A Body without a Story: The Immortal Spectacle in *The Ballad of Little Jo*

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As a genre intimately tied to the landscape of the American West, the romanticization of the frontier, and the American social imaginary, the Western holds a special place in Americans' hearts. While Western films present a nostalgia for supposedly simpler times—when communities stood by each other and people lived by a moral code, at least in theory—they also develop to deal with the anxieties present in contemporary American culture. As American culture shapes the genre, pushing it to evolve over time, the genre Western likewise informs culture by teaching Americans about their own social identity. This reciprocal relationship makes Westerns troubling to critics; Western films are steeped in genre conventions that whisper disconcerting truths about American ideology and hint at Americans' callous treatment of both themselves and the Other. One particularly troubling element of the genre Western is "the centrality of the male protagonist and the subservient nature of the female characters" (Piturro 113). Even as Western films progress to address changing American values and beliefs, they struggle to shake the patriarchal gender dynamics marginalizing women, as time and again Westerns demonstrate that "the root language of the genre is gender" (Dowell 10).

Leo Braudy asserts that "genre films essentially ask the audience, 'Do you still want to believe this?' Popularity is the audience answering 'Yes.' Change in genres occur when the audience says, 'That's too infantile a form of what we believe. Show us something more complicated'" (179). This argument suggests that if a progressive or revisionist genre film is unpopular, the audience still believes in the classic model a filmmaker sought to challenge, ul-

timately demonstrating that the audience is not ready to evolve as the genre progresses. Such is the case with Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993), a thought-provoking film that has been labeled both a revisionist and a feminist Western for its portrayal of a female embodying the classic Western hero. Earning just under $550,000 at the box office, the film's unpopularity suggests that even in the midst of the women's empowerment movements dominating the 1990s, audiences still believed, and supported, genre conventions that reinscribe patriarchal social structures. Although this weak box office performance leads some to believe the film does not merit reintroduction to critical conversations, I instead posit that *The Ballad of Little Jo* dropped off critics' radar because scholarship about gender performativity and transgender representation was not yet prominent in the field when the film was released.

Maggie Greenwald presents a female Western hero who identifies as a man, and in doing so challenges an earlier feminist criticism that was dominated by cis-gender normativity. In the early 1990s the film anticipated our present discussions of transgender experiences, asking viewers to reevaluate their understanding of gender and its relationship to identity within the context of the genre Western. Jo's story takes place just outside a small frontier community called Ruby City during the nineteenth century, and as such, the film depicts early instances of intolerance and gender violence in the American West. Despite developing into less isolated, law-governed towns in the century following westward expansion, in some respects, western communities are still plagued by the legacy of the "Wild West," both in modern culture and in popular imagination—a distressing reality addressed in other popular Western productions. Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), for example, addresses gender violence, hate crimes, and homophobia by alluding to the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming. Productions like *The Ballad of Little Jo*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and Moisés Kaufman's documentary play *The Laramie Project* (2001) speak to the necessity for scholarship addressing the troubling legacy of hate violence in the "Wild West." By reintroducing *The Ballad of Little Jo* to contemporary gender discourse, I hope to address the need for more criticism about

hate and gender violence in Western literature and film studies. Additionally, I propose that publishing an individual's image can be an example of necroviolence, especially when their final image is misrepresentative of their lived experiences and gender identity, ultimately altering the public's perspective about their contributions to society. Critics who have studied Greenwald's film have almost exclusively interpreted its disturbing final scene as "the film's last laugh" (Brower 56), a victory over gendered genre conventions. I aim to reinterpret this scene in order to show how the film's conclusion propels viewers to think critically about the American West as a prevailing icon and to indict the romanticization of a period when non–gender conforming individuals were regularly met with violence.

If a female succeeds in the American West by performing as a man, is she diminishing patriarchal gender binaries or reinscribing them? In considering whether a Western should be labeled feminist, the question arises whether it is necessary for a female to be accepted as she is. Critics disagree about what to make of a film that requires females to "becom[e], rather than transcen[d], part of the masculine order" to be considered successful and respected by their community (Natharius and Dobkin 10). Criticism surrounding *The Ballad of Little Jo* remains uncertain about how to deal with the film because its female protagonist, Josephine Monaghan, transforms into a man in order to survive and thrive in the West. The film insists that viewers reevaluate their definitions of female and male, woman and man, before inquiring further into this mysterious character's identity. Who is Jo Monaghan, and, given their unique circumstances, are we to consider them a man or a woman? Scholarship on this film makes clear that critics continue to be perplexed by the way the film challenges classic views of females in the West while still working within established genre conventions. *The Ballad of Little Jo* raises the question: to what degree must a film challenge patriarchal gender dynamics before being considered a feminist Western?

