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**Repensar, rehacer.
Reflexiones y experiencias
sobre innovación docente
en Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades**

Dykinson, S.L.

REPENSAR, REHACER:
REFLEXIONES Y EXPERIENCIAS SOBRE INNOVACIÓN DOCENTE
EN CIENCIAS SOCIALES Y HUMANIDADES



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DOCENTE EN CIENCIAS SOCIALES Y HUMANIDADES

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2024



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DOCENTE EN CIENCIAS SOCIALES Y HUMANIDADES

Diseño de cubierta: Rafa Ramiro

Maquetación: Francisco Anaya Benítez

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Madrid - 2024

N.º 219 de la colección Conocimiento Contemporáneo

1ª edición, 2024

ISBN: 978-84-1070-328-5

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WONDER WOMAN. THE TEACHING AND EDUCATION VALUE OF THE ANCIENT FEMALE WARRIOR IMAGE IN CINEMA

ARTURO SANCHEZ SANZ

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Amazon myths have survived in the collective Western imagination for more than two millennia as a legendary stereotype (Sánchez Sanz 2023a, p. 3). Something beyond the rational and socially acceptable, but which, perhaps for that reason, generated a special attraction. In the 20th century, Western culture has been shaken by enormous social changes that have not been carried out in a short period of time. The image of women in Western society has been changing little by little, relying on all those cultural icons that could help to offer a new vision of their place. All kinds of influences from art, cinema and TV, comics and videogames have been at work in this process since the 20th century.

All of which have contributed, and still do, to a process that the Greeks themselves tried to avoid. From 1902, when the first feature film dedicated to the Amazon myths (*The March of the Amazons*. UK) directed by George Smith was released, to the recent instalments starring Wonder Woman, more than a century has passed in which the image of the female warrior has undergone a profound change as a consequence of the development of Western society. For this reason, it is now possible to take advantage of the impact of cinematic products as tools capable of offering a new model of education (García Amilburu, 2010, p. 28).

FIGURE 1. *Wonder Woman*



Fuente: DC Comics

The Amazon world aroused the interest of Greek authors since Homeric times, creating various myths throughout history. The persistence of these warrior women in Classical literature generated a stereotypical vision of them and the events surrounding them that became established and perpetuated in the collective imagination. The mythical realm of the Amazons was located at the limits of the known world that was

considered civilised, and they showed different facets always related to the representation of the ideal of the Greek woman totally inverted. Their defeats were used to demonstrate the superiority of the masculine over the feminine even from the Geometric Period (Sánchez Sanz, 2023b, p. 835), showing that patriarchal society was the optimal means of controlling female sexuality and precipitation, which represented the very opposite of what was appreciated by males; even though these, in themselves, would include both masculine (warriors) and feminine (women) aspects.

2. OBJECTIVES

- To demonstrate that cinema has undergone a change in terms of the vision of women.
- To analyse the influence of the image of the female warrior created by classical culture through Amazon myths in the world of cinema and its role in this process.
- To demonstrate that it is possible to use the feature and shorts films (Parra Rodriguez and Cruz López, 2022, pp. 60-61) as a tool for teaching history (Fortino, 2012, p. 11).

3. METHODOLOGY

We will rely on recent models offered by cultural anthropology associated with comparative cognitive, social and visual analyses of cultural groups in the past and present in order to understand how certain thoughts have originated and how they have developed to reverse their original meaning. We will analyse examples of feature films dedicated to Amazon myths and women warriors based on classical culture in order to understand how a paradigm shift has taken place and how we can use new technologies for teaching innovation (Pulido Polo, 2016, p. 535).

4. RESULTS

The results obtained allow us to demonstrate a deep paradigm shift in the status of the feminine in Western culture, as opposed to the image created to define Hellenic society, which until recently had remained unaltered for millennia. This change affects not only our current value system, but also the social, political, economic, conceptual and artistic fields.

Wonder Woman embodies the quintessential heroine. She was created by William Moulton Marston (psychologist and inventor of the poly-graph) and her adventures first appeared in DC Comics in 1941. She is an Amazon princess named Diana. Her name evokes the Greek goddess huntress, one of the activities that myth attributes to the Amazons, and her hometown is named after the mythical Amazon capital, Themyscira. Her alter ego is Diana Prince, who possesses extraordinary powers granted by the gods and developed through intensive training. She was created as an archetype of the liberal woman of the time, of what women could do if they managed to free themselves from the role traditionally assigned to them by Western society and, since then, this has been one of her hallmarks, even though many archetypal aspects still remain in the vision of women in cinema (Jiménez-Millán *et al.*, 2020, p. 109).

