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Cracking Codes of Resistance: The Adaptation of Elena Poniatowska’s Story "De noche vienes" to Film

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Abstract: A comparison of one of Elena Poniatowska’s longer stories, "De noche vienes," and its interpretation in film many years later, for subversive and other techniques.

James C. Scott has argued convincingly that oppressed groups often register their resistance to hegemony through “hidden transcripts” that covertly contest authority. For the sake of survival within dominant society, female subversion of patriarchal norms is often selective and carried out under the guise of collaboration with the powers that be. Elena Poniatowska’s short story “De noche vienes” (1979) and the film adaptation by the director Jaime Humberto Hermosillo (1997) each, in different ways, underline the potential of “subversion with a smile” (Moorhead, 131) in these creations. In Poniatowska’s story, the protagonist, through her behavior, challenges the dictates of Mexican patriarchal society even as she conforms to its norms. While the inversion of traditional gender roles figures prominently in each of these discourses, the literary and cinematic devices deployed in the story and the film to undermine the ideologies of machismo and marianism diverge. Moreover, the lighthearted tone of the film diminishes the impact of the “hidden transcript” present in Poniatowska’s story.

The film remains true to the basic plot line of the story by centering on the legal questioning of the protagonist, Esmeralda, who has been charged with polyandry for being married to five men at the same time. Her apparent infidelity mocks social conventions that restrict female sexuality and, as Florence Moorhead has observed, inverts the Mexican tradition of “la casa chica.” (133) Yet Esmeralda justifies her actions by citing the social expectation that a woman must be married before engaging in sexual activity. Furthermore, though she appears to reject motherhood as the defining characteristic of femininity, Esmeralda in fact admits to the maternal role that she plays with all five of her husbands: “Ellos son mis hijos, los cuizo y los atiendo en todo, no tendría tiempo para otros.” (155) While Esmeralda twists the rules proscribing female behavior in Mexican society, she does so within the parameters of conventional gender roles and thus cloaks her resistance.

In both the story and the film, Esmeralda is portrayed as a “woman-child” whose innocence and ignorance seemingly make her oblivious to society’s condemnation of her actions. Nonetheless, Poniatowska conveys the protagonist’s agency through repeated references to her voice. Though her smile may be unwavering, she does not silently accept the judge’s remarks and insults. When he questions her work ethic in a voice described as worn-out, the narrator notes that Esmeralda protests with a very clear voice. When she receives her jail sentence, amid the crowd she encounters one of her husbands who has shaved his head: “Todavía alcanzó a gritarle: ‘¿Por qué te lo cortaste? Ya sabes que a mi no me gusta.’” (164) The displeasure and authority that she inflicts with her voice crack her portrayal as an ingénue who is simply unaware, rather than a savvy agent using her sway to great effect.

In the short story, it is this voice that breaks the overarching “legal speak” emanating from the Law of the Father that dominates the dismal setting of the police station. Adjectives such as “gastado,” “grisáceo,” “sucio,” and “triste” abound in Poniatowska’s description of the room where Esmeralda is interrogated. It is Esmeralda’s voice and smile that attenuates the heavy patriarchy of the place with a light humanity felt by everyone: “… todos … cobraban vida, recordaban que alguna vez fueron hombres, y no sólo eso sino jóvenes, ajenos al papeleo y a la tarjeta marcada; una gota de agua cristalina resplandecía sobre cada una de sus cabezas: Emeralda los estaba bañando.” (160) Esmeralda thus appropriates the female role of caregiver to turn it against the oppressive forces of the patriarchal judicial system.

Esmeralda’s voice and actions stand in stark contradiction to the official account of her deeds that is rendered by the legal secretary, Lucita. In this legal document, the term “la de la voz” is used repeatedly to refer to Esmeralda as the speaker giving her testimony, which confers upon her a certain authority. In fact, Poniatowska chooses to employ this same term outside
the clearly delimited official discourse in the story in order to highlight the power behind this voice: “Voces autorizadas han hecho circular el rumor de que los cinco maridos intentaron desistir de la acusación ya que todos deseaban que la de la voz regresara.” (164-65) The courage that Esmeralda conveys to make her voice heard in the face of the deafening rhetoric of authority becomes the fulcrum around which others who feel oppressed by the system rally. The voice thus becomes a beacon of solidarity against repression.

In the film, the contrast between Esmeralda’s voice and the weight of patriarchal discourse is muted. Rather than the grimy, gloomy police station described in the short story, the film setting is filled with pastel colors and airy light. A portion of the legal document recounting Esmeralda’s statement in the story is included in the film, but it is read out loud by Lucita in a mocking tone to the jeers of her coworkers. This dig at the expression of the Law of the Father through paternalistic and nationalistic rhetoric is rendered whimsical rather than a serious attempt to create a crack in the oppressive system.

