

MUJER TRANSPARENTE: IN SEARCH OF A WOMAN

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Abstract

In contradiction to early Cuba cinema after the Revolution which represented women as revolutionary icons and vehicles to articulate revolutionary social and political history, *Mujer transparente* (1990) presents a critical view of femininity by exploring their intimate and visceral emotions, fears, feelings and desires. Fundamentally, this film exemplifies that there is nothing *intrinsic* in cinema that defines the depiction of women strictly by recourse to a patriarchal norm, and that there is indeed a 'space' for competing images and representations that can highlight the multiple facets of 'woman', including her fears, desires, opinions and daily experiences. The presentation of the female protagonists' personal images, fantasies, desires, circumstances and experiences, has the potential to empower those in the audience finding an ostensible congruence with them, to empathise and voice their own similar experiences, thus becoming participants in a social discourse that challenges and seeks to free women's subservience to patriarchal and cultural norms. *Mujer transparente* (1990) is a film composed of five short films — each entitled with the name of the main female protagonist (Isabel, Adriana, Julia, Zoe, and Laura) — directed by five young Cuban directors (Hector Veitía, Mayra Segura, Mayra Vilasís, Mario Crespo, and Ana Rodríguez) and coordinated by Humberto Solás. To consolidate the postulated arguments, this paper discusses each short-film separately by providing a short synopsis and analysis, finally ending with a general conclusion of the major findings of the entire film.

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MUJER TRANSPARENTE: EN BUSCA DE UNA MUJER

Resumen

Los primeros años del cine cubano que se dio después de la Revolución representaban a la mujer como ícono revolucionario y vehículo para construir la revolución social y la historia política; en contraste, *Mujer transparente* (1990) presenta una opinión crítica de la femineidad en la que explora las intimidades, emociones viscerales, miedos, sentimientos y deseos de las mujeres. Fundamentalmente, esta película indica de que no existe un elemento *intrínseco* en el cine que defina la representación de la mujer bajo el recurso estricto de una norma patriarcal, y que hay efectivamente un ‘espacio’ abierto para que las imágenes compitan y las representaciones destaquen las facetas múltiples de la ‘mujer’, incluyendo sus miedos, opiniones y experiencias diarias. La presentación de las imágenes personales, fantasías, deseos, circunstancias y experiencias de las protagonistas tiene el potencial de atribuirle poder a la audiencia para identificarse con ellas, para enfatizar y manifestar sus propias experiencias, y de esta manera volverse partícipes de un discurso social que desafía y busca liberar a las mujeres de su sumisión a las normas patriarcales y culturales. *Mujer transparente* (1990) es una película compuesta de cinco cortos dirigidos por cinco directores diferentes; cada uno de ellos se titula con el nombre de la protagonista principal (Isabel, Adriana, Julia, Zoe, y Laura). Para consolidar los argumentos postulados, este artículo discute separadamente cada una de las películas cortas estipulando una breve sinopsis antes del análisis. Se termina con una conclusión general que condensa las conclusiones principales de toda la película.

Introduction

Mujer transparente (1990)¹ is a film composed of five short films — each entitled with the name of the main female protagonist (Isabel, Adriana, Julia, Zoe, and Laura) — directed by five young Cuban directors (Hector Veitía, Mayra Segura, Mayra Vilasís, Mario Crespo, and Ana Rodríguez) and coordinated by Humberto Solás. The film poses questions about women's identity based upon their available 'choices' (Riess, 1999) and the prejudices and taboos of contemporary Cuban society (Arredondo, 1997, p. 27). *Mujer transparente* reveals a shift of focus from society to individual women, presenting a critical view of gender by exploring intimate and visceral emotions, feelings and desires rather than the articulations of social and political history. Fundamentally, this film exemplifies that there is nothing *intrinsic* in cinema that defines the depiction of women strictly by recourse to a patriarchal norm, and that there is indeed a 'space' for competing images and representations that can highlight the multiple facets of 'woman', including her fears, desires, opinions and daily experiences. As a result of this, it can be hypothesised that *Mujer transparente* functions in a way that seduces the female audience to become personally engaged in a constant reconstruction of femininity. The presentation of the female protagonists' personal images, fantasies, desires, circumstances and experiences, empowers those in the audience finding an ostensible congruence with them, to empathise and voice their own similar experiences, thus becoming participants in a social discourse that challenges and seeks to free women's subservience to patriarchal and cultural norms. To consolidate the postulated arguments, this paper discusses each short-film separately by providing a short synopsis and analysis, finally ending with a general conclusion of the major findings of the entire film.

Interpretation and Analysis

Isabel (dir. Hector Veitía)

Isabel (Isabel Moreno) is a middle-aged working woman, who is promoted to manager for her skills, confidence, and personality; qualities that she is not aware that she possesses because she has never been told. She manages her new position well; however, she struggles to manage her private life as a mother and wife, as she is the only one who does all the housework and fails to be acknowledged for her qualities and her work by her husband and children. At the end of the film, she rebels against her husband and children by walking away to an open space in the park, because of her feelings of desperation, complaining and ultimately hoping to disappear.

Isabel is a mother and a wife who explores her own identity — the hidden image — and wants to know who she really is. This she discovers through other characters at her workplace. Isabel is economically independent. This is highlighted by private images of success, for instance, Isabel's salary increase, which means that she can buy herself some new clothes, shoes, perfumes and so forth (Pick, 1993, p. 77). Emotionally, however, she is dependent on her family and marriage. Therefore, she is a woman who becomes as 'free' as men to work outside the home while her husband remains free from work *within* it. Ultimately, Isabel's economic independence is viewed by her husband as a threat to the patriarchal order (his dominance over her and her dependence upon him), but her financial stability is also a site of empowerment that aids in her self-appreciation and self-discovery.

