eurocentric humanism reinforced the human/animal divide as well as the idea of animal abjection to establish its limited definition of humanness (12-13). In this sense, the human/animal divide served to fit othered subjects in an abject category for “less than humans,” which is why “the question of the animal bears on the question of hierarchies of humanity” (16). The deployment of animality in *Sarah Plays a Werewolf* is better read along with the considerations of the posthuman turn.

3. Fairy tales, gender, and wolf imagery

Among the body of contemporary films linking female teenagers and animals, there is an existing trend that gravitates towards fairy tales. For instance, films such as *Blue my Mind* (Lisa Brühlmann, Switzerland, 2017) and *The Lure* (Agnieszka Smoczyńska, 2015) explore classic European folklore by recovering the mermaid trope or by openly adapting *The Little Mermaid* (Hans Christian Andersen, 1837) to the contemporary context. Along similar lines, a variety of films specifically reference wolf-related imagery influenced by the traditional fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*, such as *Wolfwalkers* (Tomm Moore, Ireland, 2020), *When Animals Dream* (Jonas Alexander Arnby, Denmark, 2014), and the object of this manuscript, *Sarah Plays a Werewolf*.

Multiple versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* have historically circulated in the European oral and written traditions, and their differences result in diverse messages about girlhood, gender roles, and sexuality. However, the two most relevant versions of the tale, Charles Perrault's 1697 *Little Red Riding Hood* and the Brothers Grimm's 1819 *Little Red Cap*, share the same basic moral in spite of their differences: as Bruno Bettelheim discusses in *The Uses of Enchantment: The meaning and importance of fairy tales*, they both conclude that girls should be aware of the sexual dangers that they may encounter when leaving the safety of their familial house and, in turn, they should never trust strangers.² *Little Red Riding Hood* is a cautionary story belonging to the tradition of warning fairy tales, or *Warnmärchen* in German, which are narratives meant to intimidate children and especially girls to ensure that they obeyed their families (Bacchilega, 55-56). In this sense, warning tales served to keep children safe, but they "also sought to deter the young from deviating from norms" (Marshall 263), such as "proper" definitions of masculinity and femininity as well as the right behaviors associated with each.

Whitin this tradition, the wolf incarnates a real danger for children, but more specifically it constitutes a sexual threat for vulnerable teenage girls, especially in the midst of their sexual awakening during adolescence. Wolves have historically been considered a violent predator and a natural enemy of rural inhabitants in European culture, because of the danger they pose for humans as well as for the breeders' cattle. At the time *Little Red Riding Hood* became popularized, "wolves were an actual danger to peasants, and their children especially," as they could become easy prey for them, which led to the result of many popular stories about werewolves (Bacchilega, 55). Thus there is a tradition linking wolf imagery to wild, violent, and abject animality meant to protect

² For a deeper examination of the evolution of versions and influences of *Little Red Riding Hood* in popular culture, see Catherine Orenstein's *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale*.

children, which easily dovetails with the idea of a sexual predator attacking women and girls when they are unprotected in the wild. In this sense, wolves serve as an extended metaphor encoding actual human rapists in the European cultural imagery. Not surprisingly, the forenamed case of the rapists who referred to themselves as “the wolfpack” fits within this heritage. This understanding of the wolf as a sexual predator informs *Sarah Plays a Werewolf*, but the film mobilizes and responds to its original meaning.

Perrault’s version of the tale is more explicitly sexual and presents Little Red Riding Hood in an ambiguous way. The wolf appears more as a seducer than as an assaulter, and the girl’s interaction with him gets to the point of undressing and climbing in bed with him, thinking that it is her grandmother. For Bettelheim, the protagonist participates in the implicit sexual interactions with the wolf and puts herself at risk of being seduced by him (231). Eventually, the wolf devours her and the tale ends with a moral warning children, especially “pretty, well brought-up, and gentle” girls, that they should never talk to strangers (qtd. in Marshall, 263). On the other hand, the Grimm’s version adds a happy ending that allows the protagonist to redeem herself from her disobedience and her curiosity, as she is finally rescued from the wolf’s stomach by a woodsman. Yet both versions constitute a warning tale suggesting that the protagonist has a certain degree of ambivalence and responsibility for her violation for engaging with a stranger and deviating from the orders given by her family. As Bettelheim explains, according to the tale, the danger for the protagonists is “her incipient sexuality” (235) because she does not have tools to understand her desires and thus she puts herself at risk. Ultimately, the tradition presenting wolves as sexual predators and girls as their main target articulates “conflicting discourses of femininity that position the girl as both innocent and sexually inviting” (Marshall, 265). The wolf implies that “desiring men actively pursue (hetero)

sex” (Marshall, 268) to the point of raping young women, while the girl is read ambivalently, both as victim but also as accomplice of her own sexual assault.