Scholars largely agree that Greenwald succeeds in creating a prosperous female hero who defies expectations by not only surviving but thriving on the frontier. Few if any critics argue that

her[1] biological sex should diminish her status as a classic Western hero; she stands by a strict moral code, is determined to prevail against daunting odds, and even becomes a well-regarded member of the community until her death. *The Ballad of Little Jo* does not feel like a classic Western because of Greenwald's commitment to subverting problematic gender-inflected Western tropes. The film is not replete with the high-tension shootouts and excessive violence that a viewer expects to find in a classic like John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), or even some revisionist Westerns like Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018), but Greenwald's long shots of the iconic Western landscape, isolated communities that work hard to make an honest living, and creation of a stoic hero who stands by a personal moral code at all costs, remind viewers that the West was inhabited by a range of figures beyond the hypermasculine gunslingers at the center of many classic Westerns. While I agree that the film disrupts conventional gender-inflected Western tropes and aims to put a woman at the center of the story (Modleski, "Our Heroes" 7), I question how the manner in which the protagonist's final image is constructed and made to bear meaning could affect the film's feminist label. As the story is based on true events, critics are faced with the difficult task of determining what to make of the film when it ultimately reinscribes patriarchal gender dynamics.

Much of the scholarship on *The Ballad of Little Jo* concerns its classification as a feminist Western. Generally, scholars agree that feminist Westerns are those that disrupt the male gaze, create an active female character with agency, and challenge mainstream plots, but some critics continue to find that definition lacking. Barry Keith Grant believes that *The Ballad of Little Jo* "is progressive to the extent that in depicting this story it questions the traditional masculinist tropes of the western, both in content and form, rather than merely show a woman in the typically male role of western hero" (66). Where other critics like Maureen T. Schwarz contend that it is necessary for the film to subvert genre conventions, Grant objects, arguing that "it is in its use of the genre that the film's feminist perspective is articulated" (66). Greenwald's use of Western tropes is necessary to maintain genre conventions

while introducing a nontraditional hero. *The Ballad of Little Jo* may be revisionist in the sense that it challenges classic tropes, but considering it a feminist Western troubles scholars because it maintains a vision of the West as a man's world.

A common criticism of *The Ballad of Little Jo* is that it situates a female hero in a man's world, effectively maintaining patriarchal gender norms by requiring that females adopt masculine qualities in order to gain influence. When faced with a film that does not dramatically subvert masculine genre conventions, critics argue that the film can no longer be considered feminist, even if it presents a female in a position of influence. In considering the genre Western's influence on American culture, Tania Modleski is among those who view the film as a negative portrayal of gender, questioning whether it can truly be considered feminist, as she believes it reinforces "conservative notions of woman's place" ("A Woman's" 538). Maureen T. Schwarz offers additional insight by proposing four fundamental traits she believes are crucial for a Western film to be considered feminist:

> the plot must constitute a subversion of and a challenge to a mainstream text; the actions of a female protagonist must drive the plot rather than simply provide a reason for actions of the male character or characters. The dialogue of one or more female protagonists must challenge and subvert masculine discourse, as well as convey agency; and meanings must be plural rather than singular. (46)

I base my argument in a similar belief: a film can present a female in a position of influence and challenge some genre conventions while still denying that female her own voice and legacy. Because the film is based on true events, it is unable to grant Jo a lasting voice and legacy while remaining faithful to the true story. As such, the film's conclusion indicts the West for its refusal to acknowledge females who gain cultural influence. The conclusion ultimately reinforces binary gender roles and reminds viewers that in the cinematic Western even the most successful female heroes are just women when the pants come off. In the end, a man is remembered for his actions, while a woman is remembered for her gender.

While remaining faithful to the true story of Little Jo's sensationalized life and death prevents Maggie Greenwald from crafting a version of this story in which Jo's legacy is more focused on her accomplishments than her deceit, I believe Greenwald's film accomplishes something else by portraying the true story of a woman who survived and thrived in a region that severely restricted options for females. Viewers watch Jo successfully navigate life in the West as a nonbinary individual. She forms relationships with her community without sacrificing her values or becoming callous in the face of violence. Despite having learned how to behave like a man in public, Jo retains many stereotypical feminine qualities that lead to her being accepted as a unique man among the townsfolk. As a man who is soft-spoken, compassionate, and sensitive to violence, Jo embodies an alternative to toxic masculinity in the American West. Although Jo's personal legacy does not reflect her achievements in life, her story prompts viewers to broaden their understanding of masculinity in the cinematic Western.

