

Film Analysis and Contemporary Mexican Narrative: A Theoretical Approach to a Reflexive Point of View

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The object of these notes is to demonstrate how a film such as *Danzon* (Mexico, 1992) by Maria Novaro proposes a system of glances (between characters as well as between the spectator and the screen) that involves the spectator in the construction of a space in which it is possible to establish a genuine dialogue between men and women far beyond the moment of watching the film. It is, naturally, a dialogue that might as well go beyond the aesthetic and ideologic conventions that have produced so far unnecessarily antagonic visions of the world.

The film *Danzon* is one of the few which has been able to reach such a radical proposal at the same time than inviting the spectators to participate in the same play of glances that has been dominant in cinema history. This is so precisely because of this film's paradoxical and metafictional nature. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that the metafictional nature of this film is not narrative or structural, but strictly audiovisual. It is an example of what might be called a system of audiovisual metafiction, which is based on the process of laying bare the audiovisual conventions of traditional cinema, and at once using these conventions whenever the story requires them.

In short, I will take *Danzon* as an example of the possibility, all the more frequent in contemporary cinema, of laying bare the conventions that make possible film fiction, and most particularly the conventions related to the placing and displacements of the camera. This is what I call a reflexive point of view in this film.

Fragmentation and continuity: from classic to postmodern cinema

It is a well known fact, established by film criticism in the last thirty years, that our perception of the world in general, and that of the opposite sex in particular (in men as well as in women) have been constructed and confirmed according to the way cinema has taught us to look. And if this education has generated misinterpretations in daily life in all of us, cinema has the capacity to transform the elements of desire, and in this way to contribute to a dialogue between genders that has been so far only a declaration of mutual good will.

The departure of these notes is the acknowledgment that masculine glance has been constructed as a fragmentary glance, whereas feminine glance just has been absent of the film screen. If male glance is fragmentary, its nature is necessarily digital, that is to say, organized by discrete units, separated one from another. Nevertheless, all of them are united in cinematographic edition through the logics of hypotaxis, that is to say, of the sequentiality of time and space.

Furthermore, the female glance might be identified, provisionally, with what masculine glance has left as an emptiness in the history of images in Western art, or at least in the canonical version of cinema along twentieth century. This glance is then of an analogic nature, that is to say, it is a continuous, global, and paratactic glance. This means that every image and every narrative sequence are recombinable in many possible ways. This kind of montage is characteristic of a great portion of modern cinema, especially that of the sixties. If every spectator establishes this combinatory every time he or she watches a film, then this kind of montage proposes a kind of analogical glance. This means that every image may be interpreted in relation to the associations of each and every spectator, and not exclusively in terms of the narrative sequence of the story, according to the classic narrative.

Therefore, *the traditional masculine glance is fragmentary, and what that glance fragments is time, human body, and actions*. In traditional cutting, the masculine glance fragments time in very short takes, which last three or four seconds each, especially in the action movies. The human body is also fragmented in short, fixed, and very close takes, linked to the logics of segmenting the female body. This segmentation is easily recognizable also in the enumeration of body parts found in erotic poetry, as well as in the action units in classic cinema, organized in a sequential order.

But there is not only a difference between the intrinsic nature of masculine and feminine glances (that is, in the way each of them has been construed in classical cinema), but also the female glance is inscribed in a system of glances, that is to say, it does not belong in one single perspective, neither in a pre-established code of fragmentation in sequential montage. Therefore, *the feminine glance is at once analogical and gregarious*. During several generations, film critics have been wondering if it is possible to reorganize this system of conventions through a reformulation of spectacular cinema. The answer is in postmodern cinema, of a paradoxical nature, where narrative conventions are being used and subverted at once.

To see and to be seen

In modern fiction the reader or spectator always has an advantageous position in front of the characters, in such a way that he or she can observe a morally risky situation (inside the boundaries of fiction) with the possibility to enter or to leave it at will.

Metafiction is a critical strategy that lets the spectator to be aware of the narrative conventions that make possible such a distance. In other words, the power of metafiction lies in its letting the reader or spectator to be able to enter or to leave a particular

narrative convention. A film with a strong degree of romanticism where the camera is constantly crossing the boundary between the glance of the character and the glance that observes that very glance is a film where the (masculine) spectator may understand (if he wishes to) the nature of the feminine glance addressed to himself, inasmuch as woman has always been able to understand his perspective, because this perspective (the masculine one) has always been dominant in film history.

Metafiction, then, is a textual system that offers the reader/spectator the possibility to enter and to leave the fictional conventions. *Danzon* is a film that tells a story of glances. In this film, glances are not only masculine or feminine, they are also ordinary and ritual; they are also luxurious and jealous; coquettish and afraid; seductive and predatory; innocent and sophisticated.

