

The Visual Representation of Power Relationships in the Film Adaptations of William Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*

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Introduction

In a novel to film adaptation, visual elements, considered “the motion picture’s primary and most powerful means of communication” (Boggs and Petrie 125), play a crucial role in rendering the source text on screen. This article aims to explore the visual representation of power relationships between the protagonists of three film adaptations of William Somerset Maugham’s classical novel *The Painted Veil* (1925), i.e. *The Painted Veil* (1934, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, dir. Richard Boleslawski), *The Seventh Sin* (1957, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, dir. Ronald Neame and Vincente Minelli [uncredited]), and *The Painted Veil* (2006, Warner Independent Pictures, dir. John Curran).

Films are visual narratives, and this type of narration, impossible for literature, is effectuated through the positioning and movement of the camera, editing, cinematography and mise-en-scène (Lacey 23; Maltby 329). These means, as Richard Maltby notes, help build the story and promote the audience’s involvement (329). The analysis of the different approaches and cinematic techniques used by the three film adaptations to visualize the power relationships between the characters on screen and to highlight the power that the characters emanate at particular moments in the story allows to assess the evolution of the attitudes towards power dynamics in a family context in the decades between the adaptations. It is particularly relevant to

consider this at present as the film adaptations in question demonstrate the changing attitudes towards power balance in a family and the critical reassessment of gender roles.

In *The Painted Veil*,¹ the shy and reserved British bacteriologist Walter Fane brings his somewhat superficial wife Kitty to Hong Kong, where she starts an affair with the Assistant Colonial Secretary, Charlie Townsend. On discovering his wife's infidelity, Walter accepts the post of a doctor in Mei-tan-fu, a cholera-stricken town in inland China, and forces Kitty to accompany him there. However, he agrees to grant an amicable divorce if Townsend signs a promise to divorce his wife and marry Kitty. Confirming Walter's expectations, Townsend is not ready for such a commitment, and Kitty is forced to follow her husband, stepping on the path of self-discovery and moral growth.

The novel *The Painted Veil* and its latest adaptation to date (2006) have been regarded from several perspectives, including colonialism, Orientalism, and feminism. However, the earlier adaptations have been largely disregarded, and scholars have yet to compare all three screen versions of *The Painted Veil*. In addition, the question of power relationships in the novel and the visual aspects of its adaptation(s) has received rather limited scholarly attention. One of the most relevant issues raised in previous research is the signification of both gender and China in the novel (Holden 1994). In Holden's view, the book is determined by disclosure and enclosure; it "seems to focus not upon the truth behind the veil but the veiling itself" (67). In this article, the focus is on the disclosure element and the analysis of what is rendered visible in Kitty and Walter's power dynamics. Agnieszka Kurzawa (2017) regards the relationship of the protagonists of *The Painted Veil* (2006) from the point of view of female and male physical and emotional spaces, with Walter initially excluding his wife from his space and keeping a self-imposed emotional confinement, and

¹ All further references are to the 2001 Vintage Classics edition of *The Painted Veil*, which will be abbreviated as PV and inserted parenthetically in the text.

with Kitty transgressing her own metaphorical and literal space through her work at the convent in Mei-tan-fu and spiritual growth. Yitong Pan's analysis (2021) regards the 2006 film adaptation from a visual point of view, exploring positional relationships of the protagonists in several scenes. Pan focuses on the use of haptic visuality in the psychological portrayal of the characters and proves that this type of visuality, by turning psychological aspects into tangible material, gives to the audience a deeper understanding of the protagonists' inner changes.

The present article sets out to analyze general power dynamics in the husband-wife relationship in *The Painted Veil* and its film adaptations, the influence of the context of film production on this specific aspect, and the visual representation of power balance through an in-depth analysis of one scene. It differs from previous studies in connecting gender issues and visual aspects of power dynamics and in offering a graphical representation of power relationships in the analyzed scene. The first part of the present analysis will trace the progression of power dynamics in the husband-wife relationship in *The Painted Veil* adaptations, whereas the second part will focus on a pivotal scene, in which the couple discuss the move to Mei-tan-fu. The scene is remarkable for several reasons: its importance in the narrative, its presence in all the three film adaptations, and the rich material that it provides for the purposes of the present work. By focusing on one scene, precaution has been taken not to disregard its narrative context. The in-depth analysis of the mise-en-scène and blocking in the scene of the protagonists' confrontation reveals the use of various cinematic techniques that emphasize the complex power struggle between the characters, their fluctuating strengths and vulnerabilities and even the scope of their knowledge.