The success of this female heroine has been enormous. With the exception of 1986, the comic has been published uninterruptedly up to the present day. In her adventures she always appears defending truth, justice, peace and sexual equality, which is quite commendable given the position of women in the era in which she was created. For this reason, her figure also became an icon of feminist movements in several countries.

There is no doubt that one of the aims of creating this character was to attract and address a female public that lacked direct references of women with this type of behaviour, self-confident, sure of their worth and fighting for their independence. However, her creator not only had her act as a nurse after leaving her kingdom, a job traditionally destined for women and well regarded for combining in a profession the typical characteristics of kindness, love, care, etc. associated with women, but the adventures in which she took part were always at the side of her beloved, an American soldier, never autonomously and independently.

Wonder Woman's homeland was on a mysterious and unknown island called Paradise, where a society of women controlled all facets of life, unlike the rest of the world. Diana appears as the daughter of the mythological Amazon queen Hippolyta, and she would have a dark-skinned sister named Nubia. Curiously, in an attempt to bring together the two Hellenistic traditions that speak of the existence of two Amazon tribes, one Asian and the other African.

Her first TV appearance was in 1975 and continued until 1979, but she has also starred in several animated series and a feature film is expected in 2016. Like many other charismatic characters in the comic book world, Wonder Woman has spawned a huge amount of merchandising. Among the various positive aspects that emanate from this female figure, one of them lies in making ancient Hellenic culture and mythology known to the general public.

She possesses several magical items such as a "lasso of truth" that forces her to speak it and can make her lose her memory, two indestructible bracelets and a tiara that she uses as a weapon. As qualities she is presented as having extraordinary strength and great beauty (Iriarte and González, 2008, p. 186), both attributes that classical sources traditionally associated with Amazons⁹⁵. Thus, the same attributes that in Greek society served to exemplify the female anti-model that showed characteristics closer to the male than to the female, are now used to defend female empowerment through the media. It is therefore possible to use the mass media's power of attraction to create new forms of educational innovation.

5. DISCUSSION

The Greeks created the Amazon myths with the main intention of presenting an anti-model for women, so that the ideal of the feminine had to oppose all its characteristics in order to accept a secondary role in the patriarchal Greek society. This image has been preserved for millennia, as demonstrated by the world of cinema during much of the 20th

⁹⁵ Ps. Callisth. 3. 25-27; Philostr. *Her.* 14.1-2; Q. S. 6. 241-245 and 1. 48-53; Tz. *PH.* 28.

century, although the struggle for equality has managed to develop a change in this paradigm to the point of turning the Amazons into a model of empowered women. Based on this new image, it is possible to use film as a means of teaching innovation in the study of disciplines such as History, Archaeology, Anthropology, etc. (Amar, 2009, p. 134).

Despite the number of films that this new art form had come to generate and the appearance of important characters related to the Amazon myth, between 1900 and 1960 they had not yet aroused the interest that they would later arouse. Even with the emergence of the comic in the 1940s, only six related films had been made (only two of them in the 1950s and 1960s).

Not even when, after the outbreak of the 1st and 2nd World Wars, many countries saw a huge increase in the social and productive importance of women as men were sent to the war fronts, did this reflect an increase in such stories in Western cinema and TV. In 1902, the first Amazon-related work appeared in the UK, if only in its title. All of them coincide in their version of the original myths, showing the existence of a tribe of warrior women living in isolation in the South American jungles.

In the 1960s, the number of films about Amazons increased enormously. In just ten years, as many films were produced as in the previous sixty years. The Amazon myth was beginning to gain strength in the cinema and its fame would not stop growing in the following decades. The 1970s saw the definitive take-off of the Amazon myth in cinema. More than 10 films were produced.

In the 1980s, the strength of the Amazon myth in cinema reached its peak. The world was still producing more than one film a year on this theme. However, the 1990s marked the beginning of the decline and only four films were produced worldwide. References to worlds and eras lost in time now began to give way to the emergence of Amazon societies in post-apocalyptic worlds.

Between 2000-2010, the trend remained low, with only five feature films produced internationally. Similarly, although new works may appear in the years up to 2020, so far, between the films already produced

and others announced, only four productions will see the light of day, including animated works.

