

The Wind

Dir. Victor Sjöström | US | 1928 | N/C 12A | 1h 35m (TBC)

Performing live: Stephen Horne (piano) and Frank Bockius (percussion)

8.15pm on Sunday 24 March 2024

Restored by The Museum of Modern Art with support from the Celeste Bartos Fund for Film
Preservation.

“A delicately reared young girl has travelled from the east to the Texan plain, a hostile dry place of incessant, maddening winds. She finds herself ejected from her only relative’s ranch by a jealous wife and is standing in a dirty, wooden shack married to a comparative stranger who is trying to kiss her. She recoils. He tries to put her at ease by bring coffee, she can’t drink it, and tips in the water jug when he’s not looking but later, he finds out and having tried everything he can think of storms out slamming the tin coffee cup on the floor. They pace, one each side of a locked door, on their wedding night, unable to break the deadlock. He, resigned picks up the flimsy cup and carefully begins to press out the dents he has made in his passionate outburst. This is the critical scene in *The Wind* a beautifully observed and constructed *tour de force* of the late silent cinema.”

A silent film about a phenomenon we can only hear not see, may strike us as an absurdity, but *The Wind* is all about the senses. Where a 1990s blockbuster on a windy theme may have bigged-up the action, or a 21st century film might emphasise the global apocalyptic side of weather events, in the 1920s weather was most often used expressively, that is, as an echo of the trauma a character is going through. The original novel on which this film is based is a melodrama - a Texan classic by a fascinating author Dorothy Scarborough, and melodrama as a form, is chock full of weather - storms are *de rigueur*, ice floes a must, tempests and torrents, tornados and monsoons are handy plot devices for dramatic denouements, or they can be part of the metaphorical schema. In Scarborough's novel the wind is used both as plot device and as metaphor - in fact it is all-consuming - because it is

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relentless and because it is a wind full of sand. Perhaps it ought to have been called *True Grit*, both for its scratchiness - that Mohave desert sand gets in everything, even the mind of the audience - and the survival instincts of its heroine – played by the incomparable Lilian Gish.



Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Collection.

In the real world too, Gish, who had worked up a treatment and scenario with Frances Marion, had to have considerable grit. Irvin Thalberg, anxious about the conversion to sound, may not have been as supportive as she would have liked but it was a lavish enough production. The filmmakers really went to town, with aircraft engines to create the wind and sand effects, and it was given to the great Victor Sjöström to direct. He was an intelligent and sensitive director with a natural empathy for the forces of nature and arguably for the woman's point of view. The story is seen from a female perspective and is full of sexual symbolism. The wind, which is repeated as visual metaphor throughout, represents male lust, the perils of the natural world and the animal passions. In its more

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extreme manifestation, it is shown as a white stallion raging in the gale. Letty is as terrified of it as she is of sex. Lige is obliged to leave her to round up wild horses, allowing Roddy, who has been stalking her, to get her alone as the storm rises. The shack is shaking itself to bits and the wind batters at the door, she is almost driven demented by it when she realises the knocking at the door is a person – we see a fist hammering at it from the other side – she lets him in, the door bursting open with the force of the storm then, realising it is not Lige, tries to escape but is literally blown by the wind back against him. The symbolism here is plain.

Lilian Gish, in interviews later in life, claimed that that the studio forced them to tack on a 'happy' ending but it seems to me that the conclusion is remarkably successful. No evidence has ever come to light in Frances Marion's draft scripts of the tragic ending, taken from the novel, where Letty walks out into a sandstorm so that it is open to speculation whether Gish was trying to justify the film's lack of box office success. These modest returns were less about the quality of the film itself and more about the unsuitable soundtrack imposed on exhibitors, newly wired for sound, and perhaps its 19th century setting didn't chime well with all the modern jazzy musicals in circulation. In the long run, she needn't have worried...with Sjöström's microcosmic attention to detail and her ardent performance, *The Wind* is now rightly seen as a masterpiece.

BRYONY DIXON

*Bryony Dixon is a curator at the BFI National Archive with special responsibility for silent film, and author of [100 Silent Films](#) (BFI Screen Guides 2011) and [The Story of Victorian Film](#) (BFI 2023). She has been lead curator on recent BFI silent film restorations, including all nine surviving Hitchcock silent films, the works of Anthony Asquith, *The Great White Silence* (1924) and *Shiraz* (1928). She is currently working on the three series of Stoll Sherlock Holmes stories (1921-23).*

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