

Written films: The cinematographic language in Helena María Viramontes's fiction

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SUMMARY: This communication aims at discussing how “The Cariboo Cafe” and *Their Dogs Came With Them*, both written by Helena María Viramontes, may be read as “written films,” since the influence of a certain kind of cinematographic technique is clear in them. As in movies such as *Amores Perros*, *Crash*, and *Babel*, the narrative alternates between several moments and places, forming intricate mosaics, and the several plots first diverge only to converge at the dramatic, cinematographic ending.

Keywords: Cinematographic language; Written films; 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

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tragic accident. Another movie worth mentioning is the Academy Award winner *Crash*, directed by Paul Haggis in 2005. It takes place in Los Angeles and also tells interconnected stories that converge in a traffic accident. However, in the latter, the multiplicity of ethnicities plays a major role. Later (2006) Iñárritu also directed another Academy Award winner, *Babel*, in which the complexness of the interconnected plots gains global scale.

The fiction of Chicana writer Helena María Viramontes has a lot in common with such movies. Norma Hesper (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 communication, 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 Hesper's affirmation.

In "The Cariboo Cafe," 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, 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." 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, 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. 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. 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.

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.

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, which works as a camera eye. These characters are also Chicanos living in underprivileged conditions. 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, the reader witnesses the first encounter between Turtle and Tranquilina, two of the many focalizing characters. First, the scene is focalized by Turtle and a few pages later the same scene is focalized by Tranquilina. 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 her – or perhaps before – Tranquilina and her mother also meet Ermila and her friends by chance, when they stop and ask the girl for directions. Later on, we see this event through the eyes of the girls.

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 cinematographic 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. Furthermore, the fact that the same scene is narrated from different points of view emphasizes 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 pages.

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).

RESUMO: Esta comunicação objetiva discutir como "The Cariboo Cafe" e *Their Dogs Came With Them*, ambos escritos por Helena María Viramontes, podem ser lidos como "filmes escritos" devido à influência de certo tipo de técnica cinematográfica. Como nos filmes *Amores Brutos*, *Crash – No Limite* e *Babel*, a narrativa se alterna entre diversos momentos e lugares, formando intrincados mosaicos, e as várias histórias primeiro divergem para depois convergirem em um final dramático, cinematográfico.

Palavras-chave: Linguagem cinematográfica; Filmes escritos; Helena María Viramontes.

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