Isabel is a wife who has equal rights at work as a labourer but not the same rights as a wife at home, because she is the one who does all the house chores by herself. She is ignored and invisible to her husband and her children, who consider her to be melodramatic when she expresses her feelings of emptiness and her desires. Therefore, to become noticed, to find out who she is, she decides to transform her physical appearance through clothes, shoes, a hair-cut and through applying make-up. However, these physical changes in Isabel's image are no indicators of representing a 'real' image of a woman. It can be argued that she does not need all these changes to emphasise her femininity to be acknowledged, but she probably does it to feel better about the image of herself in the mirror and as perceived by others in the streets. Arredondo (1997) claims that Isabel's changes allow society to perceive her differently, because with her metamorphosis she is projecting a positive image of a real Marxist worker who is economically independent from her husband and thus does not need his material support to live or survive in a society. On the contrary, I would argue that Isabel, by focusing on her appearance, could become just a victim of the triviality whose behaviour is dictated by traditional conceptions of femininity in which women and men have been socialised and behave accordingly. By considering Accad's (1991) argument about women's self-empowerment, I argue that Isabel's character highlights the need to start at the level of her own personal life, with a transformation of attitudes towards her companion, family, sexuality, and society. In particular, her changes should emphasise the transformation of traditional behaviours of domination and subordination, which permeate interpersonal, mostly sexual, relationships and manifest as power struggles, jealousy and possession.

In this short film, and in opposition to Teresa in the film *Retrato de Teresa*,² Isabel expresses her thoughts of frustrations and weaknesses through voice-over, and consistently does the opposite to what she thinks she should do: ‘no sé ser jefa de nada ni de mi misma, ¿por qué aceptaré lo contrario de lo que pienso?’³ She recognises this weakness but does not do anything about it until a following scene in which she is waiting to be noticed by her self-centred husband Luis (Manuel Porto), who once again ignores her presence and her words. In this scene, Isabel’s voice-over complains about her treatment by her husband who expects her service unconditionally and without any complaints. A dialogue follows, based upon Isabel’s frustration with the lack of attention given to her by Luis:

Husband: ¿Qué te pasa?
Isabel: A mí nada.
Husband: Te noto rara.
Isabel: Cómo lo vas a saber si tú nunca me ves.
Husband: ¿Y por qué tú dices eso?
Isabel: Me pelé.
Husband: ¡Ah! Era eso.
Isabel: ¿Qué soy yo para ti?⁴

After this conversation and for the first time in the film, she does what she thinks. She decides not to serve coffee to her husband and demands that he serve himself. She has had enough of being ignored all the time. Drawing from Plant (1993) who states that

‘when a woman demands, desires, and liberates herself, she abandons the seductive mode which is her own and only strength, and enters into a culture for which liberation is a way of life and not at all a threatening demand’ (1993, p. 91), there appears to be much congruence with what Isabel felt at that moment; a liberation of herself, an encounter with herself and freedom from her husband’s demands. A process of self-discovery from the realisation of her own self-appreciation, which allows voicing it not just through her thoughts but with a loud voice. However, while this signifies a change in Isabel’s self-perception, the film ends without resolution. Isabel’s frustration at feeling invisible to her husband and children continues. As Abbot and Wallace (1991) indicate, a woman can earn her living in the labour place and yet still be subordinated within the family.

In the following scene, Isabel is looking at herself in the mirror and says to herself: ‘ni las ilusiones sirven para ser feliz, si yo tuviera algo de puta todo sería más fácil.’⁵ This is followed by a scene where she is putting on a lot of make-up and for a few seconds, she sees herself in the mirror. She realises that not even illusions or appearances make her happy or give her the power to be a woman of presence or as a subject. As a result of this dissatisfaction, she falls into stereotyping the image of women who believe that by being a ‘whore’ or applying a lot of make up, everything will be ‘better’ or that she and her husband will have a better life. As Jean Baudrillard (1990) argues, women are aware of this transformation ‘when, in front of their mirrors, they must erase themselves in order to apply their make-up, and when, by applying their make-up, they make themselves into a pure appearance denuded of meaning’ (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 94). Therefore, Isabel is still not aware of her own qualities; certainly, she is aware of her physical appearance but not

enough to be, or act, as herself. She has not realised that behind seduction lies the private, the hidden and personal, the secret, the sensual, the erotic, and the pleasure of herself (Miller, 1990). It seems that she needs her husband's awareness of who she is becoming for her to learn how to seduce herself. As Baudrillard (1990) claims, to be able to seduce, a woman needs to seduce herself, and this is what Isabel needs to do; to learn to seduce herself and know that she herself is seduction, an empowered agent for herself who does not need the approval of her husband or anybody else to enjoy discovering of her own seduction and the process of liberating her multiple selves.

The film starts in a closed-in and dark space (Isabel's house), and ends in an open and illuminated space (a public park), ironically with a song titled '*El Tunel*',⁶ which is about a young woman eager to take a ride in a car that once stalled in a dark tunnel. The song is linked to Isabel's desire to run away with the first young man she encounters as a way of dealing with her anger and frustration at being ignored and unappreciated. She does not believe that she will do it, but she needs to escape from being ignored. She wants to move from 'la casa' to 'la calle', where she can be recognised and behave as she pleases. However, at the beginning of the film the first scene tells the audience that Isabel does not run away, that she decides to stay at home and in voice-over says '¿por qué me habré metido en este lío?'⁷ She soon realises that she has escaped from a physical appearance of a housewife who, even if she cut her hair or applied make up, will not make any difference to her husband's *machista* attitude. She should only change her appearance if it is for her own self-satisfaction and not because all these physical changes would contribute to changes in *machista* attitudes and behaviour. However, this film is not about

her husband or her home routine as shown in *Retrato de Teresa*, this is a film about a woman's journey through self-appreciation in search of her independence to re-create herself.