While this low trend could continue, we cannot rule out that the appearance of the film version of the heroine Wonder Woman could change it, depending on its success. From animation and the old TV series, the leap to film could mean the return of the legend's importance to the cinema.

As for TV, the representation of the Amazon myth has had little participation. Its main exponents have been *Wonder Woman* and *Xena, the warrior princess*. However, the influence of feminist movements, which came to the fore at this time, also allowed the appearance of powerful and independent female characters who reflected this Amazon character, far removed from the stereotype of the exemplary mother and wife, in important series such as *Charlie's Angels*, *The Bionic Woman*, *Nikita*, etc.

Although, apart from Wonder Woman (DC), the Amazon myth has not had much influence in the world of comics, it has served to promote the appearance of numerous important, albeit secondary, female characters and other protagonists where women with powers or exceptional qualities have become stereotypes (Sanchez Sanz, 2019, p. 14) to be imitated by countless fans. This has allowed some of these characters to make the leap to TV or film, sometimes first in animated works and shortly afterwards in feature films.

Be that as it may, despite the reduction in the number of works of this type, the myth of the Amazons has always been present in the collective imagination, and it soon reached the cinema and never left it. The presentation of these mythical warrior women does not only refer to works that have directly sought to commercially exploit the mention of such an important icon of female strength and independence⁹⁶, but for decades, it has been extrapolated to many female characters who, without having a clear reference to the Amazons, have shown the same strength and courage with great success.

⁹⁶ Contrary to the image of women among the Greeks, who were physically and mentally always placed below men (Sanchez Sanz, 2020, p. 17).

Thus, if we analyse the majority of audiovisual products starring women that aim to show an image of an empowered woman, we can see that it was not until the 21st century that the new social models aimed at equality had a real impact on the world of cinema. Until then, the vast majority of examples used the female figure as a lure for male audiences, highlighting her more feminine characteristics while showing others such as strength, determination, character and independence.

It is only thanks to advances in women's rights that social change has reached the world of cinema, although the examples that do exist still do not completely abandon the need to capture not only female but also male audiences through the eroticisation of their image. However, it is possible to take advantage of these products to emphasise the attributes that are directly related to female empowerment beyond the sexualisation of their image in order to turn them into tools for teaching innovation, although to do so, it is still necessary to subject them to an important task of analysis, selection and revision.

6. CONCLUSION

We believe that it is not only possible to use film as a tool for educational innovation (Pereira Domínguez, 2005, p. 206), but necessary to improve the ways in which knowledge is transmitted. New technologies provide an attractive learning environment that we can use to create new forms of education and learning that in this case focus on the importance of educating in gender equality to consolidate the change of traditional cultural values (Reia-Baptista, 2005, p. 13).

During the 20th century, cinema and TV became the most important media, which have always tried to find interesting and captivating stories for their viewers. The existence of the myth of women warriors fighting against men and their cultural impositions could not be left out of a medium that constantly needs inspirational figures. The success of films, series or documentaries showing combative women, outside their traditionally accepted social position and confronting their own cultural restrictions, has always been successful.

From the USA to China, the myth of the Amazons has been adapted in all kinds of formats, although the aim has never been to depict any of the original myths, but rather versions set in the most diverse times and places and always centred on the fantastic, on the mixture of Greek and Roman mythology adapted to the cultural and political reality of the time in which they were produced.

In the various myths we know about the Amazons, their battles against Herakles, the Athenians, Theseus or Achilles, show strong and brave women who, in spite of this, were never able to achieve victory over their enemies. The history of the Amazons reflected in film and TV, with exceptions such as *Wonder Woman* and *Xena*, shows very similar characteristics. They are combative women who, despite their skills and prowess, are usually defeated.

These stories seem to seek to offer a message very similar to that which the ancient Greeks sought to convey, in relation to the role women were destined to play in their society. Western culture, as heir to those traditions, has not strayed too far in this respect. Films, TV series, etc. have almost always been produced and devised by men and aimed not at a female audience, but at a male one.

The Amazons always showed a strong and determined character (Sanchez Sanz, 2018, p. 222), organising a social system outside the traditions of the predominant cultures both in Asia and in the West, their values were the same as in the heroic legends but their customs were directly opposed to the conventional ones, in the most radical way.

