

“I, The Worst of All”: A Comparative Study of Octavio Paz’s Reflection on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

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Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz has always been admired by those who familiarized themselves with her life and outstanding literary *oeuvre*. So, it is not surprising that her life has inspired the desire to film the deeds and achievements that have portrayed her as one of the most learned women of the seventeenth century. Her character, her strength, her intelligence, her talent and her courage for defending her rights as a woman and a nun in a patriarchal society where women did not have many opportunities, have transformed her into a model of feminist thought for future generations.

Sor Juana struggled for her rights based on her knowledge and insatiable desire for learning. Her feminism and her talent won her the respect, as well as the contempt of those around her. In order to force her to desist in her search for knowledge, obstacles were placed in her path, hoping she would transform herself into a “conventional” woman, a representation of the traditional *marianista* behavior expected of women in Latin American society. But this was not enough for her; her love for writing and her quest for knowledge went beyond the desire and will of others. Hence, her unique feminism, created in the seventeenth century and the events that occurred in her short but substantial life, together with the book about her by Mexican writer/critic Octavio Paz serve as the basis for the Spanish film *I, the Worst of All*, a cinematic exploration of her life and works.

This article analyzes the adaptation of Octavio Paz’s *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* or *The Traps of Faith* (1988) to a cinematographic depiction corresponding to his study of the seventeenth century Hieronymite nun. The focus is primarily on the changes made in the film as a mode of adaptation in order to reach a larger number of male spectators, as well as to shed light on the feminist elements that the film retained, thanks in part to the life and work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

In recent decades contemporary feminist film theory has been dedicated to the analysis of the visual representation of women in film and television. Placing primary focus on the film’s perspective, which can be either masculine or feminine, as well as on the study of film as a text, allows for a structuralist representation of the signifier and signified, thereby aiming its perspective on the male or female spectator.¹

According to advocates of Cultural Studies, the analysis of a film has to be based on the study of different social and cultural constructs. In this manner the critical analysis of a film begins with the deconstruction of the stereotypes and prejudices portrayed, which are not only ethnocentric, but “*machista*” as well. As Laura Mulvey states in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989), the screen should be considered a mirror in which the spectator finds her/his own image of reality, in this case female reality, which may end in a misrepresentation of the image the

spectator has about her/his own sense of self. Film criticism argues that such a form of erroneous self-recognition starts at the moment we, as children, look at our image in the mirror (which can itself be imaginary), hence what we see is the idealization of the ego, which establishes the basis for our identification with anyone else in the future (17).

According to John Storey, in *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture* (1996), Mulvey's approach to the representation of reality has its basis in Lacan's theory of the three stages of childhood development. One of these stages, the "Mirror Stage," reflects the child's acknowledgment and recognition of her/his own image in the mirror. Storey explains that:

A sense of self to challenge the experience of fragmentation, and promise control over our own needs emerges during what Lacan calls the "mirror stage." Looking in the mirror (real or imagined), we begin to construct a sense of self. The mirror phase is the moment (supposedly between the ages of six and eighteen months) when we first recognize ourselves in a mirror. On the basis of this recognition or more properly misrecognition (not the self, but an image of the self), we begin to see ourselves as separate individuals (61).

Storey notes that the concept of "misrecognition" is used by Mulvey in order to argue the representation of women, which stems from *machista* cultural stereotypes, results in an everlasting identification of women with such misconceptions of themselves.

