

**“PURE HOLLYWOODLANDIA”: THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC WRITING OF
HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES**

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RESUMO: *A tela global* (Lipovetsky; Serroy, 2009) discute uma nova era do cinema, o “hipercinema”. Influenciado pela globalização, o cinema é agora desterritorializado, transnacional, plural e fragmentado, o que pode ser visto nos temas, personagens e estrutura narrativa de alguns filmes, como *Amores Brutos* (2000), *Crash – No Limite* (2005) e *Babel* (2006), que têm narrativas dispersas, caóticas, não-unificadas. Contam múltiplas histórias, através de enredos interconectados e é difícil saber quem é o protagonista. A ficção de Helena María Viramontes tem muito em comum com esses filmes. Neste artigo, discutirei esses pontos em comum, focando em “The Cariboo Cafe” e *Their dogs came with them*. Nem no conto nem no romance, há um protagonista. O olhar do narrador em terceira pessoa funciona como o de uma câmera. A narrativa se alterna entre diversos momentos e lugares e os vários enredos primeiro divergem para depois convergirem em um final dramático, cinematográfico.

Palavras-chave: Linguagem cinematográfica, Narrativa fragmentada, Helena María Viramontes.

In *The global screen* (2009), Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy go against the idea that the death of cinema is approaching, by stating that cinema is indeed coming to a new age, which they call “hipercinema.” We live in a world in which nothing and nobody can fully escape the mediation of screens, a world marked by a “generalized state of screen.” For some, the invasion of all these screens in our lives – first, the TV, then, the computer, lately, the cell phones with inbuilt cameras – could mean the death of cinema as it is. But Lipovetsky and Serroy defend that it only means cinema is now entering a new age.

Influenced by globalization, this new age of cinema is marked by the exchange between cultures, by ethnic mixture created by migration and traveling, by the opening to other cultures. More than any other, the world of cinema participates directly in this global dynamics: a growing number of filmmakers feed on a multiplicity of references, announcing a cinema which is more and more deterritorialized, transnational and plural. Hollywood is still the capital of Planet Cinema, but it is more cosmopolitan and varied than ever.

A consequence of this decentralization can be seen in the narrative structure of some movies. Narratives are now dispersed, chaotic, fragmentary, non-unified. They tell ten, twenty stories, through interconnected plots, and many times it is hard to know who the protagonist is – if there is any. Also, sometimes the clear understanding of the plot by the audience is not any more on demand. There is no more linear direction, but a complex and multidirectional net in which the audience gets lost in discontinued flashes. This less linear way of telling stories makes the audience used to more complex narratives.

One of these movies is the Mexican *Amores Perros*, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu in 2000. It takes place in Mexico City, where three separate stories converge in a tragic accident. Octavio is a young man who needs to make money fast in order to escape with his sister-in-law, Susana, whom his brother treats very badly. He then gets involved in the dog fighting business, where one day he stabs the owner of his dog's rival for shooting his dog during a fight. As he escapes, he gets involved in a car accident, in which his best friend dies and he is badly injured. In the other car is the Spanish supermodel Valeria, whose leg is injured in the accident and later amputated as a result of another injury, which happened as she was trying to help her own dog. El Chivo witnesses the accident. He is apparently a homeless man, who walks the streets pushing a junk cart, accompanied by a bunch of dogs. He seems to have never recovered after serving twenty years in prison for involvement in the guerrilla; however, at the time of the accident, he is in fact preparing to kill a man. El Chivo is in reality a professional hitman. After the accident, he takes Octavio's dog and takes care of it. He decides not to kill his victim, but leaves both the victim and his client – the victim's brother – tied up in a room with a gun, which both could reach. Their destiny, as well as El Chivo's is left unknown.