Adriana (dir. Mayra Segura)

Adriana (Verónica Lynn) is a lonely old lady who represents a typical *solterona*,⁸ who like many *solteronas* in Latin America, has most likely been prevented from marrying because she is obliged to take care of the family or because her partners have not lived up to the strict standards dictated by her father. She regularly withdraws herself from a dreary and lonely daily life and escapes into a fantasy world in which she experiences her desires for male company, which have consistently been repressed by an unnamed male figure (presumably her father). Shot in a single setting at her apartment, this film illustrates her solitude and the haunting power of her memories, fantasies and prohibited desires, by presenting images of black and white photographs, dancing and the sound of music from her early years, and a deep female and male voice prohibiting her to desire. For instance, the opening tracking shot fragments rather than describes the space inhabited by Adriana. The use of dull, soft colours that are only brightened somewhat by streaks of light, and the continual sound of a radio tuned to an all-day news station implies a feeling of loneliness (Pick, 1993, p. 77). After the opening shot, the film begins to explore Adriana's life, fears and daily dreams, maintaining a dull and ancient aesthetic throughout the entire segment.

Adriana often looks at herself in the mirror, which acts as a portal that allows her to enter her enchanted world and become enmeshed and engrossed in her own dreams, fantasies and desires. When she sees herself in the mirror, this does not signify that her fantasies will be her reflection but will be simply her deception. Drawing on Lacan, Baudrillard believes that once a woman sees herself in the mirror she finds her ego, the formation of the subject (Baudrillard, 1990). In addition, he states that a woman, by looking at herself in the mirror, deceives herself because she only sees appearances, and illusions (Baudrillard, 1990). Therefore, by looking at herself in a mirror, she is simply an object, because she cannot see her real self, thus she will never be a subject, she is just a simple simulation of that masculine truth of what it means to be a woman or, in other words, the 'imaginary' truth made real. However, it can be argued that the mirror represents but one stage in Adriana's self-discovery, her becoming of a subject — it does not preclude her from embarking upon a journey of truth-finding and self-exploration. It is clear that the image Adriana sees in the mirror is indeed an expression of her enjoyment, her freedom, and her ability to imagine what she possibly could be. By exploring where these illusions come from, who has defined them, and why she sees them, she begins a more profound search of her intimate and expressive self.

This exploration of the self through the mirror plays out in the scene where Adriana dresses in a type of wedding dress, possibly signifying her virginity that she never relinquished. She sees herself in the mirror and lives out a dream of being young and attractive. Adriana lives out this fantasy with a young man who previously had repaired her phone, and whom she requests to come back by pretending that it needs to be repaired

again. In her fantasy, she is seductive and begins dancing with him. She is consumed by her own illusion, and moves into an enchanted world, a world of youth and desires, and dances freely with this young man. However, upon enjoying herself in this fantasy world, she is interrupted by a deep male voice, presumably her father, that reminds her of her actual age and thrusts her back into the actual and present moment that is devoid of dreams and fantasy. Adriana's repression by her father is projected upon her face every time a picture or a voice reminds her that she should behave as a 'lady' and maintain her chastity because, according to the masculine code, a woman must avoid sexual desires or improper behaviours that would embarrass the honour of the family.

Expanding on Picks' (1993) simple observation that Adriana is ashamed of her desires, I believe that Adriana is experiencing a conflict between feeling ashamed (from desiring that which is prohibited by her imposed patriarchal world-view and ethic), and feeling sad and disappointed (from failing to fulfil her most sacred and personal desires and fantasies). Adriana then decides to end her fantasies by burning some photographs of when she was young. While she is doing this, the young telephone repairman appears but this time as an actual person not as an illusion. She looks at him through the door's peephole, but she also hears once again the forbidding voice that says: 'no sigas, cierra la puerta Adriana, no me gusta que te asomes cuando hay hombres en la casa.'⁹ Upon hearing the voice again, she terminates any possibility of living out her fantasy with the repairman by shutting the peephole, downhearted.

At the crux of the short film about Adriana, is the question — posited earlier by Walby (1990) — which asks why women are criticised for forms of sexual conduct or desires that in men are considered positive. Through her fantasies, Adriana searches for the hidden image of a woman who is free to imagine and express her intimate desires, fears and opinions. However, the ever-present voice from the patriarchal figure prevents her from experiencing this journey into the enchanted world and, even though she has the power to maintain the search, she always regresses, falling into a predetermined pattern of life, an actual life antithetical to the one she desires. Thus, it is obvious that she cannot break the stereotype of a ‘good father’s daughter’, instead she conditions her personal experience by going back to her present situation as an abandoned woman. Therefore, to live in a certain way (often defined as ‘normal’ within a patriarchal context), Adriana must repress those desires that are intimate and represent her individuality and self-exploration, and can only express those desires permitted and defined by the hegemonic ideology of patriarchy as preconditions of ‘normality’. Ultimately, she is a tired woman, who fails to confront, experience and enjoy her fantasies because of the continued surveillance by the omnipresent patriarchal figure and his ability to constantly prevent her from exploring her intimate, visceral self, thus proscribing her choices to decide her own individual and unique way to live.

Julia (dir. Mayra Vilasís)

In this film, Vilasís creates a new space for women. Previously, women were embodied within a family, and divorced women were portrayed as re-establishing familial links; for instance, Yolanda in *De cierta manera* (1974). By contrast, Julia (Mirta Ibarra), searches

for an identity disconnected from that of mother-wife through an exploration of her own subjectivity. In constant voice-over, Julia describes her own views and experiences of divorce, solitude, a sexual adventure with her student, the simulation of a 'beautiful marriage', and ultimately her own empowering of her femininity. Through knowing more about herself throughout these experiences, she maintains control of her gender power, explores her sexuality, and becomes increasingly confident and comfortable with herself. Fundamentally, this film describes the process of the empowerment of a woman who becomes unafraid of prejudices, and journeys deeper into an exploration of her satisfactions, pleasures and desires.