That is why metafiction in *Danzon* is based in the relationship between seeing and being seen. In this film, whenever the camera observes what is being observed by a character, it also observes the glances that observe what we see on the screen. Here we are facing a film that lets man to understand the way his partner of the opposite sex looks at him as the object of her glance.

Being aware of the logics of the glance (where there is at stake our generic identity and our way to desire) is something closely linked to the positioning of the camera. If what we men build in the symbolic plane are strategies for being accepted by other members of our gender, the act of watching this kind of films may lead us to share with the opposite sex an experience which is confirmed by the glance of others in the projection room (or the video monitor).

A glance that looks at itself

All the former process is produced by means of the construction of a system of glances that look at themselves through the camera. It is, in other words, a matter of telling the story of the characters as a story of glances where the camera is one more character. A film that is aware of its audiovisual conventions has a metafictional nature, and it positions the camera in such a way that this is constantly addressing its glance to the glances of the characters. *The cinema of characters becomes a cinema of glances*, by showing the system of glances that defines identity, desire, and anagnorisis of the characters. In other words, what is being told is precisely this process of search of identity through desire and personal revelation. The logics of this system of epiphanies is what connects cinema to the tradition of short story.

What happens in the case of *Danzon*? We as spectators watch the dreaming eyes of the main character as she glances at the object of her desire. We can see what she wants to see. We can also look at her when she walks, and we see what a sensual camera (like herself) is able to see after she makes love with the object of her desire. That is precisely why she explains to her new dancing partner that the glances of man and woman should

not address directly to each other during the first dancing, or at least until she and her partner are completely aware of their desire.

This is why *Danzon* is different to other films directed by women, such as *The Piano*, *An Angel in my Table*, or others. Precisely the meaning of *Danzon* is completely romantic, that is to say, completely cinematographic. If the basic formula of all classic cinema is that of an ordinary character in an extraordinary situation, in this case the main character is an ordinary woman who starts a search far from the ordinary. When she doesn't see her dancing partner on the dancing floor, she starts a trip that will lead her to reformulate an important portion of her generic identity.

The romantic nature of the main character may be seen in her own declaration of principles, when she says, "Dancing with your partner is the most important thing in life!" This way she transforms the ordinary (dancing) into something extraordinary (of a ritual nature). In opposition to this, almost all other films made by women present extraordinary women in too ordinary situations for their capacity or ambition. In all these cases, the circumstances crush their romantic ambitions, or else they are able to survive thanks to an extraordinary will to adapt to extremely ordinary conditions. This way, *Danzon* has subverted the dramatic tradition, leaving instead a compassionate and anti-spectacular logics.

Besides this, in all these movies the cinematographic language has been simply avant-garde or conventional, but hardly it has been a postmodern combination of both artistic traditions. This is one more reason why *Danzon* is exceptional in the context of contemporary cinema.

The romantic nature of cinema is linked to the possibility to be submerged into an adventure. And every trip is always an allegory of self-discovery. This is exactly what cinema offers, inasmuch as we want to find it on screen, that is, a glance into our own identity and that of others.

The glance and ritual of cinema

Let us see how all of this happens in practice. In the initial sequence we hear the beginning of a danzon, and we see the shoes of some dancing couples that are rhythmically dancing on the floor, as long as the camera is strolling along the room, with sensuality, at floor level. Later on, we observe the complicity that exists in a daily basis inside the group of women with which Julia, the main character, mingles when chatting at the working place. A bit later we see the painting of a train hanging on the wall of the train where she is traveling. These few images condense the formal and ideological profile of this film, that is, sensuality, complicity, and reflexivity.

In a later sequence, in the seduction scene between her and her partner, we see a splendid plane-sequence in the open-air space for dancing that starts with the image of a girl who reminds us of the freshness of Julia in her search for her own desire.

Let us look now a key sequence to understand the construction of the glance in this kind of cinema. When Julia arrives in Veracruz she steps down the train and starts to walk along the street, evidently satisfied because of having made the trip. It is a hot day, and women are bathing their sons by spilling water on them under the midday sun. Before she crosses the street, Julia stops for a minute, and holding her suitcase she walks on her dancing heels among a group of men who are watching her closely, while she feels flattered and acts apparent indifference until she arrives in the opposite sidewalk. Of course, being the object of the glances of the opposite sex would be a reason for pride and euphoria for any man, but it is always difficult to understand for men why some women experience this as an aggression to their intimacy and integrity.