In *The Ballad of Little Jo* viewers are introduced to Josephine Monaghan dressed in Victorian-era clothing and travelling alone on foot. Her reasons for doing so are not apparent until a flashback reveals that she is seeking new opportunities in the West after her family disowned her for bearing a child out of wedlock. Viewers are immediately aware that she is violating social gender norms by travelling alone as she is propositioned, threatened, and accused of vagrancy by passing men. On the road, Josephine meets Streight Hollander, a travelling salesman who takes her in under false pretenses. He appears genuinely gracious and even leads her to believe that she could work with him to support herself financially by paying her "the first money [she] ever earned" (00:06:15) after she makes a difficult sale. What she perceives as the beginning of her own financial independence quickly turns into a sex trafficking ruse when she learns that Hollander has sold her to two soldiers as a sexual object. Josephine narrowly escapes, having learned that independent women do not succeed, even in the American West where opportunity is presented as abundant and individualism is revered.

Josephine seeks refuge in a country store, where the female

shopkeeper contemptuously scans her disheveled appearance. She is the first character to directly chastise Jo for "dress[ing] improper to [her] sex" (00:11:28), and as Jo holds men's trousers up to herself in the mirror, a reflection shot shows both Jo and the woman present in the frame. The surveying shopkeeper is seen gazing unblinkingly from over Josephine's shoulder; she stands in as the first of many disciplinarians Jo will encounter. She is "the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body . . . the disciplinarian [who] is everyone and yet no one in particular" (Bartky 142). The viewers' attention is shifted from the shopkeeper's gaze reflected in an adjacent mirror to Jo's own reflection as she looks at herself. This racking focus implies that Jo's concerns are shifting from upholding socially mandated gender norms to putting her own safety and personal needs first. Josephine's reflection appears disembodied in the mirror; her face reflects back in a smaller framed mirror suspended within the larger frame. This disembodiment can be read as a division between her physical body and her emergent understanding of self. From this point on she chooses to dress and perform as a man, first as an act of survival and later as an expression of her strength and hard-won independence.

While the danger posed by Jo's two attackers serves as the catalyst for her identity transformation, her ultimate transformation is personal. By the end Jo is not simply dressing the part for survival; she reconstructs her entire life and adopts a lifestyle fitting an independent man in the West. From her beginning as an Eastern society girl, Jo's independence is fundamental to her identity. Her decision to leave her disapproving family without relinquishing her independence suggests that her self-identity lies in her character traits rather than in her biological sex. During her journey, she quickly realizes that independent women are ostracized and, worse yet, physically threatened, so she chooses to publicly identify as a man in order to safely retain her independence and gain the opportunity to make her own way in the world. Later in the film an Eastern cattle rancher comes to claim her ranch with his family. She is given the opportunity to leave Ruby City and shed her masculine identity without risking exposing her biological sex to the townspeople, but she chooses to stay. This confirms that her masculine

gender expression is self-selected, not merely circumstantial. She is unwilling to give up her life in Ruby City, and she is loyal to her community—another quintessential character trait for the classic Western hero.

Jo does not subscribe to essentialist gender norms but instead performs her gender as she sees fit. Judith Butler's theory of performative gender argues that a person's body does not determine their gender expression but rather that one "does" their body in a performative sense:

> The body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic. By dramatic I mean only that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materialization* of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body . . . (404)

While she is alive Jo has agency to determine her own identity regardless of her biological sex; as Vincent Piturro asserts, "if someone performs as a man in the West, he or she is a man" (115). She is able to masquerade convincingly and eventually experiences a personal metamorphosis that culminates in her living alone on the range, performing as a man even when she is not being watched. She dies in men's clothing, her hair still short and her body strong. Jo's death marks the end of her transformative journey, but because of her social circumstances requiring that she keep her true identity secret, her death also marks the end of her masculine self-representation. Her anatomy is all that is left to speak on her behalf.

Jo's ultimate masculine identity confirms David Natharius and Bethami A. Dobkin's argument that "Jo is transformed into a reflection of patriarchal order" (11) by being effectively subsumed into the patriarchal social structure of Ruby City (the frontier community near which she dwells). However, her transformation is forgotten as soon as the gender performance ends and her biological sex is revealed to her unsuspecting neighbors. Upon her death she becomes nothing more than a lifeless shell—a female corpse stripped of its masculinity and identity, ultimately unable to represent itself.

