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THE CINEMATIC WORLD OF GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

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«The cinema and I are like an ill-
matched married couple - I can't live
with it and I can't live without it.»

GGM¹

The major themes in the novels and short stories of Gabriel García Márquez seem to be those of violence and solitude, as well as that of love -whether disguised as fleeting tenderness or torrential sexual outbursts. All of these themes, together with the mythological and the biblical, have, for the most part, been dealt with and almost exhausted in the hundreds of critical pages written about the inhabitants of that mythical kingdom known as Macondo. There remains, however, one aspect of GGM's work, to which critics have scarcely given any importance: except for one or two brief articles, GGM's association with film still remains unexplored. The purpose of this paper is an attempt to fill, in part, that gap.

García Márquez's first encounter with the movies, for better or for worse, appears to have taken place during his early years, as spectator, and later during the time of apprenticeship in Colombia, when he was learning to write, both as a journalist and as a storyteller. Among his early pieces we find a small number of movie reviews, some of which appear in the collection of *Textos Costeños*² and elsewhere. «The Man on the Eiffel Tower» («El hombre de la Torre Eiffel») and «Bicycle Thieves» («Ladrones de bicicletas») are two specimens from that period. As film reviewer, GGM assumed the role of apologist for foreign films, for example he closed his review on *The Bicycle Thieves* with the following statement: «resultaría interminable analizar las innumerables escenas, llenas de vivo dramatismo, que habrían bastado para que fuera extraordinaria e inolvidable esta película que tantas protestas y tan

escasas manifestaciones de entusiasmo ha provocado a la ciudad.»³ There is no doubt here that GGM was attracted from the start to Italian neorealism, and in particular to the films by De Sica and other Italian film makers as well.

Besides these assignments, García Márquez also wrote short notes, essays, about famous movie stars. Some of these pieces border on the gossipy side, worthy of «The National Enquirer. » Such is the case of «El jugador y la holgazana,» which deals with Rita Hay worth and her involvement with Ali Khan. Another article, a kind of metacommentary, for it is based on a piece written by another writer, deals with Greta Garbo. In «No ha muerto Greta Garbo,» cinematically speaking, the author skillfully moves from the superficial to the mythological. At the same time that he wrote about the size of shoe La Garbo wears, he also focused on her magnetic personality and the giant shadow the Swedish actress casts on and off the screen. Without trying to GGM was starting to market myths, at the same time that he was showing his predilection for special people and events of the real world.

After serving his time as movie reviewer, and other journalistic chores, for «El Heraldo» in Barranquilla, GGM returned to the big city, like a seasoned ball player who comes to the big leagues after having spent some time in the minors. In 1954, GGM went to work as a movie *critic* and reporter for «El Espectador» in Bogotá. This is the same daily that published some of his earlier fiction. The following year he traveled to Geneva as a reporter for the same newspaper, and then went off to Italy and Paris. While in Italy, the future Nobel Prize winner decided to learn more about movie script writing at the Experimental Movie Center in Rome, but when he learned that such a course did not exist, he enrolled, instead, in a course in film directing. GGM, in an interview years later, said of that period in his life:

... fue un año completamente perdido; yo lo que quería era que me enseñasen cómo se escribía un guión, y de eso nunca se trataba; teníamos una clase a las ocho de la mañana de filosofía cinematográfica; era una serie de incongruencias, no se aprendía nada.⁴

It was in Italy that he met Fernando Birri, made friends with Zavattini, and Vittorio de Sica. He served as an assistant to the latter in the making of *The Roof (El techo)*. That was «the only way to learn something about movies,» he later admitted. Finally in 1961, after leaving *Prensa Latina*,

he moved, with his wife and son, to Mexico City to become a filmscript writer.⁵ During this period (1961-1967), he divided his working time as a journalist, public relations agent, and filmscript writer, writing fiction in his spare time. It was during these years that he teamed with Carlos Fuentes in the writing of several adaptations for the movies. Two of their best known collaborations were those of *El gallo de oro* and one of the film versions of *Pedro Páramo*,⁶ both by Juan Rulfo. Of that particular experience GGM has stated:

... en la adaptación de «Pedro Páramo», de Juan Rulfo, yo entré a trabajar como abogado de Rulfo. Partimos de una nueva estructuración, en la que, como premisa principal, planteaba quitar los «flash-backs» y hacer, como en la novela, que los personajes pasasen de una forma continua del presente al pasado; pero la película fue uno de los mayores desastres del cine mexicano.⁷