The representation of the couple's power dynamics can be argued to agree with the norms of the classical Hollywood style, to which the analyzed adaptations belong. Classical Hollywood style, according to John Belton, demonstrates "American cinema's proficiency as a narrative

machine” (23) by using various visual means to support the narrative. Moreover, visual elements in films adopting classical Hollywood standards contribute significantly to modelling a specific emotional response from the audience. Richard Maltby, for instance, commenting upon the exploitation of affective qualities of films by the Hollywood film industry, even states that the “generation of audience emotion substitutes for ‘Art’ in Hollywood’s commercial aesthetic” (54-55). Both narrative development and the generation of emotions rely significantly on the visual aspects of a scene.

In classical Hollywood cinema the intended meaning is enhanced visually through various cinematic techniques. Blocking, the actors’ positioning and movements, acquires a narrative function: the physical position of the actors in the frame and the way in which they hold their bodies can provide an extra layer of meaning, clarify the relationship between their characters, and, as Sarah Kozloff points out, contribute to the effect of the dialogue on the viewer (96). In the present work, blocking is considered a primary source of information in the analysis of power relations. In particular, an actor’s standing (as opposed to sitting) position or his/her proximity to the camera can serve to indicate his/her character being in a position of power. Finally, the camera angle can emphasize a character’s authority or subordination. The use of these techniques and their interpretation will be laid out below. The following section focuses specifically on the correlation between the visual representation of power relationships and the historical context of production of the adaptations in question.

Film adaptations of *The Painted Veil*: Contexts of Production

In films, the visual representation of power relationships between male and female characters can offer important insights into the attitudes and beliefs dominating society regarding gender (in)equality in a certain period. The French philosopher Louis Althusser considers that films are

“*active* in creating *particular* representations of reality” (qtd. in Lacey 163; original emphasis). Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery stress that filmmakers are subject to social pressures and norms, and, accordingly, their fictional film characters are given “attitudes, gestures, sentiments, motivations, and appearances that are, in part at least, based on social roles and on general notions about how [a husband, a wife, etc.] is ‘supposed’ to act” (84, 158). Therefore, more recent adaptations can reflect ideological, social and cultural shifts that have occurred since the production of the source text or previous screen versions. Through the analysis, it becomes apparent that the historical contexts of creation had a decisive influence on the representation of power relationships in the adaptations of *The Painted Veil*.

All the three film adaptations of *The Painted Veil* were produced in Hollywood; the first two belong to the classical period of Hollywood cinema that lasted from 1917 to 1960 (as defined by Bordwell et al., qtd. in Lacey 135). *The Painted Veil* (1934) was created during the Great Depression in an oligopolistic Hollywood dominated by eight corporations, of which Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), specialized in upscale adaptations, formed part. A typical criticism of Hollywood films produced between the 1920s and the 1940s treats them as “unrealistic,” containing artificial stories and improbable characters, failing to accurately reflect real-life situations (Jarvie 137), while studios are reprimanded for exploiting successful formulae, teaching the audience what to expect and conditioning it into conformity (Adorno and Horkheimer, qtd. in Hollows and Jancovich 19-20). Although the 1934 adaptation was shot before the reinforcement of the Production Code in 1934, it was released after the Code was adapted. The Code stipulated that adultery must not be explicitly treated or presented attractively, and it prescribed respect for “the sanctity of the institution of marriage” (Lewis 304, 120), to which the adaptation managed to conform despite the subject matter of the source text. Maltby stresses that during the classical

Hollywood era writers, directors, and actors had limited influence on the final product, contrary to the film's producer (139, 155). In the 1930s, actors had exclusive long-term contracts with specific studios, which tried to "fit" the films to their stars, associating a character or genre with them (Allen and Gomery 148, 181). Thus, *The Painted Veil* became a star vehicle for Greta Garbo who signed a contract with MGM in 1925. The film exploits the exoticism of Garbo's accent and confirms her image as tormented and "divinely untouchable" (Earley 250). As Earley puts it, in the 1930s, when a shift to a more realistic depiction of women on the screen took place, and they became "flesh and blood, attainable and real," only Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo retained the aloof "woman-of-mystery" image (248, 250).

