THE CONSTRUCTION OF WOMAN IN *DISTINTO AMANECER*

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She is the Chingada. She loses her name; she is no one; she disappears into nothingness; she is Nothingness. And yet she is the cruel incarnation of the feminine condition.

Octavio Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, 1950

Written at a time when Mexico was experiencing unprecedented economic growth and political stability, *Labyrinth of Solitude* is Octavio Paz’s analysis of the collective Mexican psyche. In his essay, Paz describes the position of “woman” in Mexican society, a position constructed through the intersection of the social discourses of history and popular culture. In Mexican history, La Malinche, the Indian woman who was the mistress of Cortés and the mother of his child, remains a symbol of the Spanish conquest. According to the legend that developed out of the historical event, La Malinche was not raped, she offered herself up willingly to the Spanish conqueror. For this reason, she is remembered as the fallen woman, la chingada, who betrayed Mexico.

Drawing on this figure, Paz argues that there is a parallel between the historical figure of La Malinche, “la chingada” or violated mother, and the way in which Mexican men relate to women as the “other.” Earlier in his essay Paz writes:

Woman is another being who lives apart and is therefore an enigmatic figure... She attracts and repels like men of an alien race or nationality... Woman is a living symbol of the strangeness of the universe and its radical heterogeneity.

If La Malinche represents the mother of conquered Mexico, then, by analogy, Mexicans are “hijos de la chingada,” or sons of the violated Mother. For Paz, this is a derogatory term signifying violence and aggression. Thus, he argues, the Mexican people are the product of “violation, abduction or deceit,” and that this question of origins “is the central secret of our anxiety and anguish.”

Analyzing the post-revolutionary Mexican national character as being defined by an inferiority complex, Paz further suggests that in an attempt to compensate for an identity constructed by conquest and colonization, the Mexican male put on a mask: that particular form of Mexican patriarchy known as machismo.

In *Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz, by now a disillusioned Marxist, continues the long thread of Mexico’s “philosophical” search for a national identity. Like José Vasconcelos and Samuel Ramos before him, Paz’s analysis is informed both by a Mexican middle-class preoccupation with the question of national identity and by a refusal (or inability) to deal with the real historical and material forces of history.

However, in her analysis of the “mystification” of the Mexican Revolution, Ilene V. O’Malley argues that machismo, rather than being a psychological crutch or philosophical construct, was actually part of a larger revolutionary discourse, whereby the Revolutionary government produced a “myth” about the intention and effects of the revolution in order to co-opt “the revolutionary potential of the popular classes.”

By infusing popular discourses with the “values and psychology of patriarchy,” the Revolution’s leaders were able to disguise the fact that the Revolution had not succeeded in restructuring the social and material relationships of the Mexican classes which denied lower-class men their “manhood” in the first place. Because patriarchal values of male superiority were already embedded in Mexican culture, machismo was readily “naturalized” into post-revolutionary society. One of the “achievements” then, of the Revolution, was that lower class men could now assume “the prerogatives of the patriarch.” In other words, they could partake in the continued subjugation of women.

As a number of writers have noted, women were actively involved in the revolutionary struggle as soldaderas, or female “soldiers.” Although they worked as cooks and nurses, and sometimes as “warriors” on the frontlines of the battlefields, the soldadera earned her highest praise for sacrificing her body for the Revolution—not in terms of laying down her life, but
laying down her sexual and procreative ability for the male revolutionary heroes. As an example, O’Malley quotes “La Soldadera,” in which Mexican poet Baltasar Dromundo “blesses” revolutionary women for opening their “sacred” flesh “at the command of Emiliano Zapata.”

Notwithstanding the Mexican woman’s sacrifice, the Revolution failed to account for or provide a new “revolutionary” position for women. Although, out of economic necessity, women in the 1940s were forced into non-traditional roles in the labor force, social and economic changes brought about by the revolutionary struggles did not alter the essential patriarchal structure, and women assumed their new roles within the same male-dominated system. In her study of the incorporation of women into Mexican popular narrative, Jean Franco suggests that for the Mexican cinema and other mass culture productions, sexual, racial and class categories were redefined within the discourses of the Mexican Revolution. Franco adds, however, that there was a “growing gulf” between this nationalist discourse, which sought to unify the Mexican state, and the “reality of the people’s everyday existence.” In other words, the actual day-to-day experiences of groups still marginalized in Mexican society (specifically women and Indians), contradicted the “myth” of the social revolution.