This problem of perspectives is resolved in this sequence in a very elegant manner, even though its implications are many. The director has decided to present this scene in a single take, in which we see Julia from her back, when she starts crossing the street from the left to the right on screen. In other words, it is precisely a global vision with the camera placed in a perspective of complicity with the main character.

Here we might ask, How would this sequence be filmed in a masculine perspective? At least from the point of view of classic cinema, the conventional construction would be to substitute the single take, that sort of short plane-sequence, for a series of partial images in which we could see the faces of the participants. The scene might start with an establishing shot where the camera should be receiving Julia face to face, this way taking visual command of the situation. Then, this same camera would take one or more medium shots to show her legs walking on the street; some shots of men's faces; perhaps a dog strolling by for establishing a contrast with the intensity of human glances, and a close up showing the flattered glance of Julia herself.

Narrative Wandering and Postmodernity

The forms of simultaneous transgression and convention that are present in *Danzon* are not exclusive of the cinema made by women. In the cinema by David Lynch, Oliver Stone, Wim Wenders or Peter Greenaway, for example, there is a descentering of narrative conventions by playing with the structure of the story, the use of colors or the nature of verisimilitude. After all, this is postmodern ambiguity, where there are at once classic and modern elements, often including a perfectly sequential order of time as a sort of narrative simulacrum.

All these directors are considered by the casual spectator (which is the one that counts for film theory) as perverse. This is so not because of the subject matter of their films, but because of the fact that these directors are able to take the Hitchcockian suspense to baroque and carcinogenic extremes. This is why ordinary spectators think of them as transgressive directors. Nevertheless, the specifically postmodern cinema is a paradoxical blend of transgression and ironic conservativeness.

In the case of these filmmakers (and of films such as *Danzon*), narrative is wandering, that is, their intertextuality is virtually unlimited. This virtuality depends on the personal and cinematographic memory of each spectator. What is really wandering are not the characters (even though they are usually in a personal trip of self-discovery), but the displacements and border crossings between diverse narrative conventions.

How is this new (and at once ironically memorious) narratorial authority? The narratorial authority is the principle of organization that gives structural consistence to a story. In the case of these films we are certainly far from Poe and the classic tale. Nevertheless, the story starts out of a most conventional frame, that is to say, a narrative program and a system of textual seductions still based on the complicity of surprise and suspense. This general frame may be classical and circular. In *Danzon* this frame has a structure in the shape of a spiral, as it is in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, in the sense that the solution to the enigma was already announced at the beginning (this is the so-called predestination framing). Nevertheless, the original enigma, the enigma that existed before the story started, it stays unresolved once the film is over. In the case of this film, the original enigma might be, Why Julia and Carmelo are a dancing couple? Without that original enigma there can be no ritual. This is why the trip is always a labyrinth.

In other words, even though the tale is framed in a circular scheme (that is to say, in a classic narrative formula) the film crosses through different narrative modes, such as melodrama and comedy, intimism and social commentary; normative and marginal social spaces. This lets the marginal to be placed in the center of the tale.

The new narratorial authority is in charge of these forms of complexity, and it determines the camera movements. That is why a lollypop vendor car is more important than a transatlantic on the pier, and why the keel of a ship swaying on the seaside is a much stronger image than seeing the couple actually making love; the shoes of dancing partners in the first sequence are more eloquent than any conversation between characters, and the camera is centered on the woman or on what the woman wants to see, while she walks satisfied on the pier, ready to change her perspective of life just by the impulse to find her dancing partner (this reminds a reader of Mexican literature of the character in the story "Beautiful Midday Woman" by Guillermo Samperio).

A Horizon for the Glance

In the end, all the aesthetic and moral itineraries in *Danzon* are back to their point of departure, which is the camera, that inevitable narratorial authority which cannot be ignored by any spectator of the film. Beyond the camera are the glances of the characters themselves. An in the end, there are also the glances of male and female spectators during and after the projection of the film.

It is perhaps in these rituals of the glance where we can find the stake of the spectators in general, and the stake of narrative strategies in particular. That is why postmodern cinema is especially self-referential. Because its stake is in the rituals of the glance.

The importance of this goes beyond the simple act of watching a movie. Besides being linked to the communication between sexes it also affects many other areas of interpersonal communication, such as political negotiation, the practices of teaching and learning, and the relations inside family structures.

This is the horizon we have before us. It is one of the many horizons opened by the richness of contemporary cinema.