The second film adaptation of Maugham's novel, *The Seventh Sin*, was produced in the 1950s, when filmmakers adapted large amounts of commercially popular novels for the purpose of attracting diminishing audiences to the cinema theatres again (Earley 271). Moreover, melodrama thrived as a genre in this period of social turmoil, when although a patriarchal power structure remained dominant, traditional roles were being challenged (Lacey 173). Considering the historical context, it is also noteworthy that in 1952 The Supreme Court of the U.S. overruled the Production Code, which meant that Hollywood could finally include topics that were too risky to address earlier. Similar to *The Painted Veil* (1934), *The Seventh Sin* (1957) was not considered to be realistic from the moment of its release. In a review from the year of its release, for instance, *The New York Times* states that the film "generally seems as remote now as the very setting [in the British colony]" and "remains, slightly unreal, long ago and far away" ("The Seventh Sin Opens [...]", 29 June 1957).

The third and most recent adaptation, finally, was screened 80 years after the novel was published. As Brian McFarlane notes, the time-lapse between the publication of the novel and the

production of the film version influences the way the source text is rendered on screen (137, 187). Indeed, in the decades separating *The Painted Veil* (2006) from the previous adaptations, important ideological and social shifts had taken place. Gender relationships generally developed towards equality, and changes in censorship led to the abandonment of the Production Code and the introduction of the rating system in Hollywood, while, at the same time, the Chinese Film Board introduced censorship for this particular film shot on location in China. In addition, the genre of melodrama was largely rehabilitated, after a period of being viewed as an inferior genre (McFarlane 191), and Hollywood had developed a more realistic style in the years separating the film from the previous adaptations, which significantly influenced the acting style and the representation of the characters. The first two adaptations of *The Painted Veil* were made in a period (1930s to the late 1950s) when women on screen “were to be looked at and to ‘look good’” (Lacey 178), which can be observed in Garbo and Parker’s positioning in the films from 1934 and 1957. In the 2006 film, however, the leading actress Naomi Watts is often shown dishevelled, without or with minimal make-up, rather a “real” woman than a glamorous Hollywood star, the opposite of the images created on the screen by Greta Garbo and Eleanor Parker.

Husband vs. Wife Power Relationship in William Somerset Maugham’s *The Painted*

***Veil* and Film Adaptations**

Strong criticism of women’s position in society and a predilection for personal freedom in Maugham’s novel are largely neglected or confronted in the screen versions. As for the husband-wife power relationship in the adaptations of *The Painted Veil*, it needs to be noted that classical Hollywood cinema as an institution supported male dominance and patriarchy, and practiced both fetishization (overvaluation) and devaluation of the woman by transforming her into a spectacle

through lingering close-ups, glamorous costumes, etc., or by representing her as a guilty object (Belton 241). This practice is prominent in *The Painted Veil* (1934) and *The Seventh Sin* (1957).

Supporting traditional family values, the 1934 film adaptation offers merely one brief reflection on the position of women in contemporary society through Katrin's (Kitty in the novel) curtailed ironic remark, "A good husband is what every girl [needs]" (00:07:42-45). In the 1920s, for the first time in American culture, women's sexual desire became a subject of public discussion, even though it was seen predominantly as a threat to traditional family values and ideals of American masculinity (Maltby 404). The film appears to send a warning to the female audience against following their sexual desires. At the end, Katrin learns to appreciate her hard-working husband's worthy qualities and accepts his limited attention towards her. Thus, Maugham's story of a spiritual quest is transformed into a story of coming to terms with patriarchal inequality and loving submission. The couple's reconciliation at the end of the film suggests that they have reached a certain harmony and power balance in their relationship; however, it also suggests that Katrin, from that moment on, would perform the duties of a loving and devoted wife.

