

## **Otherness and the Process of the Self in the Film *I Don't Want to Talk about It***

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The Argentinean film *I Don't Want to Talk about It* (Dir. María Luisa Bemberg, 1925-1995) is about difference. Based on a short story by Julio Llinás, it is the story life of Charlotte, a dwarf girl, who in adulthood feels unable to fit into society, because of the pressures of the authoritarian figures around her. As a mature person, she chooses to escape such environment in order to live in a world of independence and freedom. In my essay I will explain the role of patriarchal figures in the life of the protagonist and how *mise-en-scene* aspects represent her process of individuation, her struggle for autonomy, and her departure from “normality” in order to re-occupy her Otherness. Using theories of Elizabeth Grosz, homi bhabha, Judith Butler, and others, I will define how this film is a *narrative* of self-consciousness, which describes the protagonist's self-acceptance through the denial of a conventional representation of the self.

Based on a short story by Julio Llinás, the film is the narration of a “doomed love affair between an aging bachelor, Ludovico (Marcelo Mastroiani) and a strong-minded, imaginative adolescent dwarf named Charlotte (Lusina Brando) (Bach 26). Even though the protagonist accepts her physical appearance, “society thinks Charlotte is not fit to be loved or desired because she does not have the body prescribed by the patriarchal construction of beauty, sexiness, and desirability” (Britto 2).

*De eso no se habla* which means literally “that, which is not talked about” represents the unwillingness of the patriarchal figures in Charlotte's life, her mother, her husband and the town's priest, to speak about her deformed body and their failure to see her, as a human being with a unique history. Of all the “patriarchal” figures in her life, Leonor has the most difficulty

accepting Charlotte's condition.<sup>1</sup> On different occasions, Leonor tries to prevent her daughter from seeing or showing her body, but Charlotte resists and quietly reaffirms her physical existence.

Bemberg uses complex strategies to bring forward the unrepresented: the attitudes and actions that subordinate the physically different, the traditional stereotypes of feminine and masculine normativity, and the protagonist's efforts to challenge the authoritative environment in which she lives. After living a traditional life, Charlotte decides to enter a world where the individuals are part of a community by dissolving the boundaries normal-abnormal, private-public at the same time the subjects embody and play heterogeneity. Through *mis-en-scene* aspects, lighting and music, María Luisa Bemberg shows her protagonist's process of individuation and the representation obtained as a consequence of this self-awareness.<sup>2</sup>

The film opens with Doña Leonor taking off her jewelry in front of a mirror after a birthday party for her two-year old daughter and a flash back of a conversation with the mother of a deaf girl who had attended the party. While changing her clothes, Leonor becomes painfully conscious of her daughter not looking like other "normal" two year old girls. To enforce a collective denial of Charlotte's difference, Leonor destroys and buries the stone gnomes that decorate the house of a neighbor and later she burns her daughter's fairy tale books that refer to dwarves: Snow white and the Seven Dwarves, Gulliver's Travels and Tom Thumb. These actions are allegories that reflect Leonor's desire to deny and repress the acknowledgement that her daughter's body deviates from what is considered desirable by herself and the people of the town. Charlotte is an object of shame and her mother tries allegorically to annul her existence. The burning of the short stories, ultimately, replicates Leonor's desire to reduce her daughter to ashes, as well as being an attempt to bury her history up to that age. Using the supreme authority

she has over her daughter, Leonor attempts to destroy Charlotte's past and to re-create a new version of her, whose life would start after the burning of the books.

Despite feeling restless and unhappy about her daughter's condition, Leonor tries to compensate for Charlotte's lack of size through the prestige in arts and letters. Leonor hires private tutors to teach Charlotte all subjects taught at school and many others: literature, languages, music, mythology, poetry, and piano. Even though, Leonor decides that nobody would talk about "it," her daughter's disability, she empowers her daughter with knowledge of the traditionally masculine realm of culture and the arts. Leonor thinks that through knowledge of facts and other artistic skills, Charlotte's body size can escape its representation; this is an example of what Linda Hutcheon calls "the feminist challenge to the patriarchal and masculinist underpinnings of the cultural practices that subtend [such] representations [of the body]" (Hutcheon *The Politics* 142). Regarding "world knowledge," it is Ludovico, the most important masculine figure from Leonor's eyes, who gives Charlotte the language to talk about other worlds and to imagine the infinite number of possibilities outside their small provincial town. Ludovico speaks of faraway lands that are mythical –as mythical as their love could be– and in spite of the horrors he tells her of the tropics, Charlotte thinks of something positive in them: the beautiful orchids that might be found in those distant lands. Charlotte's interest in knowing the world through Ludovico's narrations illustrates her desire to open herself to other realms and foretells the many possibilities that come into Charlotte's life once she leaves San José de los Altares.

