Review/Reseña


Transnational Subjects
and the Politics of Representation

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At the beginning of Sujetos transnacionales: la negociación en cine y literatura, Nayibe Bermúdez Barrios defines her project as follows: “Este estudio se enfoca en las tensiones ocasionadas por las diferencias de etnia, clase social y género sexual, para argüir que la imagen para la representación de la mujer contemporánea, se encarna en un sujeto negociador, embarcado en un intento por reconfigurar su entorno y
resignificar su papel social y cultural” (17). The focus on representations of women in contemporary films and novels from Latin America (specifically Mexico and Colombia) is not obvious in the book’s title, which refers neither to gender nor to works originating in a particular region. The significance of the title, however, soon becomes clear: the representations of women discussed in the book inhabit the borders and interstices of a variety of discourses and practice diverse strategies of accommodation, manipulation, and resistance in order to assert themselves as active subjects within the texts and within the patriarchal contexts in which both text and subject are located.

This approach is itself an interesting intervention in the terrain of Latin American film and literary studies, insofar as it marks a departure from a paradigm in which theoretical interpretation is contained within descriptive frameworks linked to seemingly stable national or regional determinants: Mexican cinema, Latin American cinema, New Latin American Cinema, and so on, or to the study of particular authors grouped by generation, gender, and/or geography. While Bermúdez Barrios indeed addresses questions of national and regional specificity within her analyses, her emphasis on the transnational implies a destabilization of the former categories that reflects longstanding as well as emergent processes of globalization, but also highlights the instability of identity at the level of the individual: the hybrid subject crossed by multiple and often conflicting allegiances, whose notion of self is not fixed, but rather contextual and strategic. This hybridity, furthermore, “subraya puentes culturales y puntos de contención con las ideologías dominantes” and tends to position the subject “fuera de las practicas oficiales de la ciudadanía” (19). While the texts Bermúdez Barrios studies center on women who are economically privileged, she argues that their marginalization due to other categories of difference creates a context for the questioning of and negotiation with social limitations.

Sujetos transnacionales consists of three studies, each of which addresses, first, a literary text and second, the filmic adaptation of the same text. While the nature of the texts chosen varies widely, they share several elements: dating from the 1990s but set in the mid-twentieth century, each
text explores the lives of wealthy women set apart in some way from the normative and ideal notions of femininity of their era. The first chapter explores Rosa Nissán’s highly successful 1992 novel *Novia que te vea*, set in Mexico City’s Sephardic Jewish community, and Guita Schyfter’s 1993 film adaptation with the same title. Bermúdez Barrios shows that despite the marketing and reception of the novel as part of a genre considered “light” and, not coincidentally, dominated by women (the Mexican version of “chick lit”), Nissán’s seemingly simple narrative serves not only to narrate complex situations, but also to develop strategies of self-representation for a protagonist who is often marginalized and silenced within both Sephardic and mainstream Mexican contexts.

*Novia que te vea*’s narrator and protagonist, Oshinica, records her observations of people and events in a way that draws attention to cultural contradictions and dilemmas; her “naïve” style belies complex processes of negotiation in which, without rebelling openly against inherited conventions and restrictions, she is able to create space in which to express and actualize her own creativity and desires. Similarly, Schyfter’s filmic adaptation, which expands Nissán’s narrative to include a second protagonist, the Ashkenazi Jewish student Rifke, uses diverse formal strategies to give its characters voice and position them as active shapers of memory. Their experiences as Jewish women call into question master narratives of national identity and point towards the possibility of a more inclusive nation.

Bermúdez Barrios’ interpretation of Rifke and Oshinica is grounded in the concept of negotiation, a concept at once flexible and precise as a description of the relationships between subjects and their surroundings. Early in the book, she defines negotiation as “una serie de tácticas y estrategias conscientes e inconscientes, por las que los sujetos intentan construir zonas de convivencia más dignas y habitables en un entorno histórico, político, espacial y sociocultural determinado” (21). In the same section, she explains that “la negociación no necesariamente excluye la resistencia, aunque considera que otros mecanismos como el diálogo, el silencio, la sumisión, la heteroglosia y la adaptación, pueden ser más productivos a la hora de enfrentar la cotidianidad.” Negotiation is thus
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integ rall y related to the concept of performance as developed by theorists such as Judith Butler and Joseph Roach, who argue that identities are not stable, but rather discursively constructed and constantly renegotiated; subjects carry out performances of what it means to be, for instance, female, Jewish, Latin American, and/or lesbian, rather than these being inherent characteristics of an essential self (24).