The social sanctions imposed on transgressive females are clearly relayed in the juxtaposed behavior of the townsfolk before and after learning her biological sex. Before learning her secret, Frank Badger, an influential Ruby City rancher, reveals his honest opinion of Rancher Jo as he carries her corpse to the undertaker's table: "I want Little Jo Monaghan to have the best funeral ever in Ruby City" (01:51:55–59). Minutes later his demeanor has changed considerably, as he is shown ransacking Jo's house in a fit of anger.

Parallel editing is used to build tension between the undertaker's forthcoming revelation and the citizens of Ruby City fondly remembering Jo in the nearby saloon. As the undertaker is shown peeling back Jo's clothing layer by layer, Badger mourns the death of a friend he respected and toasts Little Jo Monaghan with the other townsfolk. The parallel scenes converge just as the undertaker interrupts the toast to reveal her secret: "It's about Little Jo. . . . He was a woman!" (01:54:23–25). Jo's nude body becomes the first of two grotesque spectacles displayed for a public audience. As the undertaker unveils her body, a series of reaction shots captures the onlookers' responses as they gawk at her female corpse. Jo lies silent on the table, and although the same onlookers had toasted her respectable life just moments before, the revelation of her true sex causes the town to remember her only as a woman who lied convincingly. In death, Jo is once again rendered a voiceless female. Her body is manipulated and displayed, and her memory is reduced to nothing but her sex.

The theory of performative gender identity in *The Ballad of Little Jo* is complicated by the fact that after her death Jo can no longer perform her gender. Once Jo dies her body is identified only by its physical traits and her memory is reduced to only the facts the physical corpse can tell. The most the undertaker in Ruby City can report about Jo is that her body is that of a female, and no townspeople can speak to her true experience beyond the evidence that body leaves behind. Only those who know her story could address her gender identity, and the fact that Jo's situation required secrecy makes it impossible for her story to live on. Without knowing her background, the townspeople could never represent her as she chose to represent herself in life. This is not to

suggest that the citizens of Ruby City wanted to memorialize her positively or even to understand her story. The fact that Jo's dead body is propped up on a horse and photographed from a distance is evidence that Ruby City memorialized her negatively; they effectively memorialize the spectacle of the female who pretended to be male rather than honoring Jo's story as that of a rancher who succeeded against all odds. Some scholars argue that the townspeople's laughter and their later decision to photograph her indicates positive memories and a desire to see her story live on, but I argue that it strips her of her dignity and reduces her complex identity to her sex.

The way a community treats their dead is reflective of the values of their culture, and Ruby City's decision to memorialize Jo by putting her on display speaks both to the cultural value of women and of gender nonconformity in the American West. By displaying Jo's corpse publicly, Ruby City commits an act of necroviolence as they symbolically diminish her personhood, both personally and socially. On a personal level it reduces her to a body that is gazed upon and dissociated from the human she was before death; on a social level it makes a spectacle of the deceitful woman who "transgress[ed] the social norms of femininity" (Luu 85). Jo's entire life in the West was marked by her independence, hard work, and commitment to the community. As a man the gaze she bore was neither objectifying nor sexual, but once she is revealed as biologically female, she instantly bears the withering gaze of the anonymous Other as a transgressive female. She is seen only as a female who is scarred, dead, and no longer beautiful. In a desperate attempt to rationalize this transgression, the town immediately tries to attach a tragic story to her. Her "body is charted, zoned, and made to bear meaning, a meaning which proceeds entirely from external relationships" (Silverman 66).

To display Jo's corpse is to evoke the uncanny. Her corpse is a dead object that has been presented as though still living, and in death it has a disconcerting and abject quality. Deborah Jermyn's "You Can't Keep a Dead Woman Down: The Female Corpse and Textual Disruption in Contemporary Hollywood" recalls Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject to discuss how a female corpse is "doubly abject" as an object that is dead in addition to being female:

> In Julia Kristeva's terms one might say she [the female corpse] is doubly abject, not just a woman but a dead woman. Kristeva uses the term abject to describe those things that threaten society's established boundaries (but that are nevertheless fascinating), particularly our fears of disorder, decay, and the female body. The female corpse, then, brings together two strands of the abject—femininity and mortality. (154)

Displaying and publicizing images of Jo's corpse disturbs those who view it. Her dead body does not make people think fondly of her or her success in the West; instead, it makes onlookers keenly aware of the cost of transgression. By presenting both a female and a corpse as abject figures to exemplify Jo's inexcusable gender transgression, they reinforce rigid gender roles by reminding the public what happens when they fail to comply with established social norms.