The film begins with an off-screen dialogue between a quarrelling couple in a dark room in which spectators can see only the silhouette of a man. The man — who is Julia's husband at the time — then disappears, and Julia's figure emerges. Whilst her own voice is restricted solely to idle chat, it is through voice-over that she delivers her deepest fears, desires and opinions to the audience, narrating her relationship with her ex-husband and her sexual exploits with one of her students. Matching her voice-over, oscillating images of her marriage (her past life) and of her and her student lover talking (her present life) are presented, explicitly highlighting the dramatic changes that have taken place in her personal life.

In her present life, Julia loves to express her own sexual pleasures, in spite of her saying that in Cuban society everybody is keeping an eye on what someone else is doing. In one scene, she says 'a todos nos gusta seducir, que un chiquillo nos mire turbado de placer'¹⁰

and then adds 'las mujeres maduras sí sabemos disfrutar los amantes, ir más allá de los clichés.'¹¹ Julia's discourse about her enjoyment of desires is a rejection of the conventional configuration of 'woman' as object; a configuration with a meaning that is immediately apparent and fixed and reflects more about patriarchal myths (women as object for men's pleasure) than about the role of women in society (women as subjects, independent and strong characters).

The audience is provided with an insight into Julia's previous lack of voice and power in her marriage, highlighting that, through the inability to at least speak about being let alone to actually make a choice, she is unable to express herself as an individual with personal desires and dreams. This plays out in a scene where, upon hearing a baby's cry (present tense), Julia is sitting in her husband's lap (past tense) telling him that one of her friends is pregnant. He replies, 'ya hemos hablado de eso'¹² and in a flashback one sees Julia pouring whiskey into a glass as she announces in voice-over, 'renuncié a mi mujer satisfecha.'¹³ This scene can be interpreted as an expression of Julia's regret at never having a voice within the relationship. It indicates that by giving up her choice and power to her husband, she was dominated by him and was prevented from fulfilling the desire to be a mother. Julia's independence was, accordingly, undermined by the patriarchal power that at the same time was limiting her freedom of choice.

Transcending her silence, in another scene Julia demonstrates her power to choose, imagine, and desire, and that through this she becomes a subject and not a conventional sign representing stereotypical categories of women (prostitute and spinster). This is

illustrated when she compares the indifferent silence of her ex-husband to her own sexual gratification and expression of intimate desires:

La carne fresca podría servirme de diazepam. Mi ex-alumno era un poco tonto, pero tenía un cuerpo maravilloso, una facilidad de novela radial para decirme todo lo que mi marido nunca me había dicho o gritarme en la cama lo que nadie me había gritado.¹⁴

This description of her enjoyment of her desires is also a rejection of patriarchal prejudices that dictate that only men can feel or are entitled to sexual pleasure, and by doing so she empowers herself to become a subject that takes control of her own thoughts, emotions and behaviours. In another scene, Julia juxtaposes her husband's affair in a previous time coupled with his lack of decision-making, with her own sexual exploits in the present and her security in knowing exactly what she wants. By Julia comparing her sexual relationship and her husband's affair, it demonstrates that women, like men, can express and enjoy their desires.

In a cultural context that castigates as failures those women who have been divorced, Julia apparently resists taking on the role of victim and uses her solitude to embark on an exploration of her subjectivity. She is then forced to confront the common belief that every woman to be happy, needs a man in her life: 'muchas mujeres creen vergonzoso no tener un hombre, yo no.'¹⁵

Accordingly, she is not afraid to be alone and to find her own self; as a result of this encounter with herself she says, 'con el tiempo perdí el miedo a estar sola. Mi ex-alumno se había convertido como una especie de psiquiatra; en su cuerpo yo disfrutaba mi soledad. Ese placer me permitía en restablecerme, verme a mi misma.'¹⁶ Moreover to be strong and independent, Julia's words refer to her explorations of her own sensuality, desires and choices without experiencing the fear of being alone perpetuated by social expectations and men's desires.

In light of the previous discussion of Julia's experiences with divorce, lack of voice, sexuality, desire, and solitude, the final scene can be interpreted as the ultimate test that questions the profundity of the changes she has experienced and her ability to maintain her posture and direction. The final scene is set in Julia's apartment with a *mise-en-scène* of a boxing ring, where her ex-husband enters and, as she turns on the light that illuminates the entire room, she faces him and says in voice-over 'los buenos boxeadores nunca abandonan'.¹⁷ This scene can be interpreted from at least two points of view. Pick (1993) claims that the blinding light from the light bulb emphasises Julia's desire to remain the way she is, being content within herself and not needing to go back to her husband.

Alternatively, it appears that Julia will not give up on her marriage and that as a 'good boxer' she will continue a relationship with her ex-husband, trying to make it work. This interpretation however, raises the question why Julia, a powerful woman in control of herself, would go back to a man who does not make her happy. Indeed, in a previous scene she has said that many women are ashamed of not having a man in their life, but

she is not and, over time, has lost the fear of being alone. Ultimately, it can be suggested that Julia's representation challenges the hegemonic patriarchal ideology through highlighting that women can be active, imaginative and indeed enjoy their desires and fantasies; essentially experiencing the freedom from patriarchally defined prohibitions of feeling pleasure and a degree of sexual autonomy.

Zoe (dir. Mario Crespo)

Zoe (Leonor Arocha) is a young woman in her twenties who loves to paint; to be alone and independent she lives in her mother's garage on the condition that she studies at university. Although she appears strong, confident, and in control of her life by refusing to conform to the rules, her personal tape-recordings apparently reveal her fears and insecurities about being different from other women. She very quickly develops strong feelings for a fellow student named El Acorazado¹⁸ (Leonardo Armas), who originally visits her room solely to investigate her recent absenteeism from university art classes. It is through this encounter that the game of seduction¹⁹ plays out, and which dominates the entire story, highlighting the processes involved and the consequences of the pursuit for control of gender power for them both. After they have slept together, El Acorazado dresses himself and opens the door to leave, illuminating the entire room, showing Zoe alone and pensive, painting and listening to music.