Another movie worth mentioning is the Academy Award winner *Crash*, directed by Paul Haggis in 2005, which also tells interconnected stories that converge in a traffic accident. However, now the multiplicity of ethnicities plays a more important role than in *Amores Perros*. Set in Los Angeles, a city marked by its cultural mixture of many nationalities, the movie begins with a multi-car crash, involving several characters. The audience is, then, taken back to the day before the accident and the events that will culminate in the crash. A black HMO clerk has been giving a white policeman a hard

time, when the latter tries to get medical help for his father, which leads the policeman to take it out on a black couple, whose car is pulled over by him in traffic. A socialite and a DA are carjacked by two black adolescents. The socialite, in turn, takes it out on a Mexican locksmith, who has been doing work on her home. The locksmith is also harassed by the Persian owner of a shop later on. As we may infer from this brief plot description, there is no hero and no villain, since all the characters can work as either at different moments in the movie, according to their social and/or racial locations.

In 2006, Alejandro González Iñárritu also directed another Academy Award winner, *Babel*, in which the complexness of the interconnected plots gains global scale. Set all over the world, the movie tells the story of a couple from San Diego, who is on vacation in Morocco, trying to reconcile their differences while their children stay at home in the United States with their Mexican housekeeper. Back in Morocco, a herder's son decides to try out a rifle given to him by his father in order to protect the herd, and ends up shooting the American woman on the shoulder. The accident is later ascribed by the media to terrorists. With the delay in their trip, their Mexican housekeeper decides to take their two children to Mexico in order to attend her son's wedding. On the way back into the States, she has problems on the border. Meanwhile, the previous ownership of the rifle is traced back to Tokyo, to a Japanese widower, who has been having problems coping with the recent death of his wife and also with his disabled teenage daughter.

The fiction of contemporary Chicana writer Helena María Viramontes has a lot in common with such movies. Norma Helsper (2009) affirmed of Viramontes's first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (published in 1995), that "[t]he handling of space and simultaneity often owes a debt to film, with the equivalent of wide-angle camera sweeps

from one scene to another.” In this article, I will not focus on this novel, but on a short story published in 1985, called “The Cariboo Cafe,” and her most recent novel, *Their dogs came with them*, published in 2007, to which we may perfectly apply Helsper’s affirmation. Viramontes constructs her plots in the same fashion as it is done in those movies: different stories with different characters, at first, separated and unrelated, which then converge in the climax. In an interview given to Daniel Olivas and published on the website *La Bloga* in April, 2007, Viramontes herself refers to the structure of *Their dogs came with them* as an “intersection structure” and acknowledges its resemblance to the structure of *Amores Perros*, though she recognizes it was not intentional, since the movie was released after she had started writing the novel. (VIRAMONTES, 2009). However, intentional or not, the resemblance is uncanny.

In this interview, Viramontes also recognizes she had used this same structure in a previous short story, “The Cariboo Cafe,” published in the volume *The Moths and other stories*, in 1985. In this short story, three stories intersect and converge in a dramatic ending. It opens with Sonya and Macky, two young children, who are illegal Mexican immigrants in the U.S. As both parents have to work “until they saved enough to move into a finer future where the toilet was one’s own and the children needn’t be frightened” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 65), after school the girl has to pick her younger brother up at a neighbor’s house and take care of him until their parents arrive in the evening. Being only five or six years old, the job proves to be too much for her, as she loses the key to their apartment in a school fight, though she considers the key to be her “guardian saint.” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 65). Locked out of the apartment, she tries to go back to the neighbor’s house where she had picked her brother up, but eventually they get lost in the neighborhood. Scared of the police, since their father told them that

they should avoid the police at all cost: “[t]he polie are men in black who get kids and send them to Tijuana” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 67), Sonya does not know what to do. The first part of the story ends with Sonya and Macky heading to the zero-zero place, where she thought they could be protected.

The second part of the story is narrated in first person, a resource very rarely used by Viramontes, in a tone that leads the reader to suppose the narrator is giving a deposition or an interview. It is immediately clear in the first paragraph that the narrator is the owner of the zero-zero place where the kids were heading to in the first part. He calls it the double zero cafe, since the paint is peeled off in the sign and all one can read now is the double “o.” It is evident that the zero-zero place is the Cariboo Cafe from the story’s title. The narrator claims to be an honest man, who only tries to provide the best service he can to his customers, although, at the same time, he describes them as the worst kind of scum. He also seems to feel guilty after snitching on three “illegals” that had entered the cafe to the police. The reader also finds out he is divorced and had a son, who died young and would be about thirty-six years old if alive. In the third part of the story, it becomes clear that his son died in Vietnam. The cafe owner seems to miss his son so much that he takes a liking of a junky who is a regular at his place, for the only reason that he is about the same age his son would be. In the following passage, we realize that something very serious happened at the cafe: “I tried scrubbing the stains off the floor, so that my customers won’t be reminded of what happened. But they keep walking as if my cafe ain’t fit for lepers.” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 68). Later the narrator also mentions that a crazy lady and two kids started all the trouble and that he recognized the two kids on a bulletin about missing children on TV that night, but he decided not to call the police immediately, since he was not really sure. However, the