Unlike the short story, the film employs the imagery of Sor Juana, an icon of Mexican culture, to communicate a message of resistance. Sor Juana de la Cruz, a great intellect who was widely regarded even in her own time, spoke out for the right of women to an education. Nonetheless, in the end she was forced to give up her intellectual endeavors by a misogynistic archbishop. Stacy Schlau points out that a highly stylized portrait of Sor Juana appears in a poster on the wall of the police station where she presides over the interrogation of Esmeralda with her gaze. (256) The presence of her image evokes her infamous poem “Redondillas” in which she skewers men for adhering to the patriarchal double standard infringing on women’s liberty and thus stands in for the subversion of gender roles in the film. Yet her depiction is less that of an intellectual feminist and more that of a sexualized intellectual endeavor by a misogynistic archbishop. Stacy Schlau points out that a highly stylized portrait of Sor Juana appears in a poster on the wall of the police station where she presides over the interrogation of Esmeralda with her gaze. (256) The presence of her image evokes her infamous poem “Redondillas” in which she skewers men for adhering to the patriarchal double standard infringing on women’s liberty and thus stands in for the subversion of gender roles in the film. Yet her depiction is less that of an intellectual feminist and more that of a sexualized voyeur observing the proceedings with a gleam in her eye.

The director Hermosillo reinforces this voyeuristic gaze throughout the film. The characters in the police station, like the actual observers, observe the reenactments of Esmeralda’s interactions with her various husbands, especially the sexually charged ones, with obsessive attention. Schlau contends that this technique effectively defies the male gaze, which objectifies the feminine, by presenting “the story from a perspective sympathetic to the feminist impulse of disrupting patriarchal authority.” (242) Both the characters and the audience become voyeurs titillated by Esmeralda’s accounts of her relationships, which reveal the hypocrisy of “proper” members of society. However, this gaze also detracts from the subversive power of the original story by feeding the viewing public what one critic has called a “light romantic comedy” (Tsao, 1) and what another has described as “a whimsical tale with charm to spare.” (Ginther, 61)

In “De noche vienes, Esmeralda,” Hermosillo appropriates a kernel of the female resistance to gender ideologies found in Poniatowska’s short story with the intention of building on it to drive a wedge more deeply into the repressive Mexican heteronormativity. The film becomes a playful farce as it moves along by resorting to elements of gay camp, such as exaggeration and frivolous humor (Brant, 59) as tools to expose the rigidity and artificiality of Mexican middle class, patriarchal values. However, while the film has merit for pushing the boundaries of sexual politics in Mexico, in the end it sacrifices some of its potency by giving in to superficial intertextual references that may be entertaining but fail to pack a punch.

In the classroom setting, undergraduate students often find it difficult to grasp the coded resistance of the oppressed in creative works, being that it is submerged below a façade of collaboration with dominant society. Poniatowska’s story and Hermosillo’s film are texts rich in “hidden transcripts” that provide students the opportunity to tease out the messages of resistance that lurk just below the surface. Furthermore, students often mistake the ideology of marianismo for a willing acceptance of traditional female gender roles on the part of women, rather than as a construct imposed by patriarchy to limit women’s role in society to the domestic sphere. Poniatowska’s portrayal of her protagonist highlights the subversive power that results from an appropriation of elements of marianismo that are then turned against the oppressor. Screening Hermosillo’s film allows students to visualize a critique of marianismo through Esmeralda’s sexuality, as well as a deconstruction of machismo through the use of gay camp. A critical reading of the story followed by a guided viewing of the film offer ample opportunities for students to reflect upon the similarities and differences in literary and cinematic devices and their effectiveness in relaying messages of resistance through code.
ENDNOTES

1 Jaime Humberto Hermosillo is an influential and prolific Mexican film director with more than thirty feature films to his name. In the summer of 2013, Cineteca Nacional de México recognized his lifetime achievements by sponsoring a retrospective that included screenings of his life’s work starting with his first feature film, Los nuestros (1969), and ending with his most recent digital film titled El espejo digital (2012). Cinetoma: revista mexicana de cine summed up his contributions to cinema by stating that Hermosillo offers “una crítica sin concesiones a los vicios y virtudes de la clase media mexicana … con obras que reflejan una sociedad decadente, enferma de hipocresía, represión y prejuicios.” His 1985 film, Doña Herlinda y su hijo, serves as a direct commentary on the hypocrisy surrounding homosexuality in the context of machismo in the Mexican middle class.

2 According to Evelyn Stevens, in her classic essay “Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America,” (1973) Latin American patriarchal society dictates that the ideal woman aspire to be like Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is defined as a virtuous, long-suffering, and self-sacrificing mother who submits to the demands placed upon her by men. Stevens maintains that many Latin American women readily conform to this paradigm of behavior because it grants them a certain amount of authority and prestige within the domestic sphere and the community. However, she fails to address the insidious nature of such a gender ideology and makes only scant reference to the many examples of female resistance, both overt and covert, to the oppression caused by marianismo. Since 1973 when she coined the term, the nature of gender relations in Latin America has changed considerably and many of her assertions are no longer relevant. Texts such as Poniatowska's story and Hermosillo's film have been instrumental in revealing the inequities of the marianismo/machismo dichotomy.

WORKS CITED