The gulf between revolutionary discourse and women’s lived experience in post-revolutionary society is explored in a particular genre of Mexican films of the 1940s—the cabaretera films. These films focus on young women working as dancehall girls or prostitutes in order to support themselves and their families. Charles Ramírez Berg, in “The Image of Women in Recent Mexican Cinema,” suggests that cabaretera films are about “the daughters of La Malinche...women sacrificing their lives for the benefit of others,” much like the soldaderas who sacrificed their bodies for the Revolution.

Julio Bracho’s Distinto amanecer, (New Dawn, 1943) stands out as a key film of the cabaretera genre in at least two respects. First, the film reveals the conflicted ways in which women are plotted into the narratives of Mexican popular culture. The major female character, Julieta, works in a cabaretera in order to support her younger brother, Juanito, and her unemployed husband, Ignacio. Furthermore, she is barren and has not been able to (re)produce a son for Ignacio. She is therefore doubly oppressed: in her relationship to economic production as a sexual object, and to the economy of reproduction as a disgraced “barren” woman. In this film, the fictional construct of “Julieta” represents an attempt to fuse a number of major social roles that have been assigned to Mexican women: the “chingada” or whore, the wage-earner, and the mother.

Second, although Ramírez Berg suggests that, in general, “the Golden Age films created an idealized, romanticized, and imaginary Mexico,” Distinto amanecer, in contrast, provides us with a darker picture of post-revolutionary Mexico. Here, Mexico City is depicted as a threatening and decaying society populated by beggars, prostitutes and corrupt political functionaries. It is therefore a film about the failure of the Mexican revolution to provide real social and economic change for large segments of the population.

Distinto amanecer traces the events during an unexpected reunion one night of three intellectuals who many years before, as students, had been politically active in the Revolution. Octavio (Pedro Armendáriz), a labor leader, is the only one still involved in politics. Implicated by corrupt government officials in the assassination of a union rival, he is fleeing government henchmen who have been hired to kill him. Slipping into a movie theater to hide, he unknowingly sits down next to Julieta (Andrea Palma), a girlfriend from his university days. She and her husband, Ignacio (Alberto Galán), agree to help Octavio retrieve politically sensitive documents from a post office box. These documents contain important information which will incriminate a number of high-ranking government officials in a scheme to sell out to foreign interests. Julieta realizes she is still in love with Octavio, and when he asks her to flee the city with him the following morning, she must decide whether to go with him or remain with Ignacio.
What will be evident in the following examination, is that within the representation of woman’s position in post-revolutionary Mexico in *Distinto amanecer*, Julieta had no real choice. By examining this film in a socio-historical context, it will be possible to uncover some of the ways in which an attempt was made to construct a new idea of “woman” in post-revolutionary Mexican society and into film practice. The constitution of “woman” in any social structure is conflicted by disjunctions and the “multiplicity” of shifting discourses within a particular society. Thus, any attempt to produce a unified representation of “woman” in cinematic texts will necessarily be met with narrative tension and resistance.

*Distinto amanecer* was produced amidst the “Golden Age” of Mexican cinema, which emerged in the 1940s due in part to increasing economic and political intervention by the state. Starting in 1934, President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40) centralized and nationalized the industry. By the early 1940s, when many other national cinema’s were experiencing the debilitating effects of World War II, the Mexican film industry emerged firmly entrenched as a state institution, supported by both state protectionist policies and private capital. Mexico also received U.S. war-related support in the form of financial loans, film equipment and raw stock. In 1943, the year *Distinto amanecer* was released, seventy films were produced in Mexico.

Despite the global dominance and influence of Hollywood and its “classical style” of narration,13 “Mexico’s Golden Age cinema was distinctly Mexican.”14 AsRamírez Berg explains, “Mexican films adapted the Hollywood paradigm, incorporating stylistic and narrative norms to suit its particular cultural case.”15 In relation to the position of “woman,” this “distinctiveness” is revealed primarily through the content and themes of Mexican films which were governed by particular features of Mexican national ideology.
Post-revolutionary Mexican women occupied multiple and conflicting social spaces. On one hand they had been the soldaderas, the revolutionary women who publicly accompanied their men in war and worked as teachers in the new social system, while on the other hand, they were expected to remain locked in their “private spaces”—the home, the brothel or the convent. But in the Mexican reformist society of the 1940s which demanded more and more labor power, women were incorporated into the work force in growing numbers. This integration simultaneously threatened the stability of the family and the dominancy of familial patriarchal authority, which, in turn, threatened male identity. Franco notes that the Revolution, in an attempt to shore up disenfranchised males, "constituted a discourse that associated virility with social transformation in a way that marginalized women at the very moment when they were, supposedly, liberated."16