Essentially, this film is about the shifting power dynamics embedded in a game of seduction between Zoe and El Acorazado, which presents to the audience a duel between alternative constructions of femininity and the traditional patterns of masculinity. Zoe

plays the roles of both seducer and seducee and thus is a representation of both authority and vulnerability. From the outset of the film, Zoe's body language and tone of voice suggests that she is trying to seduce El Acorazado, however, initially she is not successful in provoking him to fall for her. The game of seduction continues when El Acorazado looks at a self-portrait of Zoe that is hung on the wall behind her, in which she is mimicking the same pose she holds whilst talking to him — she is sitting, holding one of her knees with both hands and resting her chin on them — and tells her the self-portrait is probably named 'Esperando a mi novio'.²⁰ Zoe responds by looking into his eyes and replies mockingly '*no, a los hombres*'.²¹

Zoe's words can be interpreted as an action of seductive 'teasing' which, as Phillips (1994) and Erickson and Thomson (2004) would indicate, lend pleasure to a subject's instability, and stimulate the possibility of turning ambiguity into suspense. Furthermore, seduction theory claims to establish a vehicle for women by valorising the liberating process of rejecting the representation of a submissive and powerless woman to achieve independency (Erickson and Thomson, 2004). Therefore, Zoe engages in this game of seduction by teasing El Acorazado to shield her insecurities and preoccupations about her own personality and her future in uncertain times, and to show herself that she in fact is in control of her own life, and to show him that he does not intimidate her.

The audience begins to know more not only about Zoe's persona, but also her views on the traditional patterns of masculinity, in a scene where El Acorazado is alone in her room listening to the tape-recordings of her feelings and fears, whilst she is out washing

his pants after he accidentally spilt coffee on them. In the recording, she says '*el sexo es su forma de comunicación*',²² and then the camera focuses on a painting of a naked woman being attacked by a large bear. This statement coupled with the painting represents a typical discourse of masculinity whereby the male possesses a disproportionate command of power that reifies brute physical strength and virility whilst patronising the individual qualities and possibilities of women, and ultimately objectifying their body-parts. This is because within a patriarchal society, in which men possess more power than women, it is logical to assume that what is considered to be more important and valued are those qualities associated with men (Nicholson, 1990, p. 55). Moreover, it highlights a common conception that if a woman is seductive she must be punished and be destroyed by the man (who in this case is represented by the bear), because a *femme fatale* must be destroyed in a *machista* society, since she poses a threat to the status quo of the male-dominated power disequilibrium.

The game of seduction continues when Zoe returns to her room, as El Acorazado asks her if she will paint him, and then poses naked for her. He approaches her from behind to see the painting, blows in her ear, and she says expectantly to him '*vaya ya sabia yo, eso es lo que querias, como todos*'.²³ However, he responds in an innocent tone '*yo sería incapaz*'.²⁴ After his illusive or manipulative words, she begins to believe in his words and that he would not suggest playing such a game with her feelings. Such is El Acorazado's charm and sincere words that she decides to sleep with him and, at this point, his aim has been accomplished, his seduction of her is complete. After having sex, he asks her curiously why she slept with him and she responds '*porque te encontré en mi*

cama'.²⁵ By this, Zoe wishes to perpetuate her belief in her role as the seducer in the game of seduction, only realising the next morning that she has in fact been seduced when El Acorazado no longer has any need of her and, although appearing somewhat guilty, walks out of her life.

Ultimately, the main interest of the text is concerned with the question of who is seducing whom. Thus, it is through the very possibility of a woman being a seducer that the traditional conceptions of femininity are challenged, independent of what may happen to the female seducer in the end. Underpinning this question is the view that seduction denotes mutuality, or at least ambiguity about the passive and active roles of the participants (Hunter, 1993, p. 399). El Acorazado believes that he has successfully used a strategy for seducing Zoe, for winning her away and getting what he wanted from the very beginning. Although Zoe plays an active role, she is still constructed as a fetish object as a result of the camera over-fragmentising her body-parts (breasts and legs) and through the strategic use of dress-codes (high heels, tight black dress, deep voice and a lot of make up). Even though she adopts the active mode in seduction, in accordance with the destiny of *femmes fatales*, her conception of the power she possesses must be constrained, and the male director Mario Crespo achieves this by reinforcing the status quo by way of El Acorazado's seduction of Zoe.

Laura (dir. Ana Rodríguez)

The last film is about *Laura* (Selma Soreghi), a middle-aged woman who works as a data processor, who is a dedicated mother in an unhappy marriage, and who is in a constant

dialogue with her memories of her adolescence and early adulthood. This short film is set predominantly in the foyer of a popular tourist hotel in Havana where Laura is waiting for her best friend Ana (an exile,²⁶ of whom the audience only sees photos when she was young living in Cuba and in Miami). Arguably, the foyer of the hotel represents a microcosm of the daily social and political life of Cuba, which presents to the audience a depiction of Cuban identity and political struggle. Both Ana's and Laura's personal stories along with Laura's opinions, preconceptions, and prejudices of the experiences of those Cubans that live in exile, are narrated through newsreels, letters, photographs, flashbacks, and voice-over. It is apparent that whilst in Cuba, Ana was a young, outgoing extrovert, who quite early showed leadership qualities in both the social and political milieu, and was idolised and followed by Laura and other friends. Through these media, the audience also gains access to Laura's closest memories of their past friendship whilst at school, at parties, and at the beach, and her feelings of being deserted by Ana who fled to Miami (Arredondo, 1997). The film's ending is set in the hotel where Ana is staying, with Laura standing in front of the elevator waiting to see her. Thus producing another open ending that entices the audience to consider and discuss not only the concept of exile and Cubans' individual experiences of it, but also the daily problems and crises of identity evident in Cuban society. Fundamentally, whilst presenting a pertinent socio-political issue such as exile, that upon a superficial reading appears to be something external to Laura's identity, this film prefers to explore deeply her own feelings, and the intimate stories of discontent and betrayal that she feels as a result of her closest friend's exile.