In *The Seventh Sin*, a similarly inferior position of the woman in a married couple is gleaned through Carol's (Kitty in the novel) reflection on loveless marriages and the number of women who try to put the blame on themselves, while the traditional view on a wife's role is voiced by the Reverend Mother: "It's a wife's duty to make her husband happy" (01:20:47-50). Carol's relationship with her husband is contrasted with that of Waddington, a British official in Mei-tan-fu, and his Chinese wife, whose devotion to her husband, according to Waddington himself, "is impossible for a Western woman to understand" (01:14:03-08). This comment traces a difference between Occidental and Oriental visions of power distribution in a couple and labels the

“emancipated” Occidental one as “unhappy” (based on Carol’s example) and the “devoted” Oriental one as “happy.”

In the 2006 adaptation of *The Painted Veil*, finally, women’s position in society has clearly albeit subtly changed. Kitty’s protest that “the very idea that a woman should marry regardless of her own feelings is simply prehistoric” (00:06:26-34) is met with a reproach of her being a financial burden for her parents. In compliance with the shift in societal attitudes in the 21st century, duty is viewed in the film from a different perspective. Kitty’s claim that her duty is to stay with her husband is contrasted with Mother Superior’s reply that “duty is only washing your hands when they are dirty” (01:48:14-17). However, this adaptation, similarly to the 1934 film, ultimately asserts traditional family values, as Kitty eventually transforms into a loving and devoted wife.

In the novel, the husband-wife relationship has three distinct stages in terms of power dynamics, evolving (from Kitty’s perspective) from strong to weak and back to strong again. During the period preceding the proposal and the beginning of marital life, Kitty is clearly the dominant figure who “barely tolerates her husband’s devotion and soon grows exasperated by his deference” (Kuner 77). However, her adultery drastically undermines her position, allowing Walter to impose his decisions against the threat of public scandal and divorce. Kitty slowly regains her power by working in the middle of the epidemic and making decisions on how to build her life after Walter’s death. Talking about Kitty’s sexuality, Holden (72) distinguishes three stages: hiding/closeting (with her lover), external discipline (trip to Mei-tan-fu enforced by Walter) and confession/self-examination. These three stages, ranging from weak to strong, reflect Kitty’s power position in the couple.

In *The Painted Veil* (1934), the first two stages are similar to the novel, evolving from strong to weak. Then, Katrin regains her power status as Walter starts to regret his impulsive

decision and professes his love. *The Seventh Sin*, by contrast, follows the pattern from weak to strong. The film starts with Carol in a weak and doubtful position as her adultery is discovered by her husband; she slowly gains strength as her moral growth unfolds, which culminates with her being shown in the closing scene as a strong and liberated woman. *The Painted Veil* (2006), in turn, closely follows on the novel's three-fold model of power dynamics. Initially, Kitty's position can be described as strong (through the flashbacks to her meeting with Walter two years earlier), but it is then weakened (via adultery and departure for Mei-tan-fu) and again strengthened as evidenced by her moral growth, her work at the convent and her improved relationship with her husband. Whether in line with the model of power dynamics presented in the novel or deviating from it, the film adaptations of *The Painted Veil* clearly demonstrate the fluctuation power positions of the female protagonist.

Power Relationship in William Somerset Maugham's Novel: A Key Scene Analysis

With its complex relationship between the protagonists, Maugham's novel and its screen adaptations represent a peculiar case of power relationships and their visual representation on screen. Numerous scholars have discussed the role of visual elements in novel to film adaptations. Some authors contest regarding such adaptations as a mere transfer from words to images; e.g., Kamilla Elliott finds the designation of novels as "words" and films as "images" neither empirically nor logically sustainable (13-14). However, according to a common interpretation, screen adaptations are viewed as intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system to another, in which the source text is recreated in the aural and visual mode (Hutcheon 16, 8). If the latter view is taken into consideration, the recurrent internal focalization in Maugham's novel can be claimed

to challenge the filmmakers with finding a means to “translate” free indirect discourse into cinematic language.