Throughout the book Bermudez Barrios builds on these definitions in order to address an impressive variety of issues and textual events. Her second chapter examines literary and film biographies of a historical figure, Miroslava Stern, a well-known if under-appreciated actress from the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. In this chapter, much of the analysis is devoted to the process of textual adaptation; a particularly interesting section deals with the re-edition of Mexican writer Guadalupe Loaeza’s short story “Miroslava,” first published as part of the 1989 collection Primero las damas and reissued as a freestanding publication in 1994 following the release of Alejandro Pelayo’s 1993 film. While in the original collection Loaeza’s account of Miroslava’s last moments was contextualized by its inclusion alongside other suspense-filled fictional narratives, the 1994 publication emphasized Miroslava as a historical figure. It was lavishly illustrated with photos of the star, and included texts about Miroslava by critics Carlos Monsiváis and Emilio García Riera as well as information about the film. Bermúdez Barrios argues that this adaptation imposes readings of Miroslava that not only diverge from Loaeza’s text, but also, more importantly, impose “authoritative” masculine interpretations contrasting with the silence of the actress herself. Miroslava is rendered visible in the photographs, but is unable to speak except through the interpretations authored by others.

As woman, actress, and glamorous icon, Miroslava is trapped by discourses that objectify her and limit her options for self-determination. However, Bermúdez Barrios does not simply blame external factors such as sexism or patriarchy for Miroslava’s unhappiness and tragic death; rather, she shows how, unlike the protagonists of the novel and film Novia que te vea, the actress is paralyzed by the multiple identifications that she experiences as contradictions, and is thus unable to negotiate on her own
behalf. Nostalgic for her native Czechoslovakia, Miroslava identifies strongly with Mexico, yet her difference sets her apart, especially once she enters the film industry and is typecast as an “iceberg blonde.” Although her glamorous looks provide for success in her film career, she is ultimately frustrated and degraded by her experiences in the workplace and in her personal life, a situation leading to her 1955 suicide.

Loaeza’s story, as described in Sujetos transnacionales, seems to problematize this situation by creating a double narration, part of which purports to reveal Miroslava’s inner thoughts and preoccupations even as the other part observes her coldly as a distant and iconic object of aesthetic contemplation. This apparently ironic approach disappears in the critical texts, or what Bermúdez Barrios calls “paratexts,” of the 1994 version, and more so in Pelayo’s film, in which the main narrative voice belongs to a male character who, in self-referential biopic fashion, attempts to “explain” Miroslava to the audience. As the explanations multiply, however, contradictions appear, compounding rather than clarifying the mysteries surrounding Miroslava’s identity. In Loaeza’s narrative, for instance, the actress is Jewish, while in the film she is not. Loaeza’s nonspecific references to the failure of Miroslava’s marriage are fleshed out by the film’s suggestion that her husband was secretly gay—although one of the paratexts, authored by Pelayo, hints that Miroslava herself may have been a lesbian. In her close reading of these texts, Bermúdez Barrios does not attempt to resolve their contradictions in order to present a “true” version of the actress’s biography, but rather demonstrates that the creative potential inherent in Miroslava’s complex transnational subjectivity is contained and stifled by discourses that, much like some of her films, insist on casting her in one-dimensional roles—that is, subject positions with little room for negotiation.

The third chapter of Sujetos transnacionales further complicates the issue of female representation in its analysis of two male-authored texts: the 1988 novel Ilona llega con la lluvia by Colombian writer Alvaro Mutis, and the 1996 film adaptation of the same title by Sergio Cabrera. At first, the reader might ponder Bermúdez Barrios’s decision to include an author like Mutis for whom, by his own admission, female characters “no
son personajes claves” but rather “personajes que yo he creado porque me son así profundamente útiles en mi narración,” serving more than anything as reflections of his main character, Maqroll el Gaviero.¹ Yet this situation, more challenging than that posed by a text like *Novia que te vea*, generates two interesting questions: first, what are the mechanisms by which the seemingly active subject Ilona, title character and apparent embodiment of the successful, independent, transnational businesswoman, is ultimately silenced by the text and its male protagonist-agents; and second, whether alternative readings are possible.