In the film, the hotel foyer is a site in which socio-political problems and conflicts evident in Cuba are played out through Laura's observations of the general activities of the Cuban tourists and the locals that take place whilst waiting for Ana to arrive from her hotel room. With the collapse of Soviet communism in the 1990s, Cuba was compelled to develop a more independent economic system, with foreign tourism or 'el mal necesario'²⁷ being a key element in national economic restructuring. However, with the increase in demand for foreign tourism came other adverse social impacts, most notably an increase in demand for sex-tourism.²⁸ This issue is represented in the scene where as Laura enters the hotel foyer, there is a sequence of shots showing US consumer products, with her commenting in sombre voice-over 'no me gusta este ambiente, todos te miran como si fueras una puta o una gusana'.²⁹ Then, after being offered a light for her cigarette by a Cuban prostitute and experiencing a brief period of uncomfortable silence, Laura leaves her and approaches the bar, and expresses her repugnance towards the way women are generally viewed by men. After being refused a drink because she does not have US dollars, two male Cuban exile tourists, who are sitting at the bar, attempt to seduce her, ogling and suggestively offer her a drink. She becomes upset, showing anger on her face. Drawing from O'Neill (2001), who states that prostitution mirrors the patriarchal views of sexuality, consequently viewing women as commodities (O'Neill, 2001, p. 28). Laura's words and the expressions on her face illustrate her disgust of the instrumentalist epistemologies that males, both foreign and Cuban, ostensibly possess, and how they view the identity, roles and obligations of Cuban women and treat them accordingly.

In addition, Laura expresses her confusion and a degree of disappointment in relation to the identity conflicts that are being played out within herself and in a rapidly changing Cuban society, through voice-over narrations of Cuban exiles' activities and the way they are welcomed and treated by local Cubans. This is exemplified when Laura goes to the receptionist and tries to find out information about Ana's whereabouts. When she senses the receptionist's indifference towards her and that his full attention is focussed upon an exiled Cuban customer, in a voice-over she says angrily 'no sé que piensa la gente que trabaja en estos lugares, como si la situación les diera derecho a tratar, precisamente, a los que nos quedamos con ese desprecio'.³⁰ Thus, Laura expresses her disgust and bewilderment towards the superficial and pretentious identities exhibited by her fellow compatriots and those Cubans that now live in exile. She is confused as to how those that chose to live in exile can be labelled *gusanos* for abandoning the country, whilst at the same time they are treated preferentially by local businesses. She is disgusted that this preferential treatment operates upon a paradox whereby those that have remained in Cuba have constantly fought and remained a part of the Revolution but are, however, treated with less urgency and respect.

In addition, Laura expresses her disgust of what she believes are illusions embedded in the process of the identity definition that occurs when Cuban locals and exiles are reunited in the hotel foyer. Whilst Laura observes Cuban exiles shopping, wearing fashionable clothes, opening gifts, and embracing their relatives that still live in Cuba, she says in voice-over:

Es tan terrible este espectáculo, es como una mutua venganza, tan confuso, tan complejo. Recuerdo a alguien quien decía que la familia cubana siempre ha estado escindida por la política, y que siempre los encuentros han sido simulados. Detrás está esa falsa ondescendencia, la pretensión de haber elegido correctamente.³¹

Whilst she speaks in voice-over, the director then presents a series of flashbacks using newsreel footage of those Cubans who chose to stay after 1959 rallying in Havana against those who were abandoning Cuba for foreign countries. Then, in the hotel foyer, which is a *mise-en-scène* of an airport foyer, Laura observes the local Cubans meeting and greeting their family and friends who live in exile, and expresses her sadness and disappointment, as she perceives the locals experiencing an identity crisis through a confrontation with and the consequent seduction by a superficiality that is embodied through their returning friends and family. These scenes clearly exemplify the phenomenon of identity crisis whereby one is forced to question one's identity when one is confronted with difference. This process has a more profound effect when one confronts such differences in relation to those who share a background of deep common familial, social, and political roots and stories. Ultimately, in these scenes, Laura expresses her deepest feelings of betrayal and discontent with the entire issue of tourism, exile and identity that manifest through her physical and ideational reconnection of friendship with Ana.

Conclusion

As presented in the early days after the Revolution, Cuban films were focused upon representing women as a Revolutionary symbol of social transformation who struggled against *machista* attitudes that defined and were embedded within their marriages, intimate relationships, labour participation and recognition. Conversely, ostensibly drawing its influence from a feminist ethic, *Mujer transparente* — a film from the special period — emphasises a normative prerequisite necessary in understanding women, not from a historical or revolutionary point of view, but through an exploration and expression of a woman's individual experiences within both her private world of fear, failure, desire, fantasy, intimate thought, identity, seduction and empowerment, and her public world dominated by patriarchal ideologies and behaviours.

The characters of this film all represent women who are confronted with the necessity of making difficult decisions and choices in their personal and social lives to realise their full potential as empowered human beings with a distinctive individuality. Although *Isabel* is economically independent from her husband, she is emotionally affected by his and her children's unawareness of her personal identity, presence, and role in the upkeep of the family and the household. Against the background of her economic independence, the recognition of her desirable personal qualities by her work colleagues and a feeling of exhaustion and frustration with her family's behaviour towards her, she embarks upon a journey of exploration of her identity, discovering that she is more complex, interesting and powerful than what a patriarchal discourse says about a mother/housewife. It is through this journey that she begins to feel empowered enough to both express her

discontents when provoked, and at least play with the idea of leaving her husband to realise for herself all her talents, qualities, and potentials. The important observation from Isabel's representation is that her strength is initiated by and maintained through an economic independence that underpins and allows her to develop her own opinions and goals in order to embark upon deep introspection in relation to her intimate self. Through such a process of knowing and believing in herself, she has the basic tools with which she is able to demand basic respect and recognition for her desires and frustrations.