APPENDIX

Analysis of the point of view in 6 sequences in *Danzon*:

The construction of a system of glances

(This analysis must be seen with the film at hand)

This analysis is based in the concept of Point of View in order to demonstrate the construction of a system of glances in this film

The selected sequences are those that have the duration of a musical piece, mostly a danzon (a popular kind of music in Latin America), which creates a fresh use of film language

Definition of P. of V. (Point of View): A glance created by the camera, established by its placements (physical situation) and displacements (movements), which control distance and perspective

Point of View is at the crossing of at least four interdisciplinary approaches to cinema studies: discourse theory, ideology analysis, gender studies, and power relations

a) *Discourse Theory*: The camera is the place of enunciation of film discourse, that is to say, the place from where the meaning of the film is created

b) *Ideology Analysis*: The glance defines an ideology, that is to say, a perspective, a vision of the world, and it produces in the spectator an ideological commitment to that perspective

c) *Gender Studies*: The glance of the camera exists before the glance of the spectator, but it also places this glance in a particular perspective; therefore, the camera creates a positioning of the spectator; it places him / her in a particular placement, with a specific weight of ideology and gender

d) *Power Relations*: The glanced establishes a relationship of desire between the subject and the object of that desire, and therefore, it has a gender identity (depending on where it looks, what it looks, and how it is looked at); classical cinema has created a masculine glance, which has contributed to create a disequilibrium in the dialogue between men and women: *women know too much*

1. Initial Credits (Julia dances with Carmelo) (3 min 30 sec) 0:00 - 3:30

Music: "Almendra" and "Lagrimas negras" (son montuno)

Placement of the camera: Transcendental P. of V. The camera is placed at floor level. It is a sort of fetishistic glance observing shoes of

couples dancing. Audiovisual experience as such (sensual experience) becomes more important than narration

Displacement of the camera: Smooth movement, as if the camera were following the music (sensuality of camera)

Analogic Glance: Continuous glance, with no ruptures (plane-sequence with music in the foreground). This analogic glance has several consequences:

No Fragmentation of Time and Actions: This sequence and each one of the 5 others studied here last as long as a complete musical piece

No Fragmentation of Human Body (in the rest of the film): the exceptions are CU (close ups) of feet when dancing or walking, and CU of eyes of the protagonist when she is looking at the object of her desire

No Fragmentation between Camera and Subject: In this sequence, the camera adopts the perspective of any dancer mingled among other couples

2. Julia arrives in Veracruz (she steps down the train and crosses the street) (2 min 46 sec) 26:40 — 29:26 / Music: Danzon "Veracruz"

This sequence is formed by three scenes:

a) When Julia travels in the train, she opens a window

Metafiction: Image of a train inside a train, and a glance of the camera addressed to the *glance* of Julia

Metaphore: The trip opens a window which makes it possible to address a *glance* at new things

The cinema of *characters* becomes a cinema of *glances*

Glance: anagnorisis (name of the lollypop vendor car), that is, awareness of self-identity

The trip in classical cinema always puts an ordinary person in an extraordinary situation

The trip in *Danzon* puts an ordinary character (single woman with child Who works at a telephone company) in an extraordinary and joyful situation (amidst other ordinary characters)

b) When Julia steps down the train, she observes a woman showering a kid

The camera starts this scene addressing the attention to Julia's feet, who is wearing her dancing shoes

Metaphore: This trip is a dancing for Julia (where glances are most important)

The subjective camera *observes* the sensuality of the universe of women (such as an almost naked child being bathed under the sun); this echoes the sensuality of the first sequence, and it also announces the sensual atmosphere of other sequences that are also created through Julia's and the camera's sensual glance

c) When Julia crosses the street, she is observed by men

When this scene starts, the rhythm of music changes (in the danzon, it marks a pause to rest and to prepare for the final, definitive steps): Julia prepares for the moment when she *is being observed* by others

Here the camera keeps a perspective that is near that of Julia's experience: the camera follows her for a few seconds, then it stays put behind her as we see her crossing the street, walking away from the camera

3. Julia strolls along the pier (she observes the ships) (3 min 56 sec) 1:00:26 - 1:04:22 / Music: "To Love and To Live"

In this sequence Julia walks along a place where men work. She seems to be a woman who desires, and she enjoys it. Her red attire contrasts with the surroundings. Here she acts enjoying the experience itself (just walking), whereas men (in general) seem to act with specific objectives in mind

In this sequence, a system of glances is constructed

Men glance at Julia (as in former sequences), and she discovers with her glance the man she wants (as well as he discovers her too)

The names of some of the ships are a foreshadowing of the imminent: Puras Ilusiones (Just Illusions); Amor Perdido (Lost Love); Me Ves y Sufres (You See Me then You Suffer)

Amar y Vivir (Bolero)

