Gazes and Cinematic Readings of Gender: Danzón and its Relationship to its Audience

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Though Mexican cinema has been the object of numerous studies, few of these refer to the process of audience reception: to that intimate moment of cinematic communication in which the gazing subject discovers part of its identity while simultaneously appropriating the film. In this article I would like to share the findings of a research project that advances the study of audience reception from the perspective of gender. A project, in other words, that seeks to recognize the relationship established by diverse gendered subjects/audiences with a film made by a woman. In such an undertaking, the gendered subjectivity of the director, of the researcher, as well as of the audience that interprets both the film and its own reactions to it are all put into play.

My point of departure is the recognition that women directors disclose their gendered subjectivity through film and that this feminine subjectivity motivates, stimulates, and questions the gender of the subject that interprets the film. Studies on the characteristics of women’s film have shown that female creators commonly present a feminine—and in some cases feminist—gaze and perspective of the reality they choose to narrate. Thanks to the presence of female directors, the feminine subject narrates and the narrated subject has gone from object to subject, thus occupying...
an active control over discourse (See all listings for De Lauretis, Kaplan, Kuhn, and Penley in “Works Cited”). Women directors have created the possibility that they be included as creative subject and not as objects of the traditional cinematic gaze. This subjectivity is expressed in various areas such as the use of themes related to women’s everyday lives, the development of strong female characters that are more complex than those of traditional female roles, the fact that these stories and their narrative point of view tend to value feminine subjectivity, as well as the incorporation of new rhythms, narratives, perspectives, and forms. In summary, this is a cinema that attempts to be different by depicting the peculiar way in which life is experienced by women. It establishes in the cinematic code a gendered identity equipped with an awareness that allows it to question itself and whose film product is generated from within (Millán, 1996, 1997, 1999; Hershfield, 1995, Iglesias, 2004). Beyond modifying the horizon of representation, feminine cinematographic narrative also questions the audience’s reading and appropriation process (Mulvey, 1990; Iglesias, 1994, 1998). In this article, I will present part of a larger research project whose objective is to understand how these transgressions of the order of discourse are read, reinterpreted, and appropriated by various audiences according to gender while considering the different discursive practices with which various identity positions choose to express themselves.

In very general terms, cinema is one of the many instances that participate in the social and cultural creation and recreation of gender. In the cinematic realm, the contribution of women is precisely found in questioning and deconstructing established, masculinist practices in order to create “new feminities” that stem from new gender relationships. It is precisely these characteristics of feminine and masculine modes that are the subject of this study, but rather than approaching this subject in an abstract way, my method goes directly to the oral reconstruction of a film directed by a woman. Through a gendered cinematic work it becomes possible to understand part of the process of reception that constitutes the “talking about” a film, the telling of a reading-appropriation-interpretation of a specific film. I am not solely speaking of analyzing the act of watching a film, but of the plotting that takes place in its re-elaboration when talking about and discussing the movie in a group setting. The idea is to make a type of x-ray (in that it reveals aspects not seen to the naked eye and that it is selective) of an intimate moment in which underlying gendered power structures are brought forth in the exercise of interpreting a film and
its particular images. In this way I analyze part of the complex process of cinematic reception as a mechanism for interpreting gender, starting from a violent act perpetrated by the researcher when “forcing” the audience to talk about gender from a gendered position.

Because gender is one of the central elements of my analysis, I aim to surpass the mere man-woman dichotomy by recovering the more polyvalent terms masculine and feminine. The dynamics of my analysis seek to recover the constant tension between specificity and generalization, between a “them” (ellas/os) and an “us” (nosotros/as) that is in constant motion and adaptation according to theme and speaker.

The discourse generated based on a film made by a woman, from her point of view as a gendered subject, permits the recreation of ideas of masculinity and femininity, their movement and conflicts, as well as access to the world of subjective gender constructions. It also allows an understanding of the role that cinema has in the questioning of gender/power relationships.

I: The Methodological Challenge

Undertaking the study of gendered cinematic reception supposes an entry into the realm of the subjective. Unlike studies that focus on how an audience “watches” a film, the study of the process of reception requires not only the analysis of such action but a search for the meaning of this same act. For this reason, I decided to work with discussion groups (DG) using the following considerations as guidelines:

First, I decided to use a film that would stimulate an analysis with regard to female subjectivity. I selected the Mexican film Danzón (1991), directed by María Novaro.

The second consideration was to employ a qualitative method that would allow me ready access to subjects and subjectivities. Because of the characteristics and the objective of the project, it was necessary to work beyond screening rooms and movie theaters, under circumstances that were controlled and that would allow the recovery of the experience of the appropriation-interpretation of a pre-determined audience. For this reason, I decided to work with discussion groups, which in turn allowed for spontaneous discourse prompted after a screening of the film, while permitting control over certain variables according to the specific profiles set up for each discussion group.