One of the perspectives utilized by scholars to examine this "misrecognition" within Mulvey's theory, is to closely look at the representation of the various social and cultural groups presented in a film, in this case, women. According to contemporary film theory, the current representation of such groups emulates everyday popular and ideological patterns. In the case of *I, the Worst of All*, we could say that the representation of the relationship between Sor Juana and the vicereine Maria Luisa provokes a distortion of the female image. The film takes as a starting point Octavio Paz's speculations about the "relationshipz' between two women. Even as Paz denies having identified evidence suggesting a physical intimacy, he labeled their interaction as "amistad amorosa," or loving friendship, which acts as a substitute for the lack of a male presence with whom these women could share their mutual love. Octavio Paz argues that the lack of a male presence explains why Sor Juana adopted a masculine identity at various points in her life, one example being a series of poems praising the vicereine's attributes written in the style of troubadours and courtiers, who were all male. It is this ambiguity in Paz's arguments (two women who, in order to avoid an "empty" existence, shared a relationship which was never labeled as queer by the author), is utilized in the film to attract the attention of the audience, particularly the male

spectator. It is important to pay attention, however, to the description provided by the review accompanying the videotape case which reads: "Lesbian passion seething behind convent walls' engrossing, enriching and elegant." However, those scenes in which both Sor Juana and Maria Luisa are together can be interpreted in ways that surpass a queer theoretical analysis. The description on the packaging demonstrates how the editors of the film manipulate the audiences' perception by giving it a more sexual emphasis in order to commercialize it.

At this point we face the following question: Is there a relationship between the representation of Sor Juana as a lesbian and her place as one of the most important poets of the Golden Age, (or as an astonishing intellectual woman) as she is characterized at the end of the film? In order to answer this question, it is important to note that among the many aspects of her life the film places emphasis on, Sor Juana's intellectual development and her conflict with the masculine/patriarchal world which prevailed at the time: "daring" to disguise herself in men's clothing in order to attend the university or facing the inquisition and opposition of men. For Stephanie Merrim, the importance placed by Octavio Paz on the "masculine" characteristics in Sor Juana's biography as well as in the study of her contemporaries lays the ground for a feminist critical analysis due to the incomplete representation and the failure to depict the social and individual reality of the seventeenth century nun. The film adopts Paz's model of the "masculinization" of Sor Juana within an intellectual and masculine context, leaving aside the social and historical aspects Paz developed in the first part of his book. This approach fills in the void left by Paz's interpretation, by depicting the interaction between Sor Juana and the vicereine Maria Luisa as a sexual and lesbian relationship.

The juxtaposition between, on the one hand, Sor Juana as an intellectual "exception" among seventeenth century writers, and on the other as a lesbian, is what makes scholars believe that the film failed in its attempt to represent her life: it proposes stereotyped concepts about women, specifically intellectual women. In Sor Juana's *Carta de Monterrey* (Letter from Monterrey) she expresses her discontent with the masculine tendency of confining access to knowledge to men, thus leaving women to be associated with superficiality and trivialities. Based on Merrim's analysis, we could argue the ineffectiveness of Paz's work from a feminist standpoint. Octavio Paz as well as the producers of *I, the Worst of All* perpetuate the chauvinist male tendency to isolate women and analyze or psychoanalyze them through comparison with masculine aspects. Additionally, they distort women's image by relating lesbianism (a fictional element) with the presumed masculinization of the nun in her quest for intellectual knowledge.

A different scholarly perspective is based on the study of the social and cultural context the movie intends to depict. In his book, Octavio Paz aims at the "restitution" of the contextual framework of seventeenth century New Spain as

accurately as possible, but one still stemming from a twentieth century viewpoint. Thus, he uses the different descriptions and information Sor Juana provides in her writing as well as the data which other historians and biographers of the nun have made available. Such a reality ranges from the pre-Columbian era up to the end of the seventeenth century, defining its two predominant powers: the Viceroyalty and the Church, depicting at the same time the lifestyle of both the nuns and the "commoners." The dominant perspective in Paz's work is rooted in the social context of New Spain; the majority of his analysis is historical, hence restituting the original framework.