In the novel, with its extradiegetic narrator and focalization shifting between external and internal, the power struggle inside the couple reaches a climax in the discussion concerning Walter’s decision to leave for Mei-tan-fu (PV 48-56). The protagonists’ highly intense opposition is expressed through the construction of the dialogue interspersed with Kitty’s free indirect discourse and her perception of the situation, e.g., “She felt herself go scarlet. Why did he watch her like that? She looked away in embarrassment” (PV 49); “She leaned her forehead on her hand. Suicide. It was nothing short of that. [...] She couldn’t let him do that. It was cruel. It was not her fault if she did not love him” (PV 50). Starting with Kitty’s perplexity as to the purpose of the discussion, the conversation takes a sudden turn as Walter announces his decision to leave for Mei-tan-fu. Chapter 22 finishes with the two lines of dialogue in which Kitty tries to assert herself by resisting Walter’s decision, and in which the opposition of the protagonists reaches climax: “I’m not going, Walter. It’s monstrous to ask me.” - “Then I shall not go either. I shall immediately file my petition [for divorce]” (PV 51). Chapter 23 starts with Kitty in a perceptibly weaker position: she looks “blankly” at Walter, “falter[s]” as she addresses him, starts to cry, whereas Walter watches her calmly and “without concern” (PV 51-52). Kitty’s anger surges as Walter mentions her lover, and she launches an accusing speech. At this point the power control in the dialogue shifts constantly between Walter and Kitty, as both reveal harboring no illusions about each other. The conversation ends when Walter agrees to grant a divorce under certain conditions, and Kitty “walk[s] with measured step from the room” (PV 56) in order to have an urgent meeting with Townsend. She seemingly wins; however, Walter’s reserved and mocking manner undermines that impression.

Besides the content of their dialogue, in the framework of the present analysis, it is important to consider the interlocutors' physical positions and spatial relationship to each other. As Kitty joins Walter "with a bold face," he asks her to sit down, then sits down himself and starts talking about Mei-tan-fu. The entire conversation takes place while they are seated, which can be gleaned from such references as "[Kitty] sat up now and dried her tears" (PV 52) and "[Walter] leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette" (PV 55). Thus, in the novel the power struggle between the protagonists takes place in a relatively fixed physical position, whereas the shift of power occurs through the dialogue and the manifested attitudes.

It can be claimed that the confrontation between Walter and Kitty goes beyond a personal dispute; it acquires a more general dimension of gender opposition, referring to such issues as the position of a woman in the first quarter of the twentieth century, her restricted choices, limited freedom, the role attributed to her by society, and her 'Otherness' since, as Spivak (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 174) points out, "women in many societies have been relegated to the position of 'Other,' marginalized and in a metaphorical sense, 'colonized'". Kitty's marriage under the pressure of her family's expectations, her fragile situation in case of a public divorce, Walter's clear dominant position in the couple and his greater freedom of decision-making constitute an important background to the scene. Kitty arguably personifies the social changes that British society was undergoing at the time of the publication of the novel, reevaluating the position of women and their freedom of choice.

In her article on feminism and colonial discourses, Chandra Mohanty comments on sexual difference equating female subordination, with power being "automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (read: men), and people who do not (read: women)." She warns against such "simplistic formulations" which "reinforce binary divisions between men and women" (207).

The confrontation witnessed in the analyzed scene can be read in the light of this, possibly simplistic, binary opposition between a man and a woman in relation to the power they possess; it can be interpreted from the perspective of clearly defined hierarchy and gender constructs as well. What makes the scene stand out is the restructuring of power dynamics associated with male/female difference and the constant shift of the dualistic positions powerful/powerless, dominating/dominated, superior/inferior. In so doing, the conflict between the protagonists creates a tension between masculinity and femininity. Talking about power becoming “highly sexualized and hierarchically gendered,” Jane Caputi lists violence and control of space as intrinsic components of masculinity (61); she states that power in patriarchal consciousness is understood as the ability to compel obedience and to dominate. What is important in the analyzed scene is that domination identified with masculinity and submission identified with femininity are not stable: they are constantly challenged. The question is whether, and to what extent, this scene in the adaptations of *The Painted Veil* reflects general social changes in the positioning of women and indicates an increasing gender equality.