While an attempt was made to incorporate women into the new "secular" state, at the same time women were maintaining their positions as the "mortal female body that sustains the male hero."17 In this way, revolutionary and cultural practice were gendered, liberating males—in theory at least—while continuing to oppress females. Thus the state's reinforcement of the ideology of machismo conveniently inserted women into the marketplace as wage labor while at the same time kept them "in their place." The cabaretera films focused on this ideological ambivalence. As Ana López argues in "Celluloid Tears: Melodrama in the 'Old' Mexican Cinema," these films "were structured around the issue of woman's identity and presented from a female point of view" and thus offered a "serious challenge" to the Revolutionary moral discourse. She concludes, however, that the films nonetheless worked to confirm patriarchy.18

So it is that Julieta, who works as a dancehall hostess to support her unemployed husband, continues to be oppressed at home by a man who is not only unfaithful to her, but spends the rent money she's earned on his "other" woman. Once a part of the intellectual revolutionary movement, Ignacio now complains bitterly, "we live in a country where the government has ruined everything. A taxi driver earns more than a teacher." His unemployment has forced Julieta to take a job, thus challenging his remaining position of authority as head of the family. To make matters worse, Julieta has also failed to produce a son for him, which threatens his male image of potency and virility. Not only is he unable to support his family economically, he has failed to ensure the continuation of his family name. In retaliation he has displaced his dishonor onto Julieta by taking a lover, another woman whose economic survival is also dependent on limited choices. Thus, Ignacio has one woman out in the marketplace and another at home where she belongs. In the social discourse, and in the particular narrative structure of Distinto amanecer, it seems as if these two positions are antithetical: they cannot be occupied by the same character, thus demonstrating machismo's either/or categorization of woman.

The opening scene in Distinto amanecer sets up this "disjunction" between real social relations and the positioning of fictional constructs in cinematic narrative structure. When Octavio unknowingly sits down next to Julieta in a darkened movie theater, Julieta strikes a match to light a cigarette. Octavio immediately blows it out, fearing that the light will attract the attention of his pursuer. Julieta asks him, "What right do you have to do that?" Here, Julieta appears to be representative of the "new" Mexican woman, questioning the prerogative of the male in ordering her around. Octavio points to a "no smoking" sign. Julieta lights another match and points to a different sign which advertises "Smoke a Monte Carlo." She is reacting to what she perceives to be Octavio's attempt to deny her "pleasure," asserting her "right" to do as she pleases within a "new" social system.

It is true that women in Mexico in 1943 had acquired economic rights to consume and to work for wages. However, these rights did not yet include the right to vote.19 In contrast, Octavio is speaking a "political" discourse in his insistence that Julieta "obey" the letter of the law. In the next shot, Julieta gets up to walk out of the theater, and we see her framed within the cinema.
screen in the background, reminding the "real" film audience that they are watching a film, and that Julieta (and all Mexican women) are still inscribed within and limited by certain parameters of "choice." As will be seen later, although Julieta may have the "freedom" to smoke any cigarette she wants in public, she does not have the freedom to leave a man who she does not love, and who, moreover, is unfaithful to her. Thus, just as the Revolution offered up the "freedom" of machismo to men to take the place of real social and economic changes, so too, were women given "new" economic and social liberties—the freedom to get a job as a dancehall hostess and to smoke in public—while at the same time being denied access to political freedoms.

This scene also introduces a narrative device particularly related to the ideology of Mexican patriarchy. This device is expressed as a tension produced by the "double-narrative" structure of the film—Octavio's "male" narrative versus Julieta's "female" narrative. Just as Mexican social discourse constructed different positions and social spaces for men and women, so too, fictional narratives constructed gendered positions within cinematic texts. David Bordwell notes in his analysis of the classical cinematic text that most Hollywood films present a "double causal structure," one motivated by heterosexual romance, the other by another social sphere. He further argues that each plot works along similar lines towards a "coinciding" climax.20

In Distinto amanecer, the primary male narrative does follow classical conventions of Hollywood film which structure the trajectory of the plot along a chain of linear and causal events towards a definitive closure. Furthermore, indi-
vidual characters, motivated by psychological devices, are agents of this causality. The "goal" set up at the beginning of Distinto amaneecer is for Octavio to retrieve the documents and get out of town on the 8:00 a.m. train. Various sequences in the film work towards either hindering or supporting the success of his mission. The fact that the story takes place within a 24 hour period, and that there are constant references to a clock or the time, reinforce the urgency of plot resolution.