Modern stories, except in those works where they take on a leading role, often depict women with superficial personalities, destined to act as secondary characters. Sometimes they offer a higher degree of independence than the typical housewife, but in most cases their behaviour does not go beyond that. Many comic or film heroines display these characteristics (Lois Lane, etc.), from which, little by little, female characters with characteristics and behaviour closer to those of the Amazons have been generated. The mythical enemies of the Hellenes did not hate men. However, many of these works focus almost exclusively on this hatred, which never really existed. Perhaps this is intended to show them as possessing an irrational character that they never really had.

The Amazons were a clear example of what a woman could become if she allowed her supposedly feminine nature to impose itself on traditional and accepted social norms, but for the Greeks this meant confronting the established order, a trait that characterised barbarians as opposed to civilised societies (Taube, 2013, p. 54; Martini, 2013, p. 182; Ortega Balanza, 2017, p. 193; Saïd, 2013, p. 158; Mercury, 2009, p. 26; Diel, 2004, p. 85). The Greeks understood that, because of their own condition, if they did not integrate in the right way, they would end up being carried away by their indomitable nature.

These kinds of discrepancies have possibly fostered a very deteriorated image of Amazons today, even though characters such as Wonder Woman, the archetypal Amazon in comics and film, have tried to alleviate this.

As such a figure, even this modern Amazon does not have much to do with the real Amazons (Sanchez Sanz, 2017, p. 146). She has special powers that the Amazons never had or needed to defeat the men they faced. As her only weapon she uses a whip, although it is true that the warrior women of the steppes used this type of element, they rarely used it in combat, where they are always represented carrying swords, spears and shields, later opting for the bow, all of them weapons that the Greeks themselves used throughout their history.

In spite of this, this type of figure, together with the advances made by the different feminist waves that followed one another in the 20th century, meant that their values and strength began to penetrate the feminine part of society once again, to the point of showing women as heroines in their own right.

Hollywood has been the main factory that has been most interested in exploiting its own fantastic versions of the Amazon myth. In Asia, on the other hand, there has always been a long tradition of women fighters who very soon moved on to cinema and TV through works centred on martial arts such as: *Red Heroine* (1929), *Swordswoman* (1930) or, more recently, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Legendary Amazons* (2011). Characters such as the protagonist of the Japanese film *Lady Snowblood* (1973) would become the reference for the creation of O-Ren in *Kill Bill*.

And not only that, the reflection of his behaviour in many of his heroines has reached all genres of cinema: from Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*, to Sarah Connor in *Terminator*, *Lara Croft* or the *Kill Bill*, *Resident Evil*, *Underworld* sagas; or on TV through characters such as *Sheena: Jungle Queen*, *Charlie's Angels* or *Buffy: Vampire Slayer*.

The subsequent boom in this type of work may be related to what was defined as the "second feminist wave" (Sanchez Sanz, 2018, p. 227), a period of increasing struggle for women's rights from 1960-1990 as a new phase of the feminist movement that would change the Western cultural landscape using media such as comics and cinema.

It was during this period that more than 56% of the works related to Amazon myths were produced and presented, compared to 31% in the later period up to the present day and a meagre 13% between 1910-1960. Although it may seem that the role of women in these stories has developed from less prominent characters to more independent and leading ones, we are just beginning to do so. Throughout history, women have always been relegated by the imposition of a patriarchal system that established a socially accepted way of acting; however, that same constraint has always created in them the need to find and emulate those real or mythical characters who rebelled against that reality.

Myths, like all other stories, regardless of whether they come to us through a Homeric poem, the radio, a comic book or a Hollywood film, always revolve around archetypal figures such as the hero, the villain, etc., who offer us guidelines for accepted behaviour destined to be emulated.

Such figures have become the source for showing the possibilities that a change in the traditional social paradigm can offer. More and more female characters achieve relevance in these stories, without having to be associated with or subordinate to their male counterparts. Little by little, society has been changing, but there is still a long way to go. However, it is necessary to go that way in order to achieve a different society, and paradigm shifts related to ideas based on the patriarchal system must become the basis for achieving greater equality.

For this reason, it is important to promote models of empowered women from a non-sexualised point of view, and to take advantage of the appeal of cinema to promote this change in the image of women that

will turn them into a model totally opposed to the original purpose of the Amazon myths. Students need more and more motivation to learn, and we have new tools to transfer the new ethical and moral values to the new society (Marcos Ramos, 2010, p. 306). The media will always be influenced by the end consumer, so it is important to rework their products to take advantage of their impact on society in order to encourage critical thinking (Gonzalez Gonzalez *et al.*, 2014, p. 6).

8. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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