In the case of *Adriana*, the mirror into which she often peers represents her inner identity crisis. It plays a dual role of reminding her of the position she should occupy and the roles she should perform as an older woman in society, whilst simultaneously giving her the ability and energy to engage in her world of fantasy and desire. She is confronted with the option of either succumbing to her contemporary existence of solitude and predetermined behaviours that society deems reasonable or living the fantasies that play out in what remains of her youthful mind. Through immersing herself deeper into her world of fantasy, she poses a challenge to the constant voice that reminds her of her socially-defined roles and positions as an elderly woman, even though ultimately this voice triumphs in arbitrating her identity conflict. Nonetheless, her representation does exhibit emancipatory elements whereby, contrary to the popular (and thus patriarchal) discourses of women in general, and elderly women in particular, she not only has the ability to fantasise, but to a certain degree enjoys her fantasies, even though in the end they are not fully realised. Fundamentally, her representation highlights the often-obscured modalities of patriarchal ideology, whereby a traditional notion of femininity is

generally defined in discursive terms that have as their goal the production of submissive, easily manipulated subjects that ultimately self-surveil and self-regulate themselves. These subjects, by forbidding/inhibiting their own expressions of personal desires, fantasies, opinions and fears, thus behave in a way that enables men to perpetually occupy superior positions of respect and reward in social and political spheres, thus permitting them to express and realise their desires and opinions with much less chance of punishment, exclusion or isolation.

In striking contrast to Adriana's experience with choice and identity conflict, *Julia* voices and acts upon her desires and frustrations in spite of knowing that her choices may be criticised by those around her because of the deeply embedded prejudices and social conventions. Through auto-examination of the role she and her husband played in their failed marriage, she explores the facets of her identity that had been silenced by not voicing her discontent and frustration towards her husband's affair. By realising her power as an individual with intimate desires she subsequently rejects the notion that her identity is inextricably defined by her marriage to her husband, and chooses to free herself from the constraints upon her expression of her identity that she experienced in her marriage with her husband. Fundamentally, throughout this process, Julia's representation works to redefine traditional notions of femininity, by confronting patriarchally defined social conventions that define the behaviour of women. For instance, a woman must necessarily be married, and be obedient and subservient to the husband; a divorced woman cannot establish intimate connections with another partner; and women are not encouraged to talk about and experience sexual pleasure.

Zoe is a woman in a difficult position trying to choose how she will utilise her perceived gender power control, struggling to come to terms with a rejection of traditional constructions of femininity and her inner desires to find and experience a loving relationship. Through her representation as an often strong, independent and non-conformist young woman, she embodies that which is in direct opposition to the patriarchally defined 'woman', central to traditional constructions of femininity. She thus experiences some degree of gender power equality, which enables her to engage in her desires and express them without the overwhelming fear of isolation and punishment. However, it is clear that *Zoe*, to experience some degree of gender power equality, must make the 'choice' of identity entailed in a rejection of traditional femininity, and in doing so isolates herself, to a large extent, from the rest of society and from finding and experiencing love in an intimate relationship. Perceiving herself to be in control throughout the entire game of seduction with *El Acorazado*, she falls prey to her own emotions and desires of experiencing love as she loses sight of the fact that their brief relationship was based solely upon a game of power and seduction. In spite of her feelings of abandonment and loss when *El Acorazado* leaves, *Zoe* behaves throughout the film in a way that draws inspiration from her personal desires and her conception of femininity. She attempts to empower herself through the fulfilment of such desires by means of engaging in an act of seduction interpreted negatively by men as threatening and thus prohibited by the patriarchy.

Laura is represented as a woman who has developed strength and power through an introspective search and confrontation with her faults and weaknesses in earlier the

Cuban tourists and the locals' activities and interactions. Through her observations and experiences in the hotel foyer, the audience is presented with contemporary conflicts evident in Cuban politics, society and identity. In addition, by recalling her past with Ana, Laura comes face-to-face with those social ideals predicated by the Revolution that have conditioned her personality as a friend, a woman, a mother and a wife. She analyses her friendship through memories and pictures of earlier experiences with Ana because she wants to understand why Ana abandoned her and the country after showing so much political enthusiasm, leadership, and support for revolutionary ideals. She attempts to analyse the prejudices and taboos embedded in a Cuban identity by focusing her attention on how women and men view the role of a woman during the 'special period', expressing her discontent with the popular view that a woman is seen as a '*puta*' or object of pleasure within a social context increasingly influenced by foreign tourism. She realises that one of her roles as a woman is to challenge the prejudices that she holds towards those who are different from her (Ana, the Cuban tourists, the local Cubans who welcome the Cuban tourists, the prostitutes) in terms of her looks, behaviours and views and that she must attempt to accept such differences.

Ultimately, *Mujer transparente* is a film that presents a diverse range of images and voices that highlight, in a fashion that eschews the objectification of women, the range of usually silenced experiences of particular social and political circumstances and personal desires, fears, and opinions that ultimately define a woman's subjectivity. Based on the belief that film traditionally depicts patriarchal myths of womanhood, Haskell and Rosen (cited in Wright, 1993, p. 116) hold that film 'reflects' social reality, that depictions of

women in film mirror how society views and treats women, and that these reflections are *misrepresentations* of how women 'really are' and what they 'really want'. However, in the case of *Mujer transparente*, the patriarchal command over how women are represented in cinema is not as clearly demarcated as Haskell and Rosen claim. Generally, the women in this film are not representations of patriarchal myths about women because they are economically independent, are free to desire and imagine feeling pleasure, and possess the power to make their own life-choices, although Adriana self-regulates her fantasies and desires.