Julieta's narrative, however, does not follow this classical drive towards climax and resolution. Much of the "movement" of her story is non-linear, occurring through her narrations about her dreams or her past. Moreover, this secondary narrative structure works to subvert the conventions of the classical structure. Thus, a tension occurs throughout the film between Octavio's need to proceed forward towards the departure of the train and Julieta's need to go backwards (into the past) or inward (into her dreams), in order to come to a decision about remaining with Ignacio or leaving with Octavio. Although the linear causality of plot development is structured through the master, "male" narrative, it may be argued that the film's protagonist is in actuality, Julieta, the woman. While López suggests that the female protagonists of the cabaeatera films threaten classical narrative resolution through an "excess of signification," in this case it seems as if the threat occurs instead as an excess of structuration.

Towards the end of Distinto amaneecer, there is a scene in which this structural tension is explicitly revealed. At the beginning of the scene Julieta returns to a hotel room where Octavio, who now has the retrieved evidence, is hiding from the governor's henchmen. Octavio has read the secret documents revealing the extent of scandal and corruption in the government. The driving force behind the narrative trajectory of the film has been the necessity to "beat the clock,"—for Octavio to get on that southbound train with the incriminating documents.

Meanwhile, the movement of Julieta's "private" narrative has been circling around a moment of decision. Although she had been involved in the Revolution in her younger days, she has been relegated by this narrative structure back to a "woman's place," and thus is concerned here only with the narrative closure of her own "personal story." Even though she is a member of the labor force, working out in the public sector to support her man, the frame of the master story has enclosed "woman" (as represented by Julieta) within the frame of the private, domestic space of relationships, the only space open for her in post-revolutionary Mexico. She has, in effect, been split off from a conscious, active role in the public sphere of social revolution.

After Julieta falls asleep in the hotel room, the film dissolves to a montage of scenes of the city at sunrise (the first intrusion of daylight into the film), revealing an exterior, social world. The last shot of the montage is of the train station and it is marked by the sound of the train's whistle, signaling both its imminent departure and narrative closure. We cut back to the interior space of the hotel room as Julieta, awakened by that same sound, begins to "narrate" the story of her dream.

Julieta occupies multiple positions in this scene. She is both subject and object of the primary narrative moment—the "narrating" of the dream. The camera focuses on her and dollys in to a medium close-up as she relates her dream. There are no cutaways to show Octavio listening. Furthermore, Julieta is both subject and object of the "narrative" of the dream—she is the dreamer and the object of the dream. However, the dream is marginal to the narrative development of the master story; it intrudes on the totality of the constructed world of the film. The narrative function of "woman" in this scene seems to be one of retardation or delay—a device which works to add suspense to Octavio's story (will he board that morning train?)—merely an obstruction on the road to narrative closure of the "master" story.

An analysis of the dream reveals specifically how this delay functions. In the dream, Julieta and Octavio are walking through the city, waiting for the train that will take them away, when a bell rings, causing Julieta to lose con-
sciousness within the dream. She says:

I returned to reality [within the dream] and you weren’t you. I started to run as the train’s windows sped by me. It gained speed as though it was a runaway train. Then, I opened my eyes and saw the window illuminated by the morning light.

What is interesting about the narrative framework of Julieta’s dream is that it is able to contain multiple levels of reality, whereas the “master narrative” of the film is fractured by this intrusion of another narrative “level.” These multiple levels are related to the multiple positions which Julieta occupies as both subject and object. On the first level, Julieta, as object, is “waiting” (a passive position often assigned to women in classical narrative structures) for Octavio (the “active” subject) to take her away. On another level, Julieta “returns to reality” or to the realization that Octavio wasn’t who she thought he was (the subject of her “dreams”). Finally, on yet a third level, Julieta returns to “another” reality—and the possibility of “un distinto amanecer,” or a new way of life, both as a woman, and as a social subject. These three narrative levels momentarily delay the forward movement of the primary “male” plot. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan suggests that those narratives which work “below” the level of the diegesis of the story may serve a thematic function through the operation of analogy. In other words, Julieta’s dream articulates a “theme” which is relevant to the primary narrative level of the film, although, in this case not explicit. This theme is one that is embedded within the classical narrative structure constituted through patriarchy. As Annette Kuhn notes:

If female sexuality and female discourse are regarded as together posing the threat of disruption to the linear process of the classic narrative, then that threat must be recuperated or repressed if the story is to have any kind of “satisfactory” resolution—a closure, that is, in which most or all the ends of the narrative are tied up.