Amar es una angustia, una pregunta / Una suspensa y luminosa duda

Es un querer saber todo lo tuyo / Y a la vez temer al fin saberlo

Amar es escuchar sobre tu pecho / El rumor de tu sangre y la marea

Pero amar es tambien cerrar los ojos/Dejar que el sueno invada nuestros ojos

Como un rio de olvido y de tiniebla / Y navegar sin rumbo a la deriva

Porque amar es al fin una indolencia

To love is to be in anguish / A suspended and luminous doubting

It is a desire to know everything yours / And at once being afraid of knowing it at last

To love is to listen on your chest / The whisper of your blood and the sea waves

But to love is also closing the eyes / Closing our eyes because of dreams

Dreams like a river of oblivion / It is like shipping adrift to nowhere

Because to love is indolence at the very end

4. Julia seduces the marine (2 min 58 sec) 1:11:32 - 1:14:30 / Music: Danzon "Telefono de larga distancia"

This plane-sequence may be fragmented into several scenes:

i) Girl in close up (the innocence of Julia)

ii) Couples of children dancing (on the dancing floor)

iii) Couples of grown-ups dancing (on the floor)

iv) Group of musicians (as a context of seduction)

v) Julia and her partner (trying to dance together)

vi) Musical seduction (visual composition with deep focus)

vii) Julia dances for the man (foreshadowing next sequence)

This sequence starts with the picture of a girl alone, with no dancing couple (like Julia herself), then shows the context of a culture of sensuality, then it composes the image as if the trumpet were playing for the couple alone (in their ears), like a serenade

Julia is at ease with music, even though her partner doesn't know how to dance, and in this sequence music is more important than the couple itself

5. After making love, Julia is awake (2 min 50 sec) 1:25:40 - 1:28:30

Music: "Blue"

This is the sequence of a desiring, erotized woman, and here the sensuality of music leaves room for the sensuality of color (blue, as in the song, then red, as in Julia's dress) The glance of the camera is always the camera of a female observer, an erotized female observer aware of colors and objects of female desire

Plane-Sequence

- i) Julia caresses the man while he is asleep
- ii) The camera shows the man's body
- iii) Julia smokes sitting by his side
- iv) The camera seems to caress his body, too
- v) Transition take to the fan on the ceiling (beginning of song)

Other takes

Images of different spots of blue, alluding to the song

Final take of the buttock of a man (blue) and his torso (red)

Azul

Cuando yo senti de cerca tu mirar

De color de cielo, de color de mar

Mi paisaje triste se vistio de azul

Con ese azul que tienes tu

Era un nomeolvides convertido en flor

Era un dia nublado que olvidara el sol

Azul como una ojera de mujer

Como un liston azul, azul de amanecer

When I felt your glance nearby

The color of the sky, the color of the sea

My sad landscape was dressed in blue

With that blue that you do

It was a forgetmenot became a flower

It was a clouded day that the sun forgot

Blue like a woman's dark circle around the eye

Like a blue ribbon, an awakening blue

6. Final sequence: Julia meets Carmelo in the ballroom

The band dedicates a danzon to Julia Solorzano; Carmelo is aware of her presence and asks her to dance with him

In this final sequence, Julia is different to herself in the first sequence in two details: she is wearing an azalea in her hair, and she glances at her partner directly to the eyes She is aware of her sexuality, and she is aware of her dancing partner as a life-long partner; the trip to look for Carmelo has been a trip to self-awareness, told as a sensual experience more than as a narrative sequence

The point of view has been used to let the audience be aware of Julia's perspective, and to share it in her own terms

Conclusions

The analysis of these sequences may lead to a few conclusions:

This film may be considered as postmodern, inasmuch as there is a juxtaposition of classical elements ---such as fixed camera, sequentiality of chronological time, and an ordinary character in an extraordinary situation--- and modern elements ---such as metafiction, metaphorical meaning to key scenes, and greater weight to audiovisual experience as such than to the advance of narration---

Other contemporary male directors have created similar blends with other elements, such as Wim Wenders (with the structure of tale-telling in *Paris, Texas*); David Lynch, Pedro Almodovar and Peter Greenaway (with the use of color and music, as in *Blue Velvet*; in *Tie me in, Tie me out*, or in *The Thief, The Cook, His Wife, and His Lover*); Oliver Stone (with the borders of verisimilitude when using video, animation, freezing images, and reverse colors, as in *Natural Born Killers*). On the other hand, some female directors have adopted a conventional P. of V. when telling stories of female characters, such as Jane Campion in *The Piano*, or Sally Potter in *Tango Lessons*

Point of View is a powerful tool for analyzing the vision of a director, beyond the story being told and its thematic treatment