



Rebelión contra el poder. El discurso fílmico de María Luisa Bemberg
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SUMMARY

Rebellion against the power

The filmic discourse of María Luisa Bemberg

Bemberg as a critical filmmaker

María Luisa Bemberg (1922-1995) is one of the most important Argentinean and Latin-American filmmakers. This is extraordinary because female filmmakers in Argentina and Latin America still are a minority. She grew up in one of the richest families in Argentina and she always consciously experienced the limitations of being a woman in her social class. As a girl she was quite indignant about the treatment she did receive, in comparison with her brothers. She made up her mind after reading *The Second Sex* (1949) of Simone de Beauvoir. She married young, gave birth to four children and divorced ten years later. Together with other women she constituted a feminist union, but wasn't convinced by its success. She started writing film scripts for male filmmakers. The results didn't satisfy her, though. That's why she decided to make her own films. In 1980 her first fiction film was finished, and in the following years five more, gradually being really successful. In all her cinematographic work the main characters are strong women fighting against laws and rules imposed by a dominantly male society. However being true females, they develop real independency, courage, and strength. And they develop their own vision of life. Thus they feel encouraged to make their own choices and to find a different way of life, THEIR way of life.

Bemberg openly criticizes in her films specific characteristics of Argentinean and Latin American society, such as social class differences, abuse of power and the hypocrisy of the church. She relates gender to power, from a feminine perspective. She aims at demonstrating that the unequal position of women, compared to men, is caused by lack of democracy. And, parallel to that, for the same reason, that it is due to the unequal distribution of power: in political and economic systems, in religious institutions and in family structures. Her main focus of criticism is on the dominant social class, to which she evidently belongs herself.

Research on Bemberg's cinematographic rebellion

My analysis focuses on the way Bemberg applied and combined cinematographic and dialogue techniques, stories and characters into successful and interesting mainstream films with a strong critical message. During my research I did discover so called 'key scenes' in a number of her films. These are scenes, in which aspects of power and attempts to produce a rupture in traditional patterns, have been successfully represented. Such can be discerned in the behavior of, and the interaction between, the characters, enforced and supported by Bembergs specific cinematographic language. The analysis of these films requires a method that does justice to their structure on the one side and at the on the other side shows, how this structure enables Bemberg to create her specific cinematographic content. This content is representative for her rebellion against the restrictions of her country and her social class. My research has been based on three benchmarks: the socio-cultural history to which Bemberg belonged, the resources that she handled as an ideological filmmaker, and her feminist beliefs. These three components are brought together and highlighted in the analysis.

To be able to analyze the films as compact and as deep as possible, I did select the evidently most leading elements. These recurring themes are related to the use of color, the cinematography, the scripting (with special attention to the casting and to the way it is reflected in the dialogues), the story lines that develop contrary to expectations and the visual games she plays with the concept of the male gaze.

Based on these analyses, Bembergs motives and reasons to create a really original film language will be determined and decoded. At the same time the origin will be shown of the ideas which underlie Bembergs feminist point of view. This method is especially focused on form and style, showing how the content is utilized for Bembergs rebellion discourse against power. My method clearly shows which film techniques Bemberg uses to transmit her point of view while at the same time she effectively seduces the spectator to voluntarily adopt her point of view. This formal analysis of selected moments, scenes and styles in the work of Bemberg, is in accordance with the film analysis school, developed by David Bordwell. The analysis covers well defined scenes being conceptualized and interpreted, using an eclectic

combination of several methods. Central to my analysis are important concepts developed by Mieke Bal, Christian Metz and Sergei Eisenstein.

It is clear that Bemberg's films are ideologically loaded. For the narratological and the visual-cultural analyses I did use the concepts of Bal, in which overlapping contents from different art forms are explored. Her work is an example of cultural analysis in which ideology plays an important part. For the story analysis I did additionally use the work of Metz. His main starting point is that film itself is imaginary and thereby suitable to represent the imaginary.

Editing is one of the techniques that Bemberg used to depict ideology. The most important theorists in the field of the ideological editing are Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and again Metz. They, together, do constitute an important source for my method of analysis. Eisenstein is known for his principles of vertical construction, thesis and antithesis. A concept considered in feminist film theory as 'phallogentric'. Metz considers editing as a semiological theme. He doesn't focus on sequences like Eisenstein, but he considers editing at a larger scale and conceptualizes the 'building blocks of the narrative film', almost like a type of fill-in-the-blank exercise. This descriptive approach is interesting because Bemberg is opposing Metz's descriptive notions in a more prescriptive way.

Bemberg's characteristics made into film

The titles of the chapters in my thesis symbolize the most important distinguishing characteristics of Bemberg's films.

Infidelity in autumn in medium shots: Moments, refers to the framing in medium shots, that is most consequently applied throughout the entire film. This kind of framing does also refer to the personal history of the main character. *Autumn* symbolizes the sepia-like shades in this film, situated in the Argentinean seaside resort Mar del Plata, which basically is, in this off-season, without any tourists, a sad place. The autumn shades form a contrast to the vibrant colors during the summer in this place. This film has been severely controlled by the censors of Argentinian dictatorship, which one finds reflected in the narration and the use of image. This special way of framing provides visual equality between man and woman, in which Bemberg emphasizes the power of the female character.

In *Incorporation of colors: Nobody's wife*, the use of color is immediately striking the eye. This is a film about a strong and powerful woman, who leaves her husband after discovering his basic unfaithfulness. The specific application of colors shows a significant relationship with the presence of her homosexual friend. It symbolizes freedom: she is experimenting with her life. Another important element is the symmetry between the main characters, elaborated in compositions and in the use of the camera. However, in this initial phase of Bemberg's career the narration is still fairly conventional.