Power Relationship in the Film Adaptations of *The Painted Veil*: Key Scene Analysis

Through a combination of narration and monstration, films visualize what a literary text can only tell (Stam 35). While a novel stimulates the reader’s imagination through narration, a film presents the story “physicalized” through performance, as screenwriter Michael Lengsfeld puts it. In addition, films tend to offer a more concrete representation of the text: as John McGuire aptly notes, whereas “a written medium [...] allows for some indirection and contemplation, ... the visual aspects of a film demand more literalism” (11). In this article, we propose that certain implicit elements in the literary work can gain strength and emphasis in a film adaptation, and we

consider visual elements as intrinsically supporting the narration and providing additional clues facilitating the interpretation of a scene and of the relationship between the characters.

Even though the adaptations of *The Painted Veil* reshape the source text to a variable degree, the key scene described above is retained in all the three versions. The filmmakers' decisions related to the staging (the arrangement of performance space and the visual details of the performance) influence the audience's interpretation of the scene. Represented graphically, the fluctuation of the characters' positions of power becomes prominent. In tracing possible correspondences between form and function, it can be argued that the characters' physical position, such as standing over someone seated, can indicate a position of power.

While Carolyn Jess-Cooke defines film adaptation exclusively in cinematic terms, as “the process by which a text is visualized on screen” (34), Brian McFarlane specifies that film adaptations offer a combination of perceptual and conceptual experience through verbal and cinematic signs (21, 26-27). Combining images, sounds, words etc., films are multimodal by nature. Indeed, all the cinematic techniques described earlier (blocking, camera angle, etc.) contribute to the construction of the visual image on screen and communicate meaning through various means, including the actors' gestures, facial expressions, costumes, setting, music etc. Even though, in the following, proxemic relationships between the characters on screen are isolated from the other factors, it must be acknowledged that various accompanying elements can potentially intensify or contradict the meaning rendered by the proxemic techniques. In the analyzed adaptations, however, neither strong intensification nor contradiction has been detected, which is why these additional elements can be disregarded. Finally, taking into consideration that, in general, actors' movements and their positions in relation to the camera could be polysemantic and allow for various readings of their power relationships, in the key scene discussed across

adaptations, the meaning of blocking, camera angles etc. has a strong penchant and significantly limits the variety of readings.

In *The Painted Veil* (1934), starring Greta Garbo as Katrin and Herbert Marshall as Walter, in the scene under scrutiny (00:44:08-00:46:18; see a graphical outline of Walter and Katrin's relative positions towards each other in Fig. 1) Walter is shown standing with his cup of coffee while Katrin is sitting in the living room; he is clearly in the dominating position, towering over his wife while sharply announcing that they are going to Mei-tan-fu (Fig. 1, A). As Katrin refuses to accompany him, she stands up and confronts him declaring that she never loved him. At this moment he is sitting in the armchair, and she is in the dominating position, bending over him, professing her love for Townsend (Fig. 1, B). Discarding the depth of Townsend's feelings with contempt, Walter stands up to face Katrin, and being taller than her, makes her look up at him (Fig. 1, C), thus restoring his dominating position and asserting his superior knowledge of Townsend's petty motifs and character.

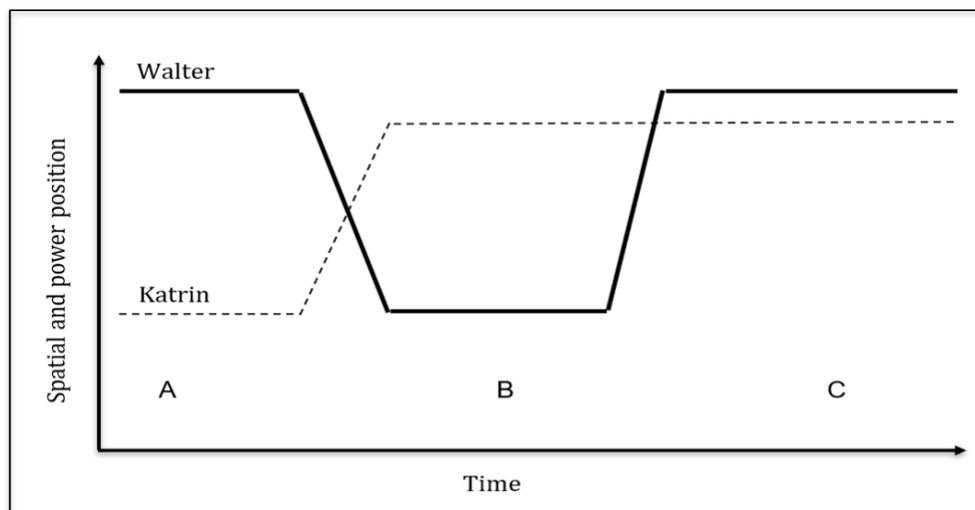


Figure 1. Spatial and power position of Walter and Katrin in the selected scene in *The Painted Veil* (1934)