During this period, GGM admitted to having written only two first-rate filmscripts, which ironically have never been produced. In his filmography, nonetheless, one finds at least one more successful script: *Tiempo de morir* (1964).⁸

It is true that GGM's work for the film industry in Mexico was not altogether satisfactory. He has often expressed his frustration with the lack of quality in some films, due to the lack of freedom the scriptwriter experiences, especially when he has to comply with the, at times frivolous, demands on the part of the producers. On that subject he has also commented:

No se puede trabajar para el cine; llevas una historia a un productor, la lee y, supongamos, le gusta mucho, pero hay un pequeño detalle que cree debería cambiarse: desde un punto de vista, el protagonista no debe ser fotógrafo, porque según confirman las estadísticas, las películas en que el protagonista es fotógrafo, no han dado dinero en los últimos quince años; te enseña las estadísticas y compruebas que realmente es cierto. Vuelves a casa y sustituyes la profesión del protagonista, pero luego empiezas a leer el guión y te das cuenta de que ese cambio debe ser el primero de una larga serie y que, al final, la historia no funciona, no se sabe exactamente por qué. Luego, por otra parte, el productor también quiere que aumentes la edad de la

protagonista, para que el papel lo pueda hacer María Félix; que el hijo tenga un amante para que lo pueda hacer una chica rubia que él conoce, y así, de la historia que había el comienzo, sólo queda una línea.⁹

In spite of all these problems GGM continued to write for the cinema, and naturally he allowed some of his short stories to be turned into films,¹⁰ but when he was asked, in a recent *Playboy* interview, about the possibility of making a movie of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* he emphatically responded:

Never. Producers keep offering me enormous sums for the rights, but I refuse. The last offer, I believe, was \$2,000,000 I don't want to see it turned into a movie, because I want readers to go on imagining the characters as they see them. That isn't possible in the cinema. In movies, the image is so definite that the spectator can no longer imagine the character as he wants to, only as the screen imposes it on him.

When I studied the way movies were made, I realized there are limitations in the form that do not exist in literature. I've become convinced that the novelist's work is the freest work that exists. You are totally your own master.¹¹

Prior to his *Magnum Opus*, GGM produced several stories under the influence of cinema, especially the films of Fellini, Bergman and Antonioni. As part of my discussion for this paper I have chosen, from his fiction, «La viuda de Montiel» to compare it with Miguel Littin's film by the same title.

My first encounter with Littin's film *La viuda de Montiel* was a German television advertisement, announcing its presentation.¹² Since then, I have been chasing *Montiel's Widow*, but it has proven to be an elusive picture, for, although this film has competed in several important film festivals in Europe and Latin America, it has never been shown in the USA. During the course of my research I have come across a good number of French film reviews of it, and I also have the first ten pages of the only English copy of the film script.¹³ In spite of these shortcomings, I will attempt a brief comparison between the two narratives.

The *histoire* (story-line) in the short story begins with the death of José Montiel, his wake, and proceeds with the linear events describing the Mayor's attempts at recovering the combination to the safe, and the

ineffectual efforts by Mr. Carmichael to save what is left of the crumbling estate. Finally, it stops with the death of the widow herself. It is only by «discourse time» that we are able to glance at Adelaida's background as well as that of Montiel, especially his shady acquisition of wealth and power. Montiel's swift rise is, as a matter of fact, one of the most important events in both the film and the short story. We see him cooperating with the authorities by first acting as an informer, and later getting rid of the opposition, eliminating the poor and divesting the wealthy of their belongings by pretending to help them by buying their land and goods at low prices. Montiel's glory, however, is short-lived, for he dies six years later in a fit of rage. Adelaida's existence, after her husband's death, is pitiful, to say the least. Abandoned by her children, who prefer to live in Europe rather than to die at the hands of savages, she lives in solitude, and soon withdraws from the world to live entirely in the past. Her only contact with the outside world is the sporadic visits of Mr. Carmichael, and the occasional letters from her daughters in Paris. Since she never understood her husband's actions nor knew the actual source of his wealth, she has no interest in the vast, but decaying, riches she has inherited. With Montiel gone, she abandons herself to loneliness and death. Her last moments are shared by La Mamá Grande, who reappears, in a dream, only to tell her when she is to die.

*Montiel's Widow, The Movie*¹⁴

Characters

| | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| Adelaida | Geraldine Chaplin |
| José Montiel | Nelson Villagra |
| Carmichael | Ernesto Gómez Cruz |
| Alcalde | Alejandro Parodi |
| La Mamá Grande | Katy Jurado |

Credits

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| Direction..... | Miguel Littin |
| Photography | Patricio Castilla |
| Screen Writing..... | José Agustín |
| Film Editing | Nelson Rodriguez |
| Music..... | Leo Brower |

The film *Montiel's Widow* is almost impossible to synposize, for we only have a few parts of the puzzle. The story line, however, is basically the same as the short story, with slight variations, such as cinematic

techniques, and a few extra details added to stretch the story to a full length film.

