Back to God's Country (1919)

Markus Heide

dir. David Hartford; prod. James Oliver Curwood, Ernest Shipman; screenplay Nell Shipman, James Oliver Curwood; photography Dal Clawson, Joseph Walker. silent, 35mm, black/white, 73 mins. Canadian Photoplays Ltd., distrib. First National Exhibitors' Circuit.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Back to God's Country is a Northwoods melodrama, a genre quite popular in the first decades of North American filmmaking: a sentimental adventure story set in the Canadian »wilderness,« juxtaposing the purity of nature to urban immorality and vice. *Back to God's Country* is considered the most successful Canadian silent film with regard both to financial profit and critical acclaim (Clandfield 5-6). The film is based on the short story »Wapi, the Walrus« by U.S.-American novelist James Oliver Curwood. The lead actress, Nell Shipman, adapted the adventure story and made the protagonist female—much to the disapproval of Curwood himself, who disliked the fact that in the film adaptation it is a heroine who saves her husband (Morris 95). While *Back to God's Country* faced problems with censorship authorities due to its nude scene, this scene at the same time aroused the heightened interest of the audience. For a few seconds, Shipman can be seen bathing naked under a waterfall (Heide and Kotte 30; Armatage).

This melodrama, following the formula of the captivity narrative, is built on a suspense structure nurtured by a clear contrast between evildoers and morally pure representatives of Canadian society. The set-up of characters and settings reflects social differences and conflicts within Canadian society, such as regional characteristics, gender roles, ethnic diversity, and racism. While the movie fosters a critical view on anti-Chinese sentiment as well as sexualized violence, its use of blackfacing and the »entertaining« depiction of Inuit confrontation with modern technology borrow from and reproduce racist forms of representation. The setting of the love drama spans the nation, from West to East to North, from British Columbia to Ontario to the

Arctic—corresponding to a stronger demand for distinctly Canadian perspectives in film during and after World War I (Morris 82, 92, 175). This filmic journey through the Dominion of Canada turns social space into a domestic stage that must be protected and cleared from sexual transgression, illegitimate violence, and crime. The emotional drive of the narrative is heightened by the inclusion of domesticated animals and the protagonist's strong emotional ties to a dog as well as bear cubs, racoons, and other animals and friendly forest creatures. The »wildlife film« (Armatage 262) was particularly successful because of its leading actress, Shipman (Heide and Kotte 28-31), who had already starred in the U.S.-produced Northwoods melodramas *God's Country and the Woman* (1916) and *Baree, Son of Kazan* (1918).

Back to God's Country opens with two storylines: One focuses on Dolores LeBeau (Shipman), spanning from her late childhood into married life and motherhood, and the other on the fate of the dog, »Wapi, the Killer,« spanning from his ancestry to his domesticated life in the caring human community of the Canadian family. These storylines eventually merge, with both protagonists in existential struggle against evil forces and the hostile Arctic. The meeting of the narratives eventually results in a happy ending for both the human and non-human protagonist.

The drama begins with a prologue on the history of Far North settlements in the 1870s, told through the fate of a Great Dane and his owner, as the intertext puts it, »in days when the lure of gold lay heavy on the land there labored into the great white north a Chinaman named Shan Tung, and with him a giant dog called Tao.« When Shan Tung and Tao enter the lively saloon, the impressive dog is welcomed by friendly looking and curious eyes, but the crowd reacts with dismissive and hostile looks when Shan Tung takes off his fur cap and reveals his face. At the bar, a drunken brute approaches Shan Tung and cuts off his braid. The fellow guests are amused and react with laughter. But the intertext informs the audience that this is the »deadliest of all insults« to the Chinese man. When Shan Tung takes out his knife to take revenge, the brute shoots him dead. With this act of violence, the dog's migration further north begins: »In the years that follow, farther and still farther north wanders the blood of Tao the Great Dane, until at last […] on the edge of the Arctic Sea, comes ›Wapi, the Killer,‹ a throwback of forty dog generations, a white man's dog in a brown man's land.« Wapi is trained to be a fighting dog, constantly chained and mistreated by his owner, Sealskin Blake, a trader among »the Eskimo.« The prologue introduces Wapi in sentimental and anthropomorphic terms: »An alien without friends, hating the men who understand nothing of the magic of kindness and love, but whose law is the law of the whip and the club.« Beyond introducing the animal protagonist, the prologue defines the leitmotif of the melodrama: the danger of destroying the friendly coexistence between different ethnic groups, between the sexes, and between humans and animals in the North.