Equivalent to the mother's intention to compensate her daughter's physical differences with knowledge, Ludovico, the second patriarchal figure in Charlotte's life, tries to counterbalance his wife's height with his own. After the wedding ceremony, the newlyweds have

a wonderful outdoor party. At the moment when Ludovico and Charlotte dance, Ludovico does not dance with his wife standing on her feet. Rather, he lifts her up, so the audience sees the heads of the two persons as if they were of the same height. This fact foretells Ludovico's control over Charlotte once he is married to her and his unconscious inability to accept her the way she is.

The education Doña Leonor gives Charlotte to compensate for the size of her body is highlighted by the camera's focus. When Charlotte is at her mother's store, Charlotte never appears walking or standing up. Regularly, she appears sitting down on a counter dressed with doll-like clothes. In one instance, Ludovico asks her to name the Seven Wonders of the World and as he speaks, the camera focuses at a high angle, which contrasts to Ludovico's size, which is two thirds larger than hers is. However, the camera focuses only on his face when he asks her the question, and only on her face while she thinks and then gives the correct answer. By closing-in only on their faces when they are thinking or speaking, Bemberg makes the viewer forget the characters' difference in size and gender and concentrate instead upon their facial expressions and intellect.

In spite of Doña Leonor's insistence that her daughter acquires intellectual knowledge and artistic skills, and that Charlotte be socially accepted, none of the patriarchal figures that surround Charlotte considers her sexuality an important part of her identity. The first time Ludovico sees her as a woman and not as a dwarfed girl, he can not accept the idea of her sensuality. This affects his vision and ability to perceive the world around him. He becomes unable to watch her riding her horse or attending the public piano concert. His life deteriorates and his only solution is to leave San José de los Altares. His desire is further fueled by her inaccessibility after she becomes the object of his dissatisfaction with the real; as a dwarfed

woman she is for Ludovico, what Linda Hutcheon calls a “displaced desire; a desire fueled by the inaccessibility of the object and dissatisfaction of the real” (Hutcheon *Politics* 144).

Ludovico sees in Charlotte an object of desire that had not been inscribed as such up to the moment when he falls in love with her. She becomes his ideal sexual partner and masculine fantasy, but it is impossible for him to accept it. In this way, Bemberg redefines the concept of “the desirable woman” (not to mention, “ideal woman”) and challenges the established mass media image of the ideal woman’s body.

Once Ludovico is conscious of his desire for Charlotte, he returns to San José de los Altares and expresses his will to marry Charlotte to the priest and to Doña Leonor, but neither of them approves. For the priest, the idea of marrying Charlotte sounds like a “bad joke.” For the mother, on the other hand, Carlota is still a child for whom she is responsible. Leonor approves the marriage after Ludovico threatens to kidnap her daughter. Thus, in this way, Charlotte passes from the hands of her mother to those of her husband.

Before and after her wedding, Charlotte lives a quiet life in which her role is to please and entertain her caretakers and their associates. When Charlotte is in her mother’s store, she answers at Ludovico’s questions correctly, impressing her mother as well as the men in the store. In the family gathering, she plays the piano until her mother tells her it is time to go to bed; and once married, Ludovico decides whether or not she is allowed to see the circus. In all occasions, Charlotte is treated not as a subject, but as an object that can not decide on her own when to go to sleep or what to do with her life. Being a dwarf woman, she is perceived as inferior. This condition is reinforced by her desire to please, serve others, and seek definition through them. As both, a woman and a dwarf, she must internalize her feelings because there is no one around to whom she can relate. Bemberg uses Charlotte’s physical condition and social situation to

illustrate a traditional characteristic of essential femininity. Charlotte's voluntary silence confirms the alienation she feels from her mother, her husband, her history, and even herself. Even though she is the protagonist of the film, Charlotte is the character from whom the audience hears the fewest utterances. As Homi Bhabha might say of Charlotte, "In her silence, she becomes the unspoken 'totem' of the taboo of the [physically different]" (Bhabha 14). Like Beckett and Chekhov who use silence as a metaphor to convey isolation and absence, Bemberg uses silence to express "it," which can neither be understood nor articulated in a "normal" society.

In addition, most of the film takes place in womb-like closed spaces, which emphasizes Leonor and Ludovico's imposition on Charlotte to remain within the confine of the house. The action occurs in closed rooms, fallopian tube corridors, and small, crowded, and claustrophobic spaces illuminated not by natural but by incandescent light. Those spaces and those aspects of the *mis-en-scène* emphasize the traditional characteristics of "woman:" private, artistic, restricted, secret, instinctive, interior, carnal, pleasurable intimate, visceral, domestic, and homely; while man, Ludovico, is of unknown origin, intellectual, public, well traveled, and in contact with the exterior world.