A completely different approach is used in *The Seventh Sin* (1957), starring Eleanor Parker as Carol and Bill Travers as Walter. When Walter announces his decision to leave for Mei-tan-fu (00:18:09-00:24:20; see a graphical outline of Walter and Carol's relative positions towards each other in Fig. 2), the positioning of the actors indicates a relationship of dominance and subordination between the protagonists: while Carol stays in the background, Walter stands closer to the camera, which emphasizes his height, strength, and authority (Fig. 2, A). As Carol defiantly admits her infidelity and declares to her husband that she despises him, the interlocutors are shown facing each other, which brings them visually to a more equal position (Fig. 2, B). When Walter reveals his understanding of the reasons why Carol married him, the first technique is used again: Carol is shown farther from the camera, subdued by Walter standing in the foreground (Fig. 3, C). The technique of shot reverse shot is then applied as the characters exchange mutual accusations (Fig. 2, D). Finally, when Carol blames Walter for what happened, he taciturnly accepts her accusations as he sits down while she continues to stand, seemingly dominating the relationship now (Fig. 2, E). However, the power suggested by her positioning is taken away from her as Walter openly calls her a fool for believing the authenticity of her lover's feelings. His superior knowledge of human nature and a better understanding of the situation contradicts his seemingly subdued physical position in relation to his wife.

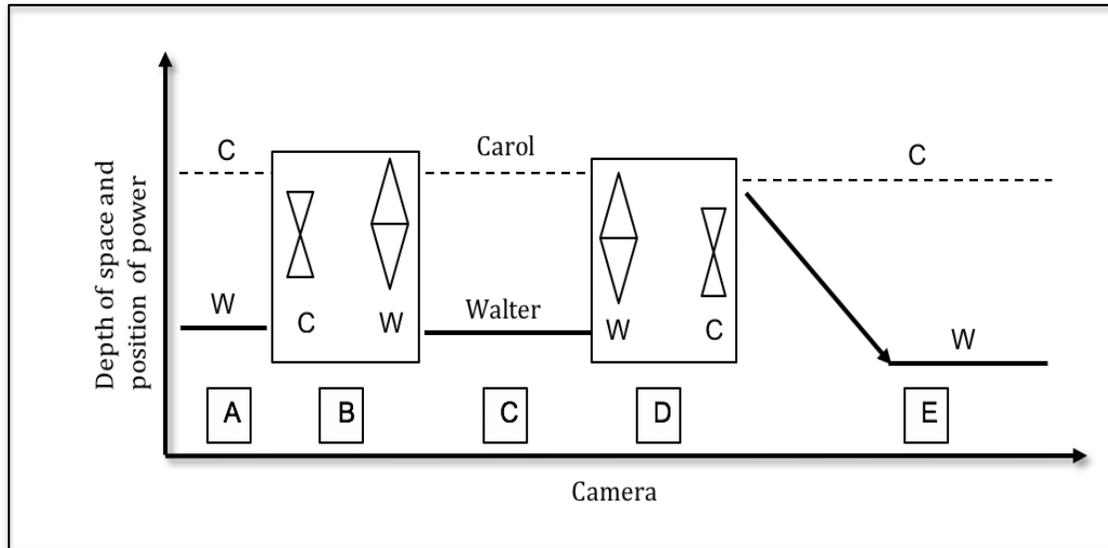


Figure 2. Spatial and power position of Walter and Carol in the selected scene in *The Seventh Sin* (1957)

In *The Painted Veil* (2006), starring Naomi Watts as Kitty and Edward Norton as Walter, two cinematic techniques complement each other with the aim to create a visual representation of the relationship of power: blocking and camera angle. In the scene where Walter plans to announce his decision to take Kitty to Mei-tan-fu (00:24:25-00:29:23; see a graphical outline of Walter and Kitty's relative positions towards each other in Fig. 3), he asks her to sit down (Fig. 3, A); thus, his position of power is emphasized by the composition (he is standing, while Kitty is sitting) and a low angle shot. The latter has the psychological effect of conferring to the subject in focus a strong and powerful look. As Kitty refuses to go to the cholera-stricken town, she stands up (Fig. 3, B), challenging Walter's dominating position, but he physically forces her to sit down (Fig. 3, C), restoring his dominance; finally, she stands up (Fig. 4, D) to tell him that he is partially responsible for her infidelity, challenging both his dominance and self-assurance.