A colorful continuation: *Camila*, in which we see Bemberg's development reflected in her full command of visual composition. Here, for the first time, she dares to fully open the color palette. This film is based on a true story. The colors do mark the relevant events. By using the cinematographic elements, Bemberg gives this woman's life (*Camila*) an important place in historiography. The color palette is used to emphasize the violence of General Rosas, by which a connection is made clear with the, at that time just ended, 'dirty war'. The basis of the classical narrative structure of this film is the melodrama. This genre is optimally used at the level of the shots, the framing, the position and the movement of the camera, the sound and the rhythm. These aspects together do support the female perspective. For Bemberg this film represents her international breakthrough.

A break with the classical narration: *Miss Mary*, is a clear mirror of Bemberg's own life. As the title of this chapter indicates, she experiments in this highly autobiographical film with a new breakthrough. Most remarkable in it, is the composition of the shots. There is a wide variety of shots, from detail to panoramic. She does apply classic narration and adapts it in order to transmit her personal ideas. She provides remarkable sound bridges on the transition to new scenes. An example of this is the use of Erik Satie's music. At first glance this film seems to be a classic narrative film, but the themes are presented in an associative, avant-garde way. An example is the confusing and intermittent use of time, just like Satie does in his *Gnossiennes*.

We can see another form of a narrative break in: *The power of darkness: I, the worst of all*. This large chiaroscuro work of Bemberg is based on the book of Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana, or, the traps of faith*, about the 17th century Mexican poet and lock sister Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695). The history of Juana is told from the

perspective of spiritual and physical oppression by the state and the church. Bemberg and her co-writer Antonio Larreta do rely on the work of Octavio Paz, but Bemberg does not a moment lose sight of her feminist message. As Larreta stated in an interview about working with Bemberg: "she was a militant feminist". This is the most elaborated film of Bemberg with respect to the image, and also the film with the most powerful cinematic discourse. She provides sharp stylistic compositions, combined with an exceptional use of chiaroscuro (light and dark). The literary work of Juana gets a prominent role in the entire film by citing her poems in the dialogues. Bemberg is experimenting in a special way, in this film, with flashbacks in which the character of Juana as a child and as an adult do blend symbolically together. Throughout the film Bemberg does apply a subjective camera point of view, with low and high angle shots, reinforcing many significant symbols of her characters. For example in the filming of objects that surround Juana, like her glasses, her books and the bars, symbolizing her wisdom, her curiosity and her oppression.

Finally, the last film: *From the dialogue to images and metaphors: I don't want to talk about it*. In this film all the knowledge and experience of her previous work comes together in a majestic way: the use of colors, such as chiaroscuro, symbolic objects and representations, sound bridges, subjective shots, the feminist discourse and the break with the classic narration. This time it is applied with a refinement of cinematic technique, for example in the way she uses the color blue as an instrument to symbolize what should remain hidden, that which does not tolerate daylight. Exactly that what is not talked about, is revealed nevertheless in the images. Bemberg does apply 'relational editing', getting back to the theory of Eisenstein. There is a strong relationship in this film with fairy tales, with a young woman, a mother who is a widow and the Prince on the white horse, in which the roles of the desired girl and the beloved are evidently switched mutually. This film combines the baroque and surrealist aesthetics with music of the Italian composer Nicola Piovani, who previously worked with Fellini.

Bemberg breaks with masculine expectations

In her last film, as already indicated, all the themes and technical resources from her previous films come together: the impossible love, equality versus inequality, the associative narrative, anchored in the historiography and a female protagonist (the

dwarf Charlotte) who in a highly visual way breaks with the expectations that men have with regard to women.

Actually this indicates that Bemberg's career as a filmmaker is heading all the way towards this goal: the inevitable break with classic masculine expectations. Thus, she has had a remarkable influence on the role of women in history, as is reflected in the revised edition of the original book of the same title by Julio Llinás, *De eso no se habla (I don't want to talk about it)*. After the film was released this book in high print run with a new front, now with a picture of Bemberg's film with Marcello Mastroianni and Luisina Brando.

Bemberg has developed her own voice in which her engagement is reflected: in her cinematographic discourse, in the rhythm, in the form and in the composition of her films. She produced "author" films with an influential and distinctive voice. That is the most valuable thing we can attribute to a film director. Even though she didn't create a totally new film style (which is only realized by very few filmmakers, such as Eisenstein and Riefenstahl), Bemberg has most certainly changed cinematographic language in a revolutionary way. She has applied her cinematographic language in the heart of the dominant class from an evident feminist perspective and derived directly from her own life experience, in order to strongly denounce abuse of power. From a feminine gaze she transforms history into film scenes and thus gives a voice to women, who until then were often invisible. She has developed a filmic discourse with feminist, visual, stylistic and semiotic elements that radically changed the visual narration. She uses the technique of narrative cinema and deconstructs it at the same time. In her filmic discourse she combines avant-garde elements with mainstream cinema. With her production of feminist films she did certainly reach the level of a universal filmmaker.

There are many personal motives, which do explain my admiration for the cinematographic work of Bemberg. This admiration in turn does account for the comprehensive examination and analysis of her work, that I do present in this thesis. I am convinced that I have successfully demonstrated the importance of her cinematography, her contribution to the "author" film, to the feminist discourse and also, how she gave a new place to female characters in the film art.