Even when the film *I, the Worst of All*, is based on Octavio Paz's work, it still parts from the individual perspective of the nun. While the Mexican writer/critic establishes an historical context for the life and works of Sor Juana, the film offers a more personalized image of her life. This depiction is displayed throughout scenes that include romantic and fictitious elements not mentioned in Paz's work. For instance, two parallel scenes focusing on a "stolen kiss" give the spectator the notion that Sor Juana has been transformed from an "asexual" being, as she is described by Paz, into a sexual one. What makes the scenes parallel is the fact that each one represents a "first" experience for Sor Juana: the first kiss by a man is followed by her own initiative "para recordar" (in order to remember) while in the second scene it is the vicereine Maria Luisa who steals a kiss from the nun to receive one back "para recordar." Both of these instances in her life provide her with a different type of experience, adding to her already established search for knowledge.

According to Mulvey, the cinema provides many pleasures, and among them we find "scopophilia" (16); such pleasure in looking is associated with the concept of the "male gaze." In this sense the audience can be depicted as voyeuristic, finding pleasure in sexual or sexualized images. In *I, the Worst of All* the sexualization of various scenes give credence to the advertising description or commercialization of the film. For instance, when the vicereine asks Sor Juana to help her loosen her bodice, and informs her that she is pregnant, we find an emphasis which feminist criticism would characterize as masculine since it targets male desires. At the same time, the camera closes in slowly, focusing solely on Maria Luisa's breasts. Nevertheless, in the film, we find elements that not only target traditional masculine visual pleasure, but we encounter a sexualization of the nun's image that can also target visual pleasure for female spectators. It is important to note that the film is not only advertised under "gay and lesbian interests" sections of video stores, but it is marketed more broadly as erotic. Advertisements use adjectives such as "seething", "engrossing" and "enriching" to refer to the film, revealing the commercial interest in the sexualization of Sor Juana's life.

We could argue that both *I, the Worst of All* and *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz or The Traps of Faith* offer us distorted images of the life of the Hieronymite nun.

Paz does not limit his work to a neo-historical analysis of her life and works, rather he bases his interpretation on psychoanalytical theories previously used by other authors to perpetuate a masculine interpretation of Sor Juana's image and literary production. He relies both on the historical context in which she wrote, as well as on his own theory of Sor Juana's masculinization. This allows for multiple speculations. According to Frederick Luciani's article "Octavio Paz on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: The Metaphor Incarnate," Paz's revisionist attempt fails when combining various discourses in his work, such as biographies, historical essays and literary criticism, mixed with a "porción de fantasía especulativa" (10). According to Luciani, Octavio Paz's rhetoric disguises the imperfections and errors within the text that enveloped the reader in the story. In the same way, Paz accepts Sor Juana's affirmations in her defense, *The Reply to Sor Philothea*, without questioning its accuracy. By including literary criticism and psychoanalytical discourses in his research, Paz establishes a series of speculations that fictionalize the nun's life, and which are reflected in the cinematographic reproduction of his text in the mixing of the historical and social reality of the seventeenth century.

Both the film and Paz's book revolve around the life and literary *oeuvre* of the seventeenth century nun. However, the book provides a critical and historical analysis of her works, while the film provides a more personal account. Although both fictionalize Sor Juana's life, they address a specific and distinct audience. Paz's book is directed at an educated and intellectual readership emphasized by the varied use of discourses in his analysis and elaborated rhetoric. However, the films use of cinematography, which forms part of popular culture, allows a more general accessibility to Sor Juana's story. As a result, the film's emphasis on sexual elements that commercialize Sor Juana is not surprising since it targets a larger audience. Nonetheless, when commercializing the theme in this manner, as feminist critics would assert, the film reproduces patriarchal social patterns (e.g., the marketing of sex), provoking not only a misrepresentation of a social reality, but a distorted image of women on screen/mirror.

Endnotes

1. *I, the Worst of All* was brought to the big screen by María Luisa Bemberg. This film lasts 107 minutes and is based on the book by Octavio Paz. The screenplay is by Antonio Larreta and María Luisa Bemberg, cinematography by Felix Mont with music directed by Luis Mario Serra. It was produced by Lita Stanic and starred Asumpta Serna and Dominique Sanda. The film is in Spanish with English subtitles.

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"I, The Worst of All": Comparative Study

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