On a social level, displaying her costumed corpse for the public's entertainment labels her as a freak and transforms her into a spectacle. In her text *The Female Grotesque* Mary Russo explains that women who were seen as spectacles were simply those who lost sight of—or chose to act outside of—the social boundaries dictating appropriate gendered behavior: "For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries" (318). By choosing to "dress improper to [her] sex" and behave as a man, Josephine is considered blameworthy and therefore a woman who deserves to be publicly chastised. In the public eye she "had done something wrong, had stepped, as it were, into the limelight out of turn" (Russo 319). When they dress her up and pose her as "Rancher Jo," Ruby City is "marking [her] doubly as object and other by displaying [her] bod[y], exhibiting [her] deformities, and foregrounding [her] specularity" (Luu 86). By creating a spectacle of her costumed and posed corpse, they silence her, ignore her way of self-identifying, reduce her to her sex, and attempt to preserve her image over her story.

I believe displaying the costumed corpse serves the dual purpose of entertaining the crowd while negating Jo's success as a female rancher who identifies as a man. As a spectacle, she becomes an object of amusement. Greenwald notes that she incorporated the display of the corpse as a reminder to viewers that corpses were

routinely manipulated and displayed as entertainment in the nineteenth century: "Greenwald's idea for the scene in which the corpse is placed on the horse came from looking at books of Western photography, which she notes are filled with photographs of dead people. In fact, when she first saw the photograph of the real Jo in the newspaper clipping she thought it was a death photo" (Modleski "A Woman's" 526). While critics agree that Greenwald succeeds in creating a female Western hero, Jo's heroic status is muddled in this fascinating final scene, which has generally been left unexamined by scholars.

Although relatively few scholars have studied *The Ballad of Little Jo*, the conclusions reached about the final scene are unanimous: the act of re-costuming and posing Jo astride the horse is a way to remember her in a positive light, to mythologize her by photographing one of the first women to succeed alone in the American West. But I find the scene troubling, as it does not present Jo as she ultimately identified, nor does it provide her a dignified memorial. Instead, her rigid body is lashed to a horse to be photographed for the newspapers and displayed for the crowd. The final scene draws attention to her biological sex and her gender transgression, effectively serving to re-gender her as a woman and chastise her for her deceit. Ultimately, Jo is readmitted into patriarchal social systems, now as a body without a story: "Josephine may have had control over her gender and her body, given the adverse circumstances of her life, while alive, but, in the final scene, her body returns to being a sort of property, in accordance with male codes of morality, sexuality and heroism" (Coelho 120).

My analysis of the film's conclusion is prefigured by an earlier scene that is crucial in helping us understand the social repercussions gender transgressive women face in Jo's community. Greenwald provides viewers a detailed look at Percy and Badger, the two men who knew Jo best in Ruby City, as they discover Jo's secret. Their reactions suggest that if Jo's secret had been revealed during life, the consequences would have been severe. Limiting our view to the two men with the closest relationship to Jo makes it clear that even the closest friends are not understanding when they discover her secret; they feel angry and betrayed, and they respond

with physical violence. Although viewers do not see the others react in detail, we can assume that the rest of the townsfolk would react similarly had they discovered her secret while she was still alive.

Viewers do not witness Percy's initial reaction as he learns of Jo's background while she is away, but when he next sees Jo he calls her by her given name, "Josephine," and thus "reduce[s] her to her 'sex'" (Gatens 84) before attempting to physically dominate her by raping her: "But you're a female, and a whore at that" (Greenwald 00:56:56–59). This scene recalls Jo's earlier experience as a survivor of sex trafficking and attempted assault when she was travelling alone. Viewers are reminded that any degree of transgressive behavior, whether it is travelling unaccompanied or masquerading as a man, is punishable by sexual violence. Sue Brower claims that Jo's transgressive behavior would be seen as a threat that merits "violent elimination" in the genre Western: "the protagonists of *Brokeback Mountain* and *Ballad of Little Jo* are characters whose transgressive behavior . . . would be seen as the sources of temptation, and thus, they would be characters whom the conventional Western hero would be compelled *justifiably* to dispatch violently" (50–51). Women who violate social norms receive a specific type of "violent elimination": they become victims of sexual violence. Although Jo's safety and subjecthood are momentarily jeopardized by Percy's attempt to dominate her, reduce her to a sexual object, and publicly announce her deceit, she once again affirms her status as a Western hero by shooting with restraint.[2]