The third consideration was to work with groups that allowed
for contrasting renditions of various constructions of the “feminine” and “masculine.” I considered different groups of reference using the following criteria: gender, sexuality, age, as well as regional and national culture. The first of these criteria for constituting the groups formed the basic categories of sex; that is, men and women. The second criteria allowed me to further distinguish between subjects by creating distinct categories based on age groups: those between 40 and 55, and those between 18 and 25. The third criteria were derived from theoretical queries regarding heterosexuality and gender, which brought up questions of sexuality in general and for which homosexual and heterosexual groups were required. The final criteria were designed to include aspects of regional and national cultural identities as a point of departure that would allow for contrast between various groups. To make this last criterion a feasible component of my study, I worked with groups of Mexicans from the cities of Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez and with groups of Spaniards residing in Madrid. Using these four criteria, I was able to diagram 13 discussion groups as listed below:

| Group 1 (DG1) | women | heterosexual | ages 18–25 | students and workers | Mexican Tijuana |
| Group 2 (DG2) | women | heterosexual | ages 40–55 | homemakers and workers | Mexican Tijuana |
| Group 3 (DG3) | women | lesbian | ages 18–30 | students and workers | Mexican Tijuana |
| Group 4 (DG4) | women | lesbian | ages 40–55 | workers | Mexican Ciudad Juárez |
| Group 5 (DG5) | women | heterosexual | ages 20–30 | students | Spanish Madrid |
| Group 6 (DG6) | men | heterosexual | ages 18–25 | students and workers | Mexican Tijuana |
| Group 7a (DG7a) | men | heterosexual | ages 30–45 | workers | Mexican Tijuana |
| Group 7b (DG7b) | men | heterosexual | ages 40–55 | workers | Mexican Tijuana |
| Group 8 (DG8) | men | gay | ages 18–25 | students and workers | Mexican Tijuana |
| Group 9 (DG9) | men | gay | ages 40–55 | workers | Mexican Tijuana |
The fourth theoretical and methodological consideration refers to the very perspective of gender in the analysis of the discourse of gender. Following Joan Scott’s concept of gender as a form present in all significant relationships, I understand gender itself as a part of the actual research process. The researcher—in this case the author of this article—is a gendered and historical subject that interprets (analyzes) the discourses of gender (resulting from various discussion groups) in reference to another form of the discourse of gender (the film). This serves as a useful point of reflection in that, as a subject of gender, I also functioned as the mediator that attributed sense and significance to these discourses while extending the field of observation and analysis of my own subjectivity, which was in turn objectified through the use of a particular methodology.1

A final consideration involved the development of various analytical levels meant to aid in the recovery of the complex process of appropriation of a film by gender. In this case, the idea was to work with six levels: the process of creation-production, the process of exhibition-reception, social relationships for discursive reconstruction, thematic and cinematic elements recovered by the audience, identity positions from which themes and discourses are structured, and the ideological positions that support both identity positions and the aspects that they recover.

The first analytic level allows us to perceive the form, method, and mechanisms through which a subject creates and completes a product of gender with which the subject aspires to become a “generic subject.” The analysis of this moment of communicative process explains the manner in which gender becomes a code for interpreting reality, a sort of filter or lens that colors not only reception but also cinematic creation, through which we can now speak of a “mark of gender,” and by which we can analyze the importance of the “mark” and the subjectivity of gender in its relation to the cinematic product and its various spectators. The second level recovers the audience and the ways in which, as subjects of gender, they relate to the film during its projection. The third
level emphasizes the relationship established between a gendered audience and the discursive reconstruction of a film; it seeks to capture a level of gendered subjectivities manifested by way of social relationships formed for discursive elaboration. It is my belief that through the elaboration of social discourse about a film, social relationships and asymmetries of gender are reproduced. The fourth level aims to reconstruct and recover the aspects or themes of the film that were better developed by each group since it is through them that we can situate the film’s most innovative or transgressive elements as well as those aspects that confront actual gendered identities. The fifth analytic level allows me to characterize the gendered identities and their movements in relation to the film by recreating places and positions that the audience occupies with regard to the themes or aspects that the film suggests and in regard to the positions that other audience members take, which permits the recovery of conflicts and movements in the gendered identities based on the film chosen for analysis. Finally, the last level points to the need to recognize the ideological positions with regard to gender that support the themes, the forms, and the identity positions developed during the discursive recovery of a film such as Danzón.

II: *Danzón: Contemporary Mexico from a Woman’s Point of View*

*Danzzón* is a tale of change, of a woman’s transformation. It is the story of Julia Solórzano, a phone operator that lives in Mexico City with her young daughter. Her world and her personal relationships are structured through her friends at work and through the friends she frequents at a dance hall. She is fascinated with dancing, in particular with the danzón. For many years, she has been with a steady dance partner—Carmelo Benítez—with whom she has even won awards. One day, Julia’s partner disappears and her life loses direction. Carmelo, as the absent character in the film, is the focus of the search