As the film opens, the camera eye is located outside the Montiel house and it is dawn. The camera, with a slow tracking shot, approaches the house with a high barred windows. A mixture of sounds, sobbing, weeping, and praying, is heard. The voice of José Montiel scarcely audible repeats «two two two to the right, three eight five to the left, zero right, zero Adelaida, seven right...» Then the voice becomes incoherent; it gets lost among the prayers - and the sound of a teletype which beats out of rhythm grows louder. The next scene takes place inside the Montiel house: DRAWING ROOM AND HALLWAYS. The tracking shot of the camera continues to absorb and record sounds, furnishings, and the prevailing affluence of its owners. The camera, as a curious observer, finds its way into the room where Montiel lies dying and is being attended by Doctor Giraldo. Next we witness Montiel attempt to sit up as he says in a whisper, «two two two Adelaida to the right...» Adelaida moves closer, trying to understand what he is mumbling. She gently adjusts his pillow for him, then turns and leaves the room. The camera follows her. In front of the window there is a small circus passing by. At its head there is a white horse with a silver horn on its forehead. A teenage girl atop the horse is offering ritual greetings which have a pathetic quality. The image fades out on the white surface of the curtains. After a very brief shot of Adelaida coming down an old and creaky stairway, the following scene is a panoramic view of the basement of the house where Adelaida is kneeling on the ground, scratching with animal-like frenzy and bleeding hands. The camera is now behind her. In the background one can see the huge carcass of a bull on the rain-soaked earth. We see its head, its bones. There is a foreground shot of Adelaida who is mumbling something. Adelaida says, «At least I have the small consolation of seeing him die in bed, like a saint.» She throws her head back and laughs strangely while nervously biting her right thumb. Above her face, we hear the sound of a storm breaking, rainfall, thunder, and then quickly the sound of the sea overwhelms all other sounds. The next scene is OUTSIDE, AT DAWN, AND BY AN IMMENSE RIVER Adelaida's voice *in off*: «You made me very happy, Montiel . . . very happy ...» The image of Adelaida comes forth from the bottom of the dark waters among the rushes. The main credits of the film appear.

Until now I have tried to paraphrase what takes place on the screen to give you a more visual idea of the filmscript, but since neither time nor space allows me, I will briefly summarize what follows: SCENE FOUR

Carmichael is notified by a young ranch hand that Montiel is dying. SCENE FIVE: INTERIOR. DRAWING ROOM. DAWN. People enter and leave; some are in uniform. Adelaida tells her Grandmother of Montiel's death. Grandmother replies that every one knows that, but nobody believes it. Adelaida swears to shut herself in forever. SCENE SIX: BRIDGE. DAWN. OUTSIDE. Balthasar and Ursula appear discussing the price he should charge for the cage. Those who know the normal sequence of GGM's stories will agree that this detail is anachronous. SCENE SEVEN: DRAWING ROOM. INTERIOR. Grandmother appears shuffling a deck of cards and magically telling a tale of a king who owned a herd of elephants and had a daughter named Margarita (Poem by Rubén Darío). This is a prelude to the flashback showing Montiel sitting atop of a rice bin, and fleeting images of rich people concerned. SCENE EIGHT: INTERIOR THE MONTIEL HOUSE. DAYTIME. Adelaida is mourning and lamenting the lack of support from the townpeople. At the same time a young Montiel appears barefoot and speaking nervously to his wife. He announces, «There is a new Mayor coming.» In another mini-scene the new Mayor appears disembarking and looking around suspiciously. SCENE NINE: DRAWING ROOM. A card falls from Grandmother's hand. It is a proclamation: «The entire country is in a state of siege.» Visually represented, several proclamations succeed one another, thus elliptically synthesizing «the curfew,» «the war vs subversion,» and the exhortation for citizens to «denounce those who are opposed to the military junta.» (!) The last card shows the worried face of José Montiel. SCENE TEN: INTERIOR. CITYHALL. NIGHTTIME. Montiel is shown supplying the names of the dentist, the pharmacist, and the tradesman of the new Mayor. SCENE ELEVEN: INTERIOR BARBERSHOP. LATE AFTERNOON. Close-up of a sign on the wall which reads: «Talking Politics Not Allowed» Carmichael enters to get a haircut. Through their dialogue we learn of the barber's dislike for Montiel, and of Carmichael's devotion towards his employers. A recapitulation of Montiel's rise to power and wealth follows.