Mujer transparente highlights the changes and conflicts of each woman that should be transparent to the audience, and by understanding women on a deeper subjective level the audience becomes a participant in the process of empowering women through the development of empathy towards the protagonists' experiences, fears and desires. Moreover, Pick (1993) states that this film 'empowers the intimate and private feelings of female characters and opens a distinctive space for the feminine voice within the New Latin American Cinema' (Pick, 1993, p. 7). In addition, it can be suggested that this film provides a space for men to begin to change their interpretations of women because they are exposed to the traditionally silenced narratives of women and thus are given some insights into a woman's private and public worlds. Therefore, the representation of each of these women might possibly seduce the audience, some women in particular, to become active, not static symbols, intelligent and powerful (even if destructively so) but not weak (Kaplan, 1998, p. 47). It is also essential to keep in mind Donapetry's (1998) statement that the primary issue does not consist in looking for and finding a female ideal,

but understanding what type of female ideal is presented to us and the consequences that flow or conclusions that one can make through an analysis based on this female figure. Therefore, *Mujer transparente* chooses to make transparent that any challenges to taboos, prejudices, and indeed, any change in women's roles, are mainly the prerogative of the woman's voice to say when to stop, when to change. It is not a matter of a decree, since *machista* societies abet the narcissism of culture, subtly denying a feminine revindication, already created inside the family sphere.

Notes:

¹ The film was originally going to be titled *Tabús y Prejuicios* (Taboos and Prejudices), but when all the collected stories were found to be based upon women's personal experiences, it was decided to title the film *Mujer transparente* (Mayra Vilasís quoted in an interview by Arredondo, August 1994).

² For more information about this film refer to Burton-Carvajal, J. (1994). 'Portrait(s) of Teresa: Gender politics and the reluctant revival of melodrama in Cuban film' in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, (eds D. Carson, L. Dittmar and J. R. Welsch). Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 305-317; Pastor, B. (2005). 'Del margen al centro: Cuba y el Nuevo Cine Lationamericano', *Razón y Palabra* 46. Available online at <http://www.razonypalabra.org.mex>; Rich, B. R. (1980). 'Portrait of Teresa. Double day, double standards', *Jump Cut* 2: 10-22.

³ 'I don't know how to be a boss of anything, not even of myself. Why should I accept the opposite of what I think?'

⁴ 'What is wrong with you?/ Nothing/ You are acting strange/ How would you know if you never see me?/ Why do you say that/ I cut my hair/Ah! That's it / What am I to you?'

⁵ 'Not even illusions are good to make you happy. If I was a whore, everything would be easier'.

⁶ 'The Tunnel'

⁷ 'Why did I get myself in this mess?'

⁸ spinster

⁹ ‘Don’t go, close the door Adriana, I don’t like you to peek through the door when there are men at the house.’

¹⁰ ‘we all like to seduce, that a young man looks at us and is tormented by pleasure.’

¹¹ ‘we mature women know how to enjoy our lovers, we go further than clichés’

¹² ‘we have already talked about that’

¹³ ‘I give up on being a satisfied woman.’

¹⁴ ‘The fresh flesh could help as a diazepam. My ex-student was a bit stupid, but he had a wonderful body, the facility of a dazzling novel to tell everything that my husband or anybody else never told me or screamed to me in bed.’

¹⁵ ‘many women are shamed by not having a man, I am not.’

¹⁶ ‘with time I lost the fear of being alone. My ex-student had become a type of psychiatrist; in his body I could enjoy my solitude. That pleasure allowed me to rebuild myself, to look at myself.’

¹⁷ ‘good boxers never give up.’

¹⁸ Battleship Potempkin

¹⁹ Seduction here is used in its traditional sense to describe a process of attraction based primarily upon a sensual aesthetic.

²⁰ ‘Waiting for My Boyfriend’

²¹ ‘no, for men’

²² ‘sex is her/his form of communication’

²³ ‘well, I knew that’s what you wanted, like the others’

²⁴ ‘I wouldn’t do such a thing’

²⁵ ‘because I found you on my bed’

²⁶ Those Cubans that did not agree with the ideology and processes of the Revolution were permitted to leave without the option to return to Cuba from the outset of the 1959 Revolution, and were deemed ‘gusanos’ (worms) for their apparent betrayal of their country by fleeing mainly to the United States (Saney 2004). However, during the ‘special period’ and the consequent economic restructuring that sought foreign capital, Cuban exiles were permitted to return to Cuba as tourists (Saney 2004).

²⁷ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Fidel Castro commented that foreign tourism was a ‘necessary evil’ because of the social and political implications that are brought with the foreign tourism industry (Saney 2004).

²⁸ For a detailed discussion on sex-tourism in Cuba, refer to Cabezas A. L. (2004). ‘Between love and money: sex, tourism, and citizenship in Cuba and the Dominican Republic’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29:4 pp.987-1015; Mesa-Lago, C. and Pérez-López, J. (1999). ‘Cuba’s economy: Twilight of a era’, *Transition Newsletter*, 10:2 pp. 22-25; Wiarda, H. (1999). ‘Leading the world from the Caribbean: The Dominican Republic’, *Hemisphere*. Available online at <http://www.csis.org/americas/pubs/hemvii4.html>; and World Bank (2001). *World Development Indicators*, Washington, D. C.: World Bank. Available online at <http://www.worldbank.org/data/wdi2001/index.htm>.

²⁹ ‘I don’t like this ambience; everyone looks at you as if you are a whore or a worm (nickname for a Cuban exile)’.

³⁰ ‘I can’t understand what these people are thinking. They believe their positions give them the right to look down upon precisely us who have chosen to stay, with contempt’.

³¹ 'This performance is so terrible, it is like a mutual revenge, it is so confusing and so complex. I remember somebody saying that the Cuban family has always been split by politics, and their encounters have always been simulated. Behind this is a false kindness, the pretentiousness of having chosen correctly'.

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