Sarah Plays a Werewolf draws from the meanings about girlhood, sexuality, and wolves articulated in the fairy tale. According to Bettelheim’s psychoanalytic reading of the story, *Little Red Riding Hood* points at the Oedipal drive of the girl in her sexual awakening. In addition, he explains that while the wolf represents a dangerous sexual threat, the family home and the hunter in Grimm’s version of the tale operate as metaphors for the strong and responsible father figure, meant to protect the girl (233). *Sarah Plays a Werewolf* strongly confronts both of these ideas by presenting Sarah’s father as her abuser. The wolf and the hunter are thus conflated in this figure, as the sexual predator is not out in the woods, but at Sarah’s own home. The film then questions some of the basic premises of the fairy tale, such as the girl’s ambivalent role, her perceived disobedience, and her confused sexual desires. Sarah does not cross the boundaries defined by the tradition of *Warnmärchen*, yet she is victim of sexual violence. In this sense, the film highlights the problematic definition of girlhood produced by the original fairy tale, which suggests that femininity is determined by the threat of sexual assault and that the possibility of being raped is yet another feature of a girls’ coming of age. In the film, Sarah’s confused desires have more to do with her trauma as a victim of sexual abuse as well as with the stories that she makes up to cope with her pain than with Oedipal drive.

But most importantly, *Sarah Plays a Werewolf* contests the construction of wolves as metaphors for threatening sexual predators and wild, uncontrollable, violence against girls and women. To express her suffering and defend herself, Sarah embraces the animal qualities of wolves by imitating their behavior. In this sense, embracing the abject animality of wolves constitutes a potentially empowering strategy for the protagonist, who negotiates her restricted agency as a disempowered female human by escaping this

very category: if humanity as a girl involves oppression and sexual violence, she tries to resist through animality. The wolf in *Sarah Plays a Werewolf* does not evoke or reinforce the patriarchal violence of a sexual predator, but rather operates against it. In an interview about the film, director Katharina Wyss explained that the scene in which Sarah “becomes almost feral” was the best moment of the film for many teenage girls who watched it. According to Wyss, these spectators liked the scene because “they could finally see [Sarah] fight. Sometimes you shouldn’t do what you are told- it’s healthy” (Balaga, para. 8). Even though Sarah’s call for help does not succeed, it offers her the possibility of healing. Wyss’ conclusion directly counters the compliant messages of *Warnmärchen* and offers animality as means of healthy disobedience.

Sarah Plays a Werewolf reappropriates wolf imagery as articulated in European fairy tales and mobilizes its original meaning against its initial gender imperatives. The narrative connecting patriarchal violence with wild, abject animality has strengthened problematic constructions of masculinity. In the forenamed protests, the words “we are the wolfpack” do not mean that women are entitled to patriarchal violence. Similarly, Sarah’s appropriation of wild, fierce animality is not a blind assumption of its forenamed masculine, patriarchal traits. Instead, her werewolf performance implies an assumption of the animal’s strong confrontative features to counter the narratives about femininity as a potential target of sexual aggression and about complicit or perfect victims of sexual abuse. In this sense, the film deploys common strategies utilized in recent feminist discourses: the recontextualization of existing signifiers and the innovative use of existing cultural metaphors to transform narratives pretraining gender imperatives (Romano, 98), in this particular case, through wolf imagery.

4. Case study: the performance of animality in *Sarah Plays a Werewolf*

Katharina Wyss' directorial debut proposes performance as the only way of expression of the protagonist's traumatic experience of girlhood. Sarah turns to the enactment of fictions to cope with her father's sexual abuse, her oppressive family environment, and her resulting inadaptation at school. She performs scenes from William Shakespeare's plays in her spare time, makes up tragic stories about an imaginary dead boyfriend or a suicidal brother, and creates painful fictions for her theatre class. But most importantly, she performs violent and abject animality.

Among the philosophical discussions establishing the human/animal divide in Western culture, the denial of animal language has served to institute inter-species otherness. In fact, throughout history, European humanism has relied, among other traits, on the "attribution of language as an exclusively human characteristic" (Mónica Beatriz Cragolini, 7). As a result, animal film studies pay special attention to silence in cinematic representations of animality (Laura McMahon and Michael Lawrence 2015, xiv). Film and modern visual culture have historically relegated "the animal to its conventional representational status as mute" (3) but *Sarah Plays a Werewolf* responds to this cosmovision with a paradox: for the protagonist, animality serves as the only language to express her suffering while human verbal language hides her struggles. In her context of miscommunication and secrecy, Sarah's performance of a wolf as means of expression seems hopeful, albeit it fails because none of her classmates, teachers, or family members understand its meaning, except her father, the sexual predator in her life. The cinematic elements deployed in the film serve to problematize the power of language through three main resources: emotional disaffection, literal and metaphorical silence, and narrative ellipses.