Julieta’s “narrative” of an active female subjectivity posed a threat to narrative closure, specifically, the threat of an “opening” of woman’s eyes to the exclusion of female subjectivity from cinematic narrative structure. In the same way, “female sexuality and female discourse” posed a “threat” to the Mexican revolutionary narrative and therefore had to be repressed through the ideology of machismo. The insertion of women such as Julieta into the wage labor force threatened the traditional patriarchal discourse which gave men a superior social, sexual, political and economic position. Before this change in socio-economic practice, men, because they were the “breadwinners,” could demand unquestioning submission from their women.

Part of the problem is that in Mexico, as in many cultures, women are represented as both multiple and conflicted. In Mexico, there are a number of “master” roles to which women have been assigned: La Malinche, the “traitress”; the Virgin of Guadalupe, who represents the virginal “maternal womb” (through her association with the ancient Aztec Goddess of fertility, Coatlicue); and the long-suffering Mexican mother, who represents an attempt to combine the whore and the virgin into a singular, but “useful” female position. The fictional construct of “Julieta” in Distinto amanecer is an attempt on the part of Mexican social and cinematic discourses to tie these images up into a unitary female “body.” However, Julieta’s narrative position as a wife/mother and as a “prostitute” (the negation of wife/mother), results in the construction of a “split” or fragmented body. This notion of a fragmented body suggests the impossibility for women in post-revolutionary Mexican society of recognizing themselves as “unitary” subjects. As in all patriarchal systems, women’s bodies remain “repositories” or sites of social construction of meanings regarding gender and sexuality.

It is morning—“un distinto amanecer”—and Julieta has decided that she will leave her family to go off with Octavio, but first she needs to
return to her apartment to say goodbye to Ignacio and Juanito. The two subsequent shots exemplify the structural excess discussed above. In the first shot, she descends the dark stairs of the hotel, passing and ignoring a washerwoman on her hands and knees who signifies the failure of the Revolution to respond to the needs of the lower classes. This woman, doubly oppressed as both female and a member of the lower class of the new urban proletariat, has not yet emerged into a “new” morning. Unlike Julieta, she has not been granted the limited economic access which women of Julieta’s class have achieved.

The scene then dissolves into a shot of Julieta, dressed in her black evening gown (perhaps a reminder of the darkness in which the washerwoman remains), emerging back into the light and walking down the middle of the street against the oncoming traffic. This shot offers a moment in which Julieta again “escapes” the linear narrative process, thus forestalling narrative closure and final containment. In this moment, as in the dream sequence, the possibilities of a female subjectivity in both cinematic and social discourse are again articulated. These above two shots serve no purpose in furthering the narrative “logic” of the story; they are merely “moments” in Julieta’s narrative in which “woman” attempts to break through the restrictive boundaries of both the classical cinematic narrative and the social narrative of patriarchy.

Although the final words of a popular song celebrate “a new morning for women” in the last scene of Distinto amanecer, the master narrative appears to achieve its closure at the expense of “woman.” Octavio boards the train safely with the documents, but as the train pulls away, Julieta is revealed standing by the empty tracks with Ignacio and Juanito. The choice she made to leave Ignacio was articulated “outside” the boundaries of “his” story, and thus, as noted earlier, she had no “real” choice at all.

At the time Distinto amanecer was made, the narrative of the social transformation of woman’s position in the Mexican social structure had not been resolved. In this film, Julieta remains temporarily trapped within the conflicting traditional roles assigned to her by patriarchal discourses. The position of “woman” in both Mexican social and cultural discursive narratives could not be reconstructed until the “myth” of the Mexican Revolution was rewritten to deconstruct the myth of patriarchy. Nonetheless, those moments of textual disruption discussed above reveal both the impossibility of complete containment of “woman” and the possibility of “un distinto amanecer.”

2 Ibid, p. 66.
3 Ibid, p. 79-80.
6 Ibid.
12 The Churubusco studios were heavily invested in by U.S. capitalists, including Harry Wright, a private industrialist, and N. Peter Rathvon and Phil Resiman, who were executives of RKO Radio Pictures. The Mexican film industry as a whole was also receiving assistance from Nelson D. Rockefeller’s Office for Coordination of Inter-American Affairs. This caused “concern among many Mexican film executives who feared the ‘Americanization’ of the industry.” See Carl J. Mora, Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-1988, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 68-69. For a more critical analysis of the industrial relations between the U.S. and Mexico,
see Jorge A. Schmitman, *Film Industries in Latin America: Dependency and Development*, (New Jersey: ABLEX, 1984)


15 *Ibid*.


19 In 1946, women were granted the right to vote in municipal elections. It was not until 1958 that women were granted full political rights.


21 López, “Celluloid Tears,” p. 44.