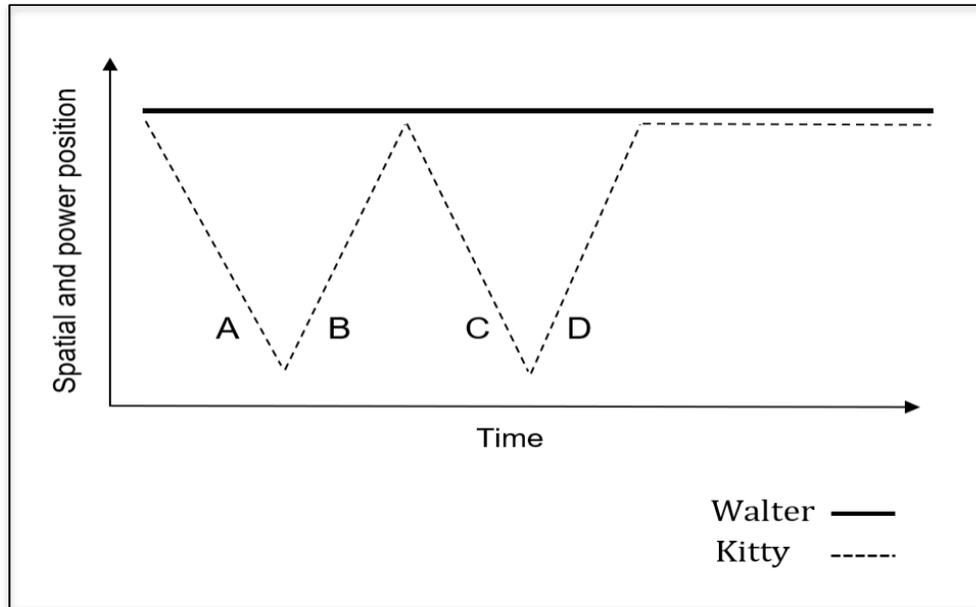


Figure 3. Spatial and power position of Walter and Kitty in the selected scene in *The Painted Veil* (2006)

Regarded from the visual point of view, this scene in the first screen version of *The Painted Veil* demonstrates the predominantly strong and more authoritative position of Walter in relation to his wife, as he both starts and finishes the scene standing and dominating the discussion. The second screen version puts the female protagonist at the background at the beginning of the scene but allows her to finish the scene standing, seemingly dominating the situation and assuming a stronger position in the couple. Finally, in the third screen version, the power positions are defined through multiple channels, and the female protagonist is given a chance to stand up several times to challenge her husband's domination. It can be argued that in the latest version there are indications of the changed views of a woman's position in society in general and in marital relationships in particular.

Conclusion

The analysis above demonstrates how adaptations created in different periods reflect the position of women in society, each from their contemporary perspective, and subtly demonstrate a growing empowerment of the female protagonist. The analysis of a key scene, moreover, has shown how the visualization of the characters' relationships highlights the power struggle in the husband vs. wife relationship and the evolving dynamics and fluctuations of power from the early 1930s to the 21st century. The different cinematic techniques discussed in detail, such as various camera angles, prove to contribute significantly to the depiction of this power struggle.

It can be concluded that the novel and its film adaptations mirror the predominant discourses of their times and depict the characters in accordance with the expectations concerning gender roles. Through the analysis of visual representation of power relationships between specific characters, it has been established that cinematic techniques such as blocking and camera angles help define and intensify the relationship of power between the characters. Moreover, it has been demonstrated how the changing of the actors' positions in the frame reflects the representation of power dynamics between the characters and puts an emphasis on their fleeting moments of empowerment and attenuation.

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