To explore these questions, Bermúdez Barrios draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism, through which non-dominant voices may come to the fore within a text, possibly without the author’s awareness or consent. She argues that even though el Gaviero serves as Mutis’s narrator and authorial alter-ego, his narration inevitably contains silences, lapses, and interruptions which may be productively interrogated in order to generate alternate meanings. Thus, a lesbian affair, which Mutis mentions seemingly in order to accentuate Ilona’s cosmopolitan image, gains significance when the focus of analysis shifts to her friendship with Larissa, a prostitute employed in Ilona’s elite Panama City brothel. The possibility of an erotic relationship between the two women, beyond the control of the male protagonist, would seem to subvert the dominant thrust of the narrative. Yet that the women are punished at the end, restoring patriarchal authority, also indicates the limits of such “against the grain” readings. Sergio Cabrera’s film version of *Ilona llega con la lluvia* omits the lesbian relationship altogether, and through a variety of visual, aural, and narrative mechanisms, succeeds in its construction of Ilona as a mythic female figure, contained by the male gaze and ultimately, as in the novel, a product of a phallocentric imagination.

Following the three analytical chapters, Bermúdez Barrios includes interviews with Rosa Nissán and Sergio Cabrera that she conducted, respectively, in Mexico City in 2000 and in Lawrence, Kansas, in 2001. The inclusion of Nissán’s and Cabrera’s voices in the book implicitly makes a

case for dialogism and heteroglossia not only as creative strategies in film and literature, but as concepts that can be applied within critical practice. The interviews offer alternative perspectives on the texts under discussion, and also provide evidence for some of the book’s arguments; in particular, Cabrera’s response to a question about the possible erotic triangle between Ilona, Larissa, and Maqroll (269) adds weight to the analysis of the repression of lesbian possibilities in his film (230-31). Nissán, on the other hand, supports Bermúdez Barrios’s arguments about the inclusive possibilities of hybrid subjectivities with her discussion of public reception of her novel. Commenting that her brother initially criticized Novia que te vea as a “bola de chismes de la familia” unlikely to interest a wide audience, she says that in fact not only Jewish women, but women of all sectors of Mexican society expressed identification with the novel: “El libro las ha tocado, y dicen que sentían lo mismo que yo” (257).

This brief synopsis of the three studies carried out in Sujetos transnacionales and the appended interviews suggests a conclusion that is, perhaps, too obvious: that women are far more likely to encounter spaces of negotiation and self-determination in works authored by women, especially women like Nissán and Schyfter who identify with their protagonists in semi-autobiographical fashion. The negation of female agency and autonomy in works like Mutis’s Ilona llega con la lluvia is, in the end, predictable, as is the self-imposed prohibition on lesbian representation that Bermúdez Barrios identifies in Cabrera’s film. However, the book’s detailed, sophisticated analyses are far richer than this conclusion might suggest, characterized as they are by careful attention to literary and filmic technique, to processes of adaptation and narration, to visual and aural signification, and to the act of reading itself.

Moreover, the crucial argument about representation itself—that gender and other social identities are not fixed, but are rather a matter of performance and constant negotiation—is convincingly demonstrated in relation to the texts, and at the same time transcends the individual case studies to become an argument about methodology and, ultimately, about

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2 It is worth mentioning that Bermúdez Barrios is presently engaged in an extensive research project on lesbian representation in Latin American cinema.
feminist praxis. “No se trata de utilizar nociones críticas foráneas,” notes Bermúdez Barrios in her conclusion, “ya que la negociación y la capacidad de acción e intervención son parte intrínseca de la vida diaria y la gente las usa, consciente o inconscientemente, para trascender negativas posiciones de víctima” (245). Indeed, her implicit questioning of binaries such as resistant/complicit, hegemonic/subaltern, and so on, not only allows for complex interpretations of cultural artifacts, but also suggests ways of rethinking the everyday behavior of women and men as social actors.

The ideas contained in *Sujetos transnacionales* regarding adaptation and negotiation lend themselves to consideration of the book itself as a transnational object. Published by the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez in its Colección *In Extenso/Serie Crítica*, the participation of a second institution, the Humanities Department of the University of Calgary, is not mentioned except on the back cover, where the logos of both universities appear against an otherwise plain green field. However, the book's front cover, rather than featuring a film still or other thematically relevant image, contains a photograph of a dry maple leaf against a neutral brownish-colored surface. While equally decorative or abstract images adorn the covers of all the books in the series, the maple leaf here seems to function as an odd, veiled reference to the book’s partial and semi-hidden Canadianness. The work of a Colombian scholar currently living and teaching in Canada, published by a Mexican university located close to the U.S. border in a city widely perceived as a site of cultural ambiguity, violence, and struggle, *Sujetos transnacionales* inhabits the same hybrid and transnational coordinates it describes. It is not surprising, then, that its central concerns spill over the boundaries of literary and filmic analysis. Besides providing extensive textual readings that will undoubtedly be valuable in the film or literary studies classroom, Bermúdez Barrios’s “poetics of negotiation” offers a thoughtful and thought-provoking contribution to wider debates on gender, power, difference, visibility, adaptation, and resistance.