First, *Sarah Plays a Werewolf* articulates structures of disidentification with Sarah, making it hard for the audience to connect with her and evoking a sense of emotional disaffection that apparently colludes with the intense drama that the protagonist experiences. While the narrative conflict is traumatic and painful, the film does not underscore it through poignant resources, such as close ups of the protagonist, dramatic empathetic music, and highly expressive acting. In fact, the film's audiovisual language seems rather unempathetic with Sarah's struggles, which highlights the cruelty of her experience and the contrast between her inner pain and the apparent indifference of her outer world. More specifically, the camerawork cultivates a sense of estrangement towards Sarah. The cinematography of the film tends to be functional, mostly relying on medium shots filmed on interiors. However, some key moments of the film, such as her theater performances, are portrayed with distant long shots, observing her with a physical and emotional separation. In addition, other scenes, especially the more intimate ones filmed in interiors, rely on disturbing close ups of Sarah's face. In some cases, the frames are extremely close and claustrophobic, such as on the scene that hints at her father's sexual abuse in the car in which we can only see Sarah's saddened face while the action remains off-screen, suggested through the use of sound. In other instances, the framing is markedly decentered, leaving Sarah's face on the margins or even fragmenting her head visually. This use of cinematography makes it difficult to identify with the character, but it also hints at her own disidentification with herself, as she dissociates from her reality and makes up fictional stories about her own life to cope with her traumatic situation. In a film so marked by shifting emotional stages and fluctuations between what is real and what is fictional, the camerawork reinforces distance and ambiguity. This idea is reinforced by the girl's acting. Played by Loane Balthasar, Sarah's contained expressions

make her emotions ambivalent, nearly cryptic, and it is hard to distinguish something beyond melancholy in her facial appearance.

Secondly, silence highlights the discomfort of her oppressive family environment and supports the secrecy that surrounds her. The dialogues in *Sarah Plays a Werewolf* are sparse and often revolve around unimportant events or even lies. Most importantly, what remains unsaid is dramatically much more relevant than what is verbalized. And third, this absence of language becomes even more apparent with ellipses of crucial turning points and markers of narrative causality. The most relevant ellipses occur in crucial turning points of the story: in place of the father's sexual abuse and of Sarah's attack during her last acting class. The scene depicting Sarah's final outburst and her wolf-like behavior is extremely brief and focused on sound. Sarah's uneasiness becomes apparent during the final dressed rehearsal, causing arguments with some of the members of her theatre group. Her anxiety attack starts because she feels like everybody is gossiping about her, a feeling evoked through exaggerated ambient sound of the classmates whispering illegibly. When one of the girls tries to comfort her, a discordant, minimalist extradiegetic music fades in. Sarah then attacks her classmate, a moment filmed mostly with functional medium shots. During the fight, they get on the stage, but the camera remains by the seats. With the exception of a brief point of view shot from Sarah's perspective, we are forced to observe the situation with distance, as spectators of a theatre play, a position that highlights the performativity of Sarah's behavior. Her classmates approach her to calm her down as the minimalist discordant music continues. Suddenly as Sarah starts barking and growling at them like a wolf, the sound mix becomes louder and the camerawork relies on out-of-focus, decentered close ups of all of the teenagers.

There is brief yet significant ellipsis during her wolf-like attack, because the theatre teacher returns abruptly, resolving the scene. This ellipsis eludes the moment after which

the film is entitled: Sarah's performance of animality. Playing a werewolf serves as what Rosalind Galt has called "linguistic substitution" (2017, 16), as a way to speak of human issues that have otherwise become impossible to express for Sarah. As Galt explains, "Being animals is a way to speak, imaginatively at least, outside of power, outside of death, and outside of the norms of social relations" (2017, 16). Yet, the ellipsis and the decentered and fragmented camerawork show that this linguistic substitution is unsuccessful when the code of animality is not shared by the humans surrounding Sarah. In other words, even though she attempts to express herself with alternative means, nobody understands her language. In *Sarah Plays a Werewolf*, human language prevails, making this communicative exchange impossible. The film inscribes human language in the classic European literary and cultural tradition of operas and theatre tragedies that obsess Sarah's father and that in turn inform her lies, her creativity, and her behavior.