next day the woman and the kids enter the cafe again and at this moment the second part ends.

The third part of “The Cariboo Cafe” starts with first-person narration and focuses on the story of a woman whose son, Geraldo, disappeared. The reader may infer that she comes from a Latin-American country, since the Contras are mentioned. The woman goes to the police looking for her son, for she believes he was taken by them, who must have mistaken him for a Contra. She cannot believe it when the police officer tells her they only arrest spies and criminals and she answers, “Spies? Criminals? [...] He is only five and a half years old. [...] What kind of crimes could a five-year-old commit?” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 73). Without any help from the police, the woman returns home to her endless waiting, until a nephew decides to take her to his home in the U.S. One day, as she walks the streets of the North-American city where she now lives with her nephew, she spots a little boy in the crowd whom she believes is her Geraldo and she takes him with her. A few paragraphs later, we realize she also took the boy’s sister. The woman bathes the boy, changes his clothes and puts him to sleep, but she seems not to be aware of the presence of the girl in the room.

The next day, they return to the Cariboo Cafe where they had been the night before. This part is narrated in third person and a few paragraphs are focalized by the cafe owner. This time he calls the police because “[c]hildren gotta be with their parents, family gotta be together [...] It’s only right.” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 77). As the police enter the cafe, the woman realizes they are going to take her son from her a second time, and she does what she can to stop them, including throwing steaming coffee into their faces. The last paragraph is again narrated by the woman, as she heads towards her tragic ending:

And I laugh at his ignorance. How stupid of him to think that I will let them take my Geraldo away just because he waves that gun like a flag. Well, to hell with you, you pieces of shit, do you hear me? Stupid, cruel pigs. To hell with you all, because you can no longer frighten me. I will fight you for my son until I have no hands left to hold a knife. I will fight you all because you're all farted out of the Devil's ass, and you'll not take us with you. I am laughing, howling at their stupidity because they should know by now that I will never let my son go. And then I hear something crunching like broken glass against my forehead and am blinded by the liquid darkness. But I hold onto his hand. That I can feel, you see, I'll never let go. Because we are going home. My son and I. (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 78-79).

In "Hungry Women: Borderlands Mythos in Two Stories by Helena María Viramontes," Wendy Swyt mentions the fragmentation of time, space, memory, and voice in "The Cariboo Cafe". (SWYT, 2001). Firstly, time is fragmented since the story takes place at two different moments: the present of all the characters, with the kids' struggle to get home and their meeting the woman and the owner at the Cariboo Cafe; and the past of both the cafe owner and, mainly, of the woman. Secondly, space is fragmented too, since the present events happen mainly in the cafe and the streets surrounding it, but the past of the woman in a Latin-American country breaks this unity. Furthermore, the memory of all the characters, who either narrate the story themselves or focalize it, is also fragmented. And finally, the use of polyphony, a multiplicity of voices, is the last aspect in its fragmentation.

The sense of fragmentation produced in the reader by all these instances parallels the different levels of fragmentation in the lives of characters. Sonya and Macky are momentarily, but dangerously, separated from their family; their section of the story is, therefore, the least fragmented one. The cafe owner is permanently separated from his

son and wife; however, though confused, he is still capable of retaining his sanity and moving on with his solitary life. His section of the story is thus more fragmented than the first, but less than the last. The woman is permanently separated from her son, and also from her home and her sanity. She is no longer capable of distinguishing reality from imagination; therefore, her section of the story is the most fragmented one. It is interesting to note here that the children have names and so do some of the secondary characters, but neither the cafe owner nor the woman has a name. Their fragmentation is so deep that they are robbed of their identities.