In this brief synopsis we notice a remarkable number of divergences between the short story and the film. First, as a filmed narrative, *Montiel's Widow* is much closer to a similar Venezuelan student theater production based on several of GGM's short stories than to the tale itself. The film likewise incorporates characters and situations from other stories. Contrary to the free flowing and more encompassing narrative structure of the film, the widow's tale is much less panoramic and represents more of a

furtive glance into the lives of the Montiels - a newsreel, as it were. According to one reviewer:

Toutes les caractéristiques de la littérature baroque imprègnent le film de Littin. L'hyperbole (le dédoublement du monde), l'hétéronomie (le trop-plein et les proliférations), l'homothétie (la contamination des espèces et des règnes entre eux), présents dans l'oeuvre de García Márquez, trouvent dans *la Veuve Montiel* des équivalents visuels parfois réussis mais aussi quelque peu appliqués.¹⁵

Although nearly all the major developments of the story are fully depicted in the film, there are some variations, especially in the behavior of the characters. Two illustrations will suffice. First, there is the scene in which Mr. Carmichael shoots and kills the widow. This initial shock is soon lessened when we realize that this event is merely taking place in the deranged mind of Adelaida. Secondly, we are surprised with the film's ending, for unlike the short story, the final scene shows Adelaida in the turbulent waters of the river. The water scenes - call it «motif,» if you will - take us back to a series of symbolic shots the film maker uses to highlight the erotic elements. I am thinking not only of the river, but also of the circus scene in which a young girl appears riding a white horse resembling a unicorn. With point of view, we again notice a few discrepancies. In the short story, for instance, the narrator goes unidentified; in the film, however, the narrator turns out to be Mr. Carmichael himself! There are, of course, other points for comparison between the two works, but neither time nor space allows for them.

Similar to the reel world of William Faulkner, the cinematic cosmos of GGM is full of ups and downs - full of deceptive enticements. His filmscripts and scenarios based on his short stories represent, nonetheless, a sizeable amount in his *oeuvre*, and can no longer be ignored. I hope the rapid journey I have undertaken through this almost unexplored facet of his writing serves as an incentive for future and more productive probes into GGM's filmography.

NOTES

1 Julianne Burton, «Learning to Write at the Movies: Film and the Fiction Writer in Latin America,» *The Texas Quarterly*, Vol. 18 (1975), p. 92.

2 Gabriel Garcia Márquez, *Textos costeños* Jacques Gilard, ed. (Barcelona: Ediciones Bruguera, 1981).

3 *Textos costeños*, p. 468.

4 Augusto M. Torres, «Entrevista con Gabriel García Márquez» *Cuadernos para el diálogo*, No. 66 (marzo de 1969), p. 44.

5 «Gabriel García Márquez,» *índice* Vol. 24, No. 237 (1970), p. 26.

6 Cf. Juan Rulfo, *El gallo de oro y otros textos para cine* 2a. ed. (México: Ediciones Era, S.A., 1980), pp. 133-134.

7 Augusto M. Torres, p. 44.

8 Cf. *Gabriel García Márquez: An Annotated Bibliography, 1947-1979* Compiled by Margaret Eustella Fau (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), pp. 6-7.

9 Augusto M. Torres, p. 44.

10 Cf. Carl J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society 1896-1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); also «Nueva obra de García Márquez para el cine,» *El tiempo* (Bogotá) (2 de marzo de 1972), p. 11-A.

11 «Playboy Interview: Gabriel García Márquez,» *Playboy* (December 1982), p. 174.

12 «22.05 Uhr. ZDF. Montiel Witwe Nach dem Tod ihres Mannes eines korrupten, skrupellosen Gutsbesitzers, gerat sein Witwe (Géraldine Chaplin, Photo mit Nelson Villagra) zunehmend in Einsamkeit and Isolation. Die als Parabel auf den lateinamerikanischen Kontinent interpretierte Geschichte des Nobelpreisträgers Gabriel García Márquez inszenierte Miguel Littin 1979.» *Der Spiegel* (1973).

13 For this material I am indebted to Prof. Robert Scott of DeAnza College, Cupertino, California.

14 Jorge Ruffinelli, *La viuda de Montiel* (Behind the Scenes) (Xalapa, Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 1979), pp. 5-68.

15 Cf. Dominique Païri's review of *La veuve Montiel* in *Cinema* (Paris) Vol. 263 (November 1980).