Although Jo first attempts to reason with Percy, she pulls her weapon in self-defense since he can no longer engage with Jo as an equal. Because she is a female she becomes less than human and therefore voiceless in Percy's eyes. This sudden change from Jo being respected as an equal to silenced as a woman further echoes Moira Gatens's argument that "women who step outside their allotted place in the body politic are frequently abused with terms like: harpy, virago, vixen, bitch, shrew; terms that make it clear that if she attempts to speak from the political body, about the political body, her speech is not recognized as *human* speech" (84). The fact that Percy learns about Jo's background while she is alive and capa-

ble of reasoning with him anticipates later questions viewers might have about how the film's ending might change if her identity was discovered during her life.

Unlike Percy, Badger learns about Jo's true sex after her death and is therefore dealing with a female who literally cannot speak. His reaction is complicated. At first Badger reacts to Jo's secret by ransacking her house on the ranch. He responds violently by destroying her home, knocking her belongings off the tables and walls, and throwing furniture. Similar to Percy, in learning of her secret, Badger strips Jo of her identity by cursing her and calling her an abusive term in place of her name: "Dirty son of a bitch! Goddamn you! You were just fooling and lying! Yeah! Son of a bitch! Goddamn you!" (01:56:27–40). But when he finds a concerned letter from her sister back East along with a small photo album on the floor, his physical demeanor changes from violent to calm. This sudden change of demeanor is another source of debate for critics who believe the town chooses to memorialize her positively. Some point to the reaction shot capturing Badger's reflection on Jo's photographs, which makes him appear understanding of her gender transgression, but scholars have failed to observe that Badger is in possession of Jo's photograph immediately before it is published alongside the photograph of her corpse. He presumably gives her private photograph to the newspaper for publication, and although his reasoning for sharing the photograph is unclear, his actions make a regional spectacle of a beautiful woman who chose to become a man. Because viewers witness only a few seconds of Badger's reaction to Jo's photograph, they are left wondering what he was thinking. Scholars have assumed he has good intentions to memorialize Jo for her success in the West, but my focus is not on Badger's personal opinion of Jo. I focus instead on how Badger's actions adversely affect Jo's legacy. Whether or not he intends to shame Jo by sharing her personal photograph, he decontextualizes it and renders her voiceless.

The film ends with a shot of the front page of the *Rocky Mountain Gazette*, a regional newspaper with a provocative headline that reads, "Rancher Jo Was a Woman!" Viewers can easily read the subhead that follows: "Death and a Bundle of Old Letters Reveal


SALOON
& CO.
& HINE
tail General
NDISE,
TS
Binders.
bed Wire.
baker Wagons.
JO MONAGHAN
RANCHER
JOSEPHINE MONAGHAN
SOCIETY GIRL
The strangest of all strange romances, in which a woman's sad secret is revealed after thirty years of successful concealment, was brought to light last week through the following brief notice in the Boise City Capitol News:
Joe Monaghan, a well known character of Jordan Valley, this town, center of the Soccer Creek country, was found dead of natural causes at the home of Bartholomio Mollos at upper Soccer Creek, a few days ago. Upon preparing the corpse for interment, it was discovered for the first time that "Jo Monaghan" was a woman attired to look like a rancher. It was also revealed that she had a child.
The child's future assured, she determined to begin life over in the West, that was then offering homes for the outcasts of all lands. In those days a journey across the continent was an undertaking attended by many hardships and not few dangers. this was the more

Fig. 1. Front page of the *Rocky Mountain Gazette*, 01:57:34.

the Sad Secret of a Society Girl Who Fled from Her Eastern Home and Lived as a Man on Western Ranches, Her Real Sex Unsuspected for THIRTY YEARS" (01:57:34, Fig. 1).