The use of fragmentation as a narrative strategy points to the challenging and transforming character of Viramontes's literature. The reader is called into action after reading the story. As the discomfort caused in the reader by the zigzagging narrative parallels the uncomfortable position of those displaced fragmented characters, the reader identifies with the characters and his or her consciousness is awakened to social injustices and called into action. The reader is challenged "to become a better, more sensitive, interpreter of the social world represented in the text." (MOYA, 2002, p. 191). Furthermore, narrative fragmentation requires from the reader what Gloria Anzaldúa calls "la facultad": "the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface." (ANZALDÚA, 1999, p. 60). According to Wendy Swyt (2001), "[b]ecause temporality and point of view are deliberately fragmented, meaning is dependent on deep structures that suggest the interconnections between events that manifest racial, gendered and political oppression." The reader is, therefore, invited to read below the surface, to interpret the layers of oppression to which Latinos are subjected to in the U.S.

In *Their dogs came with them*, the fragmentation present in the short story will be developed to a much greater extent by the author. If in “The Cariboo Cafe” there were a present moment and a past moment, in the novel there are two present moments, and several other moments are interwoven to these two main presents through the use of narrative flashbacks and flash-forwards, thus contributing to the non-linearity and fragmentation of the novel. Except for the laconic indication “1960-1970” placed before chapter one, these moments are not signaled to the reader, who has to untangle the web in order to make sense out of the plot.

Although there is unity in setting throughout most of the novel – all the main events take place in the neighborhood of East L.A. – the story also moves down to Mexico a few times, especially in flashbacks narrating the background of some of the characters. However, what is more important to consider in relation to the fragmentation of space is the fragmentation experienced by the characters in the first moment of the story as a result of the construction of freeways in the city. The fragmentation caused in the lives of those characters by the freeways is reflected in the structure of the narrative. In the interview to *La Bloga* mentioned previously in this article, Viramontes tells of the moment when she actually recognized the resemblance between the novel structure and the freeway structure:

The list of characters kept increasing and with this increase, the stories multiplied like freeway interchanges. Having this Eureka moment, I realized that the structure of the novel began to resemble the freeway intersections. [...] The intersection structure had always been in the drafts of the “Dogs” novel, but never as strongly until I recognized it.” (VIRAMONTES, 2009).

Like the freeways, the stories of the several characters in the novel flow separately until they converge in an interchange – in the case of the characters, in a cinematographic climax.

If in the short story there were three focalizing characters, in the novel they are countless and there is not one protagonist, although the novel is narrated in the third person by a single narrator. These characters are also Chicanos living in unprivileged conditions, already described and analyzed in chapter two of this dissertation. The multiplicity of voices here is much more disconcerting to the reader, since it is almost impossible to keep track of all the focalizing characters. Moreover, focalization changes not only between chapters but sometimes also within chapters without any warning to the reader. Frequently, characters invade each other's lives, when the same scene is shown more than once through different viewpoints, showing the reader that a character's interpretation of reality depends largely on his or her racial, gender and class location and on how he or she understands this location. In chapter two, for instance, which is focalized by Turtle, we read:

Turtle sought shelter under the awning as two women crossed the street. One was short and plump, and the other one, her younger companion, was taller and hunched under an umbrella, cradling a package wrapped in white paper. Was it possibly a white bag containing bolillos or pan dulce from La Pelota Bakery? Turtle saw an opportunity: simply bump her and run with the package. God-sent easy. [...]

But then she leaned over to whisper in the short woman's ear, and the short woman burst out in laughter and the taller one emerged from under the umbrella and ran ahead like a schoolgirl as the light turned red. When the taller one reached the corner first, she stopped momentarily to lift her arms and open the wings of her poncho. While the winds pinched up the corners of the poncho, and the clouds clacked with terrifying force, the taller woman turned and smiled at Turtle with

incredible delight and then rewrapped her flapping poncho to nestle the package once again in the cradle of her arms. (VIRAMONTES, 2007, p. 27-28).