The film's articulation of European culture connects with the understanding of language as a marker of humanity shared by many philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger. For him in particular, language grants humans their privileged position within the essence of the being, of existence (*dasein*). Thus language constitutes the possibility of expressing the being (Arce, 14), which only humans have. In other words, language "is constitutive of the existence of Dasein" (Arce, 26). But more especially, Heidegger refers to poetic language beyond practical language, highlighting the work of famous European writers such as Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Hölderlin, and Rainer Maria Rilke. The film draws from this understanding to problematize language vis-à-vis animality. To that end, it explores the Heideggerian juxtaposition of animality with poetic language or classic European culture. For Sarah, speaking in "animal language" is less natural than expressing herself in the European culture that entraps her, which is always mediated by her father. Yet she makes the "artificial" effort in a desperate attempt for

communication. The presence of classic European culture is ubiquitous in the film, also through sound. After her breakdown, Sarah and her parents talk to the school principal at her office. Interrupting their conversation, the school's public address system starts to play opera music. Sarah recognizes the music and perks up, as if she was being called, a reaction that her father observes with pride, like a Pygmalion pleased with his own creation. In a way, Sarah's father constantly tries to direct her life like a tragic theatre play. Her self-expression and her own existence are constrained and mediated by her father in favor of European cultural texts.

But most importantly, femininity is also mediated by European culture in the film, with references to William Shakespeare's tragedies, Romanticism, and Pre-Raphaelitism. After the attack during the dressed rehearsal, Sarah tells her parents that she wants to commit suicide. She explains "mom, I have nobody to talk to, nobody who understands me," directly addressing language and issues of communication. Her mother expresses her heartbreak and proposes that she goes to therapy, a plan that the father violently rejects in fear of being discovered. Instead, he advises Sarah to find a special place to "do it properly," mediating her experience as a tragic play. Eventually, Sarah kills herself by jumping off a cliff by the river, a place in nature where she often hides and writes the name of her imaginary dead boyfriend. The shots of her death, filmed in abrupt, fragmented close-ups, evoke the famous imagery of Ofelia's death in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) that has circulated in European painting for centuries, connecting Sarah to the iconography of tragic European femininity. The famous Romantic writer Edgar Allan Poe famously captured the romanticization of dead girls in nineteenth century European culture with the quote "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (548). The romanization of young, conventionally beautiful, white women has circulated since the Victorian Era, when it became a particularly

popular topic of artistic inspiration (Brenna Mulhall,1). These representations of death female bodies “exemplify the feminine ideal: passive, visionless, and voiceless” (1). Sarah’s father clearly aligns with this fascination, as he encourages his own daughter to kill herself in a Romantic way. In this imagery, especially in Romanticism, the non-human is at the service of the subjectivity of the individual, who observes it with longing and distance. Nature and animality are therefore inscribed at the service of human melancholia. Sarah attempts to relate to the non-human in a different way, by expressing herself through animality, but the European tradition entraps her. While Sarah eventually kills herself, the film never shows her corpse in the water and eschews reinforcing the romanticizing imagery of the young, dead woman. Instead, the suicide is filmed abruptly, with medium shots and close ups of the forest and the cliff from which she jumps, but the action remains off-screen, once more suggested through sound. Ultimately, Sarah’s disidentification responds to her abusive situation and results in her losing herself in fictions. The film connects classic European tragedies with her father, the figure that mediates her relationship with language, and thus Sarah’s mental health challenges evoke the tragic fate of characters like Shakespeare’s Juliette and Ophelia.

5. Conclusions

Sarah Plays a Werewolf proposes animality as means to negotiate patriarchal oppression, more specifically as an alternative way of expression to the constraints, secrecy, and manipulation facilitated by human language in her world. Sarah turns to animal behavior to escape from her father’s sexual abuse as well as to eschew his mediation of her self-expression. In doing so, the film reframes wolf animality as an emancipating feature for the female protagonists and challenges the naturalization of gender roles prescribed by the main versions of the classic fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*, which naturalize the idea of men behaving like the sexually threatening wolf and

girls needing to remain vigilant and careful to avoid being sexually assaulted by them. Yet, the film does not idealize animality as means to overcome human power dynamics; its potential to resist patriarchal violence is limited. Animal linguistic substitution confronts human language as conceptualized in European thought, but its power is restricted, since abject, less-than-human animality is produced by the very system it tries to defy. *Sarah Plays a Werewolf* is more constructively read within the body of contemporary European films reframing animality vis-à-vis femininity to question what makes humans, humans and more particularly, what makes girls, girls.

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