Following the prologue, the viewer encounters Dolores as a young woman who grew up in the northern Rocky Mountains. The first scenes show her enjoying an isolated life, solely with her father, in a remote log house, in total harmony with nature and wildlife. When Peter (played by Wheeler Oakman), a researcher sent by a government agency, enters the scene, Dolores' father senses that a marital prospect might open for his daughter, who had thus far led a life fully immersed in nature, unexposed to human society and the city. And indeed, Dolores and Peter eventually fall in love and plan on a future together. However, the editing technique reveals that the idyllic life in »God's Country« is under threat. Here, the camera's gaze shifts to »Captain« Rydal

(played by Wellington A. Playter) and his companion, who appears in blackface. After having brutally killed a Canadian mounted policeman, Rydal puts on the latter's uniform. The evildoers first spot Dolores when she bathes naked under a waterfall. While Peter is on his way back to Ottawa, Rydal tries to rape Dolores, with his companion staring on lustfully at the scene. When Dolores' father interferes, he accidently kills the blackfaced man. Rydal, still in disguise, arrests the father and leads him into the forest, isolating Dolores in the log house as his prey. In the woods, Rydal pushes the father down a cliff into a wild river, from which Dolores retrieves his dead body. Peter returns unexpectedly and finds Dolores devastated on the riverbank. Rydal observes the scene from afar and gives up on Dolores—escaping, before reappearing in the second part of the film.

A fade-out and a fade-in indicate a leap in time. We see Dolores and Peter, now a married couple, settled in a luxurious house in Ottawa. While Peter works in his library, Dolores dreams of a return to her childhood home in the West. The couple receives note that Peter's agency will be sending him up North. We next see the couple »weeks later aboard the Flying Moon. Round the jagged coast of Baffin Land into the edge of the Arctic Sea.« It turns out that Rydal is the captain of the vessel. He threatens to kill Dolores' husband if she reveals his identity. Dolores is therefore completely at the mercy of the evil captain, who continues to try to seduce her. Following Rydal's first attempt at murder, Peter is left injured and has to stay in his cabin as a captive. Later, Rydal and his evil companion, Sealskin Blake, keep the couple trapped in a lonely wooden hut in the midst of Arctic ice on Baffin Island. In this hopeless situation, Dolores, the animal lover, befriends Wapi, who is kept in unbearable conditions, chained, and abused by the whip. At this point, the generic narrative takes an exceptional turn. Dolores assumes an active role, transforming into a heroine who fights against male persecutors and thereby confronts the viewer with a matrimonial relationship that contradicts traditional patriarchal patterns. The husband is injured, passive, immobile—while the wife acts in a male-dominated environment, defends herself, shoots at her kidnappers, and endures the extreme hardship of the Arctic. With the help of Wapi, Dolores manages to escape on dog sleds—led by faceless, voiceless Inuit—across the Barents Sea. The wild chase on the ice is framed in spectacular, on-location images, following the desperate heroine and her merciless pursuers. Some of the scenes are ostensibly shaky images, adding existential urgency and suspense. Finally, Dolores makes Wapi attack Rydal's sled dogs. With Wapi's aid the couple reaches civilization at Fort Confidence in the Northwest Territories, but Wapi himself is left severely injured on the ice. At the Fort, the military police are informed about Rydal's evil activities. Rydal, who tries to escape, falls into the frozen lake, and the camera follows his sinking dead body. Finally, Wapi reappears, and the narrative solution is dramatically triggered: »Wapi—dear old Wapi—we're going home—home—and you are going with us…«

The closing scenes show the couple happily back in the Western idyll, back in »God's Country,« where Dolores grew up and for which she has longed: »and then the old dream . . . COME TRUE.« We see a group of wolf puppies, bears, and other animals in the forest. A shot of Dolores cuddling with a bear cub is followed by the couple at the desk: Peter writing, Dolores sewing. Both observe the scene, gently smiling. The final shot focuses on Wapi next to Dolores and Peter's infant on the floor. As Gittings rightly observes, »the film's opening image of a Chinese man and his dog is displaced by the white family and their dog« (110).

Back to God's Country shows a strong heroine who successfully defends herself against sexualized violence, and who takes the lead in rescuing her weakened husband—a role Nell Shipman repeated in *Something New*, a 1920 film she both wrote and directed (Armatage 121-60; Heide and Kotte 30). This gender constellation and this strong heroine may be read as an emancipatory statement. In fact, it attempts »to reverse the gaze of male voyeurism« (Gittings 108). However, the narrative closure reverts to traditional patriarchal patterns: Dolores' adventure ends in matrimonial reproduction. The ending reintroduces traditional middle class ideals of the nuclear family, with the sewing wife as mother and domestic laborer, and the husband, in his writing, professionally linked to the outside world. Through the anthropomorphized character of Wapi, even male heroic agency is reintroduced at the climax of the wild chase. When Wapi launches his decisive attack on the enemy's sled, the intertext comments: »Fighting at last the greatest of all his fights—for a woman.«

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