Beside the *mise-en-scène*, lighting and music are important in the film. Some scenes are artistically shot through a blue lens offering tonalities that heighten the sense of both passion and freedom. In the movie, three scenes are shot with this type of lens: when Ludovico sees Charlotte for the first time riding a horse, when he, perturbed during Charlotte's piano concert, runs out to the street, and when he, decided to marry Charlotte, enters the whorehouse for the last time. The blue tones represent Charlotte's sensuality, her capacity to awaken Ludovico's libido, and as a

parallel, his ability to see the “abnormal:” the dwarf, the girl, and the undesirable, transformed into the “normal:” the woman the successful pianist, the sexed, the desirable, the marriageable.

In addition to highlighting scenes that relate to Ludovico’s feelings for Charlotte, other images shot through the blue lens represent what the circus means to Charlotte. While Ludovico and Charlotte are having dinner, the street outside the window is blue. At this moment, the circus announces its performance, and Charlotte, upset at the fact that her husband has not allowed her to go to see it, does not finish her supper and can not sleep. Although Ludovico asks for forgiveness once he understands his wife’s loss of appetite, Charlotte realizes she must leave him.

Music, as well as lighting, is important in the film and represents Ludovico's love for Charlotte. Immediately after the scene in which Ludovico shows Leonor the little horse he has acquired for her daughter, Charlotte appears sensually dressed in high heels, a long skirt, and covered with a coquettish shawl, dancing in front of the mirror to “La habanera” from the opera *Carmen*. Through this scene, the audience gets to know the attitude of the mature Charlotte towards her body. While dancing, Charlotte looks at her reflection in the mirror and enjoys the way in which she flirtingly moves her body to the rhythm of the music; in this scene, the audience can affirm that Charlotte does not flirt to anyone but to the image of herself in the mirror. The pleasure that the woman feels at seeing herself and her rhythmic body, is comparable to the satisfaction felt by Sethe in the novel *Beloved* by Tony Morrison when she says: “I am loving my face so much, my dark face is close to me. I want to join [my inner and outer self]” (Morrison 213).

Charlotte’s splendid expression when seeing herself at the mirror contrasts with Leonor’s anger and frustration over her daughter’s abnormal body and anything that may resemble it.

Analogous to Leonor's actions to destroy all figures and fairy tale books that refer to dwarves, the mother stops the playing of the opera *Carmen*, to which Charlotte dances, in order to keep her daughter away from seeing her own reflection in the mirror. In this way, Leonor separates Charlotte away from the grotesque image the mother has of her daughter's body. Charlotte, however, once Doña Leonor has left the room, she resists her mother's censorship by continuing to play the music. In this respect, Charlotte's body is both, a site of resistance and an affirmation of the self because as Lyotard would say, "with the body there is love, . . . [and] a capacity to reflect *singularity*." In the opera *Carmen*, the protagonist sings when she is ordered by José to remain silent. Similarly, Charlotte continues to dance in front of the mirror in spite of her mother's objection. Furthermore, when Charlotte gets ready to give a piano concert, Doña Leonor instructs her daughter to remain seated before she starts playing. Instead, she does what she thinks is more appropriate to do. She stands up closer to the audience and announces the title of the piece she is going to play. By enunciating the title of the musical piece she is going to interpret, Charlotte re-textualizes her body and through it, she establishes herself to occupy the space she was not allowed to occupy before: Now her body occupies a place in history where her body is part of the "process of materialization as an investiture of discourse and power."<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the opera *Carmen*, tango music is also significantly related to the film's narrative. Tango is heard in two different places: in the film's narrative and during a social gathering at Leonor's home. According to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the tango is defined as a dance for embracing couples [with an] obvious domination of the male over the female in a series of steps. . . highly suggestive of the sexual act" (Sadie 564). However, Argentine writer Ernesto Sábato, affirms that the tango evokes a nostalgia for love and communion, the longing for a woman but not her presence a lecherous object (14). Similarly, well



know novelist, critic, and professor Ricardo Piglia, states that tango music “expresses the skeptic and philosophic look at the world a man has after losing a loved woman.” Ludovico finds in Charlotte the woman he had been without knowing, yearning for all his life; and she was not simply an object of desire as he used to see other women: “I desire her as I never had desired any other woman,” says Ludovico; but, “How is it possible?,” asks the priest. “She is the only person that I accept completely,” Ludovico replies. In another instance, during an evening at Leonor’s home, Charlotte accompanies Ludovico at the piano while he sings the well-known tango *Caminito* (trans. *Narrow road*). This song captures Ludovico’s future state of longing after Charlotte leaves San José de los Altares:

Desde que se fue, triste vivo yo,  
 Caminito, amigo, yo también me voy.  
 .....  
 Desde que se fue, nunca más volvió,  
 Seguiré sus pasos, caminito adiós.