While they can read the headline and subtitle, the remainder of the article is in grainy, small font, so viewers are encouraged to focus on the headline then draw their attention to the two symmetrical photographs of Jo Monaghan that are centered in the frame. The photo of her corpse, captioned "Jo Monaghan, Rancher," is displayed next to the gendered caption labeling the tintype from her youth: "Jo Monaghan, Society Girl." The images are equal in size and shape, but there is a notable difference between the presentation of the body in both photographs. They are not identical in their composition. Josephine's gender-conforming body is easily seen in the professional portrait featuring her in her youth. The image is shot from up close and highlights all the feminine qualities that made her beautiful by society's standards. Ironically, the image used to reinscribe normative gender expression is the professional portrait shot by the very man who started Josephine on her journey after seducing her in the film studio; his portrait ultimately led to her pregnancy, her expulsion from the family, and her decision to move West to start a new life. This portrait of a beautiful woman draws the viewer's attention away from the photo of "Rancher" Jo's

gender-transgressing body, manipulated postmortem and shot at a distance to obscure Jo's abject body in its costume. Viewers are made to see Jo, the rancher, as a sideshow spectacle to be ogled at. Her body, now reduced to an object used for entertainment, bears the gaze of a wide audience: the citizens of Ruby City, readers of the *Rocky Mountain Gazette*, and the viewers of the film. This final scene still leaves Jo reduced to her body and remembered only as a woman.

Publications like magazines and newspapers are just several of the many media through which women are subtly and systematically socialized to equate their social value with physical beauty. Young girls develop a constant awareness of their body image, always self-evaluating and considering how they appear in the eyes of others. Sandra Lee Bartky writes that women exist in a state of constant surveillance in a patriarchal culture: "They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other" (140). This includes surveillance by the anonymous Other, but it also includes self-surveillance. There exists an equivalence between image and the bodies of women, and in her text *Theory of the Image* Ann Kibbey argues that this relationship is unquestioned by society and that women experience it in reverse—by equating their being with their image:

> Continually reasserting an intrinsic and unquestioned relation between the film image and the visible shape of a woman, this semiotic structure asserts that women are inseparable from iconicity, as if the concept of the image could not exist without women. The substance of the image, its essence, is Woman. However, actual women experience this ideology in its reverse form—as a belief that a woman's image is essential to her being. Without her image, a woman faces extinction, she ceases to exist. (45)

When they are included in a publication for public consumption, Jo's photographs gain cultural currency and consequently influence the way people think of gender dynamics. The photograph taken of her as a rancher is distant and unappealing. It contrasts starkly with the photograph of her as a beautiful young woman, a photograph

that had the power to seduce Josephine herself in her younger years. When in an earlier scene Josephine first sees her own image in the photographer's studio, she is captivated by her body. Her own beauty had the power to charm her into enacting femininity by ceding to the photographer's advances and therefore submitting to male dominance. The photograph retains the power to seduce; just as Josephine is seduced into femininity by her own image, so too are women seduced into femininity when they see her image juxtaposed with the photograph of her corpse as a rancher. The photographs reinforce gender binaries by reminding women that their worth lies in their image: our attention is drawn to beauty, and we are disturbed by the consequences of transgression.

Photography, by nature, relies on visual representations to make meaning. Siegfried Kracauer's essay "Photography" explains that photographs alone cannot bear meaning that is not conveyed in the image itself. Where human memories and associations can work anecdotally, photographs retain only the singular image captured in an instant:

> Photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum; memory-images retain what is given only insofar as it has significance. Since what is significant is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms, memory-images are at odds with photographic representation. From the latter's perspective, memory-images appear to be fragments but only because photography does not encompass the meaning to which they refer and in relation to which they cease to be fragments. (425–26)

Photographic images become decontextualized almost instantly, and the only way they can gain meaning beyond what is captured in the frame is through immediate referents who can convey memories and speak to the experience of whomever is photographed. As such, Jo's photograph from her younger years in the East cannot retain or retell the story of her youth.

Kracauer uses a photograph of his grandmother to explain the nature of photography, and he notes that "when Grandmother stood in front of the lens she was present for one second in the

spatial continuum that presented itself to the lens. But it was this aspect and not the grandmother that was eternalized" (431). His explanation of his grandmother's eternalized aspect applies to the photograph from Jo's youth; it is her appearance that lives on, not the person she was. The citizens of Ruby City can imagine what her life was like as a young woman, but because she is no longer able to speak for herself, her memories are lost, leaving only "the image taken from the family album [that] necessarily disintegrates into its particulars" (Kracauer 429). Her photograph gains meaning through the immediate context in which it is presented; as Annette Kuhn observes in *The Power of the Image*, "The immediate context in which an image appears will set limits on the ways in which it is likely to be read" (28). Contextually, we are made to remember Jo's gender above all else. The photographs anchor our memory of Josephine Monaghan in an image that fails to represent her. Kracauer argues, "the last image of a person is that person's actual '*history*'" (426), and Jo's last image becomes a history she chose to deny during her life, the photo of a gender transgressing woman who relinquished her beauty.