A few pages later, the same scene is narrated, but now Tranquilina is the focalizing character:

Tranquilina elbowed Mama and they laughed. [...] The butcher's package felt chilled against Tranquilina's chest, and she ran to the corner and readjusted the bulk, the cloak of her poncho raised to shield it from the rain. She turned to Mama; but instead her gaze locked with the razor-cut head of a cholo under an awning. Between them a fence of lashing rain, Tranquilina recognized his glassy yellow-eyed hunger. [...] She held the package tightly.

The storm fractured his face. Tranquilina tried to revive the compassion she once had for those with such hunger, when hunger meant empty bellies or an overwhelming desire for a better life. [...] And as a way of this gangster youth to forgive her immediate condemnation, her abrupt suspicion, she lifted the corners of her mouth (just as she lifted the corners of her poncho seconds before), delivering upon him a broad, toothy smile. (VIRAMONTES, 2007, p. 31-32).

For Turtle, Tranquilina seems to be smiling “with incredible delight,” although as we read the passage as focalized by Tranquilina, we realize she is smiling out of fear of Turtle. Later on in the novel, we discover that her suspicion is justified by her background since she had a traumatizing experience when she was raped in Texas by a man, whom Turtle, in her gang-like attitude, probably resembled. Tranquilina, in turn, has no idea that Turtle is actually a girl. Right after bumping into turtle – or perhaps before – Tranquilina and her mother also meet Ermila and her friends by chance, when they stop and ask the girl for directions: “They stopped once more to ask for directions at a patio table where a group of noisy girls laughed loudly.” (VIRAMONTES, 2007, p. 35). Later on, we see this event through the eyes of the girls: “Two women in long balck

skirts and rubber boots stopped at the table to ask for directions. [...] Creepy, huh? Rini asked after the woman left.” (VIRAMONTES, 2007, p. 53).

These accidental and apparently unimportant meeting of the characters – as many others that occur throughout the narrative – gains a totally new significance by the end of the novel, when the lives of Turtle, Tranquilina and Ermila, as well as those of other main characters, converge in a tragic climax. Not coincidentally, the last chapter of the novel starts with the words: “A perpetual drowsy fog of gaseous fumes hovered over the freeway routes. *Divergence and convergence, six freeways* in Ermila’s front yard, right across from her bedroom window, though she rarely had use for the delineated corridors.” (VIRAMONTES, 2007, p. 313, my emphasis). Six is also the number of focalizing characters whose lives diverge throughout the novel, finally converging in the ending: Ermila, Nacho, Turtle, Tranquilina, Ana and Ben. Throughout the novel their stories had been told in three more or less separate nucleuses – Ermila and Nacho; Turtle, Tranquilina, Ana and Ben. Furthermore, the fact that the same scene is narrated from different points of view shows the simultaneity of the stories which will converge at the end. A closer reading of the novel will reveal that all the second present moment in the narrative – in the early 1970s – accounts for no more than two days, although the stories stretch for more than a hundred of pages. This technique helps convey an idea of compression of time.

The ends of both the short story and the novel point to the recovery of all the plots that converge in it, in an opening to the past. It is the end that organizes the narrative and not the opposite. This connects to Stanley Cavell’s idea of cinema as “world past:” “a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present.” (CAVELL, 1979,

p. 23). The simultaneity between presence and absence experienced by the reader at the end of the novel is, to Cavell, something that only cinema may satisfy (p. 42).

ABSTRACT: *The global screen* (Lipovetsky; Serroy, 2009) discusses a new age of cinema, the “hipercinema.” Influenced by globalization, cinema is now deterritorialized, transnational, plural, and fragmented, which can be seen in the themes, characters and narrative structures of such movies as *Amores Perros* (2000), *Crash* (2005), and *Babel* (2006), which have dispersed, chaotic, non-unified narratives. They tell multiple stories, through interconnected plots, and it is hard to know who the protagonist is. The fiction of Helena María Viramontes has a lot in common with those movies. In this article, I will discuss these points in common, focusing on “The Cariboo Cafe” and *Their dogs came with them*. Neither has a protagonist. In both, the eye of the third person narrator works as that of a camera. The narratives alternate between several moments and places, and the several plots first diverge, only to converge at the dramatic, cinematographic ending.

Keywords: Cinematographic language, Fragmented narrative, Helena María Viramontes.

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