Trans.:

From the time she left, my life has been sad,  
 Narrow road, my friend, I’m leaving too.  
 .....  
 Since she left me, she has never returned,  
 I’ll follow her footsteps, narrow road good-bye.

The song foreshadows Charlotte’s decision to leave Ludovico and to never return. Leaving San José de los Altares, she re-defines herself and her history by rearranging her experience of what Frederic Jameson calls “collective existence.”<sup>47</sup>

With the announcement of “or tonight or never,” the circus tries to persuade the people of the town to attend its performance. At the same time, Charlotte realizes that the circus is her only opportunity to live a freer life and, in spite of the rain and the uncertainty of the future, she leaves Ludovico. She joins the circus to evade the patriarchal family life and to re-create herself through a restored self-representation. Charlotte, thus, establishes her history and heterogeneity as differentiated from those of her authority figures.<sup>5</sup> After seeing the circus, she becomes bonded to its members at the same time the viewer assumes the fundamental separation from her family. She immigrates on a “one way trip” because for her, there is no “home” to go back to. With an open ending, Bemberg illustrates Charlotte’s infinite possibilities outside her hometown, at the same time it adds the metaphysical dimension the director wanted to give to the film.<sup>6</sup>

Charlotte represents the unhomely world, the halfway between the undefined world of the midget as the “distorted place” in which she and the circus people live. Her exit marks the process in which she elaborates her selfhood by initiating new signs of identity. Leaving with the circus, she places herself in a social interstice where her “living” becomes a collective experience. The circus becomes her nation, her community, and the place where all members share the experience of being alienated by society, where there is not a single definition of the correct or ideal mode of living, feeling, or being. In the circus, all hierarchies, classes, and races are erased, at the same time that each person maintains his/her identity. Living in the circus, the private becomes communal and the communal private. Charlotte’s presence in the circus is not bound to the past but to the present because her public image comes to be defined by the discontinuity between the life with her former biological family and the now and new adopted community. After leaving San José de los Altares, Charlotte creates her own space because she

is, as Homi Bhabha would say, not a “homeless” person but an “unhomely one.” Within this space, her displacement in society at large can not totalize her experience.

The film is a *narrative* of self-consciousness, which describes Charlotte’s rejection of her representation by others in San José de los Altares, and their denial of her as a subjective and historical being. It questions the conventional representations of the female subject and her body, while, simultaneously, validates and normalizes feminine desire and pleasure. Throughout the narrative, Bemberg challenges and attempts to change the dominants in both mass cultures and high art. As a Postmodernist film, it shows the painful experience of a woman’s repressed youth and her self-liberation after having been shown only one way to live: a life contained by a fixed, authoritarian, and patriarchal environment of domination that does not allow her to be who she was born to be. The problematic the director presents applies not only to women and dwarves, but also to anyone who has been displaced and represents the Other in society. It represents “it,” which can not be talked about. Charlotte, according to María Luisa Bemberg, “is a metaphor to anybody who is different: a dwarf, black person, young homosexual, even a big, fat, ugly woman, anyone who like anyone else, has the right to a place in the sun, [and who] is vertical, autonomous, independent, thoughtful, courageous, spunky” (Bach 22).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The protagonist's original name is Carlota. However, as she grows up and learns French and acquires world knowledge, Carlota prefers to be called "Charlotte," which I would say, is the identity she adopts. Because in an interview María Luisa Bemberg refers to the protagonist of her film as "Charlotte," I will refer in the rest of my essay to "Charlotte" instead of "Carlota." It is important to notice that Leonor addresses to her daughter as "Carlotita," which in Spanish means little Carlota.

<sup>2</sup>For more on the process of female identity in relational and intersubjective terms, see Patricia Waugh ed. *Postmodernism: A reader* (London, NY, 1992): 203.

<sup>3</sup>Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. (New York: Routledge, 1993) 35.

<sup>4</sup>Jameson, F. Personal Interview. University of California, Davis. April 20 1998.

<sup>5</sup>Regarding the importance of men's and women's history in the determination of their subjectivity and heterogeneity see Jane Flax in her article *Excerpts from Thinking Fragments* in Patricia Waugh, ed. *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London/New York, 1992): 420.

<sup>6</sup>"I felt a need for big, wide horizons, the pampa, because it has a metaphysical dimension. . . We decided the river-the muddy waters-could serve just like the immense plain" (Bach 27).

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