As consumers of the image who know nothing about Jo's background, the townsfolk and newspaper readers have no story by which to remember Jo other than the "sad secret" the newspaper reveals. Film viewers, however, have a more intimate relationship to Jo's story as they watch it unfold in her eyes through the use of point-of-view shots. Some might argue that viewers will retain a more accurate memory of her, completely dismissing the misrepresentative "last image" of Jo as a gender transgressing woman. Because of their ability to see Josephine's world through her own eyes, viewers understand her motives and come to know and identify her as a man despite knowing her background. By the end of her life, viewers are so accustomed to seeing Jo as a man in the West that they no longer think twice about her behavior or costuming, but after seeing the newspaper article that emphasizes the photograph from her life back East, even viewers remember Jo as the woman she was at the start of the film rather than the man she became. The newspaper article is the final image they associate with her story, and as Kracauer argues, "The photograph is the sed-

iment that has settled from the monogram, and from year to year its semiotic value decreases. The truth content of the original is left behind in its history; the photograph captures only the residuum that history has discharged" (429). Because Jo ceases to be able to represent herself and perform her gender for viewers, they begin to dissociate her life as an independent rancher from her lasting image in the newspaper, ultimately remembering her as a "society girl" with a "sad secret."

Though Jo Monaghan gains a position of influence during the latter portion of her life, she does so by existing in a patriarchal social system living life as a man, and because she is made to transform rather than society transforming to accept her as she is, Jo's legacy is not her influence on Ruby City but instead her gender transgression and "sad secret." In thinking about this film as a revisionist or feminist Western, I consider the argument presented by Maureen T. Schwarz, that for a Western to be considered feminist it needs to challenge mainstream texts, put women in positions of influence, convey agency by challenging masculine discourse, and have plural meanings (46). Some critics approach the question of the film's feminist label by thinking of Jo's life and personal triumphs, and while I absolutely agree that in life she fulfilled all the classifications of a feminist Western hero, in death she was cruelly stripped of her voice and legacy. Instead, I propose that her death and legacy be considered in classifying the film. Did Jo Monaghan's life as a rancher have a lasting effect on the town and their understanding of gender dynamics? Ultimately, no. Jo's death and remembrance does not convey agency but rather undermines what successes she had in her life. Jo's lived experiences are not sufficient to render *The Ballad of Little Jo* a feminist Western because her lasting legacy in the American West was unrelated to her lived accomplishments as a woman. Her actions are quickly forgotten, and the "sad" story of a woman who hid her whole life supersedes the memory of Jo's actual achievements.

Maureen T. Schwarz points out that, in the Western, "women are silenced, their words are ignored by men or seemingly have no consequences" (46). Jo does not ultimately speak for herself; instead it is the men of Ruby City—notably Badger, the man who comes to

possess and distribute her image—who speak for her, retelling her story as they imagine it. Her body is manipulated and posed dead on a horse, immortalized as a spectacle of a woman, and made the property of men. By the end of the film "Jo is transformed into a reflection of patriarchal order" (Natharius and Dobkin 11) because her inferiority as a gender-transgressing woman is reasserted. The film's theatrical release poster claims, "In 1866, a woman had only two options . . . she could be a wife or she could be a whore. Josephine Monaghan made the boldest choice of all. She chose to be a man." But Jo is not ultimately remembered as a man. In reality, townsfolk and viewers alike are reminded that, in the West, there are only two options for women: to be a woman who played by the rules, or to be a woman who was made a spectacle.

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NOTES

1. Because critics are divided on how Jo Monaghan ultimately self-identifies (as a woman masquerading as a man or as a self-identifying man), I am electing to use the gendered pronouns she/her/hers in reference to Jo. With transgender experiences only recently inciting revolutionary discourse on gender as distinct from biological sex, utilizing binary pronouns to discuss Jo's experience most accurately reflects the gendered social standards existing in Jo's lifetime. Gendered pronouns also serve to underscore the strict binary system of gender identification she thought possible in her lifetime. Though we might understand gender as a spectrum in the twenty-first century, this understanding would not have been common in the nineteenth century.

2. According to Justin A. Joyce, "The hero is everywhere a man of restraint, self-contained and self-reliant, while the villain is a foil of verbal and physical excess" (143). As a Western hero exhibiting constraint, Jo pulls her gun only a handful of times in the film—only in instances where her physical safety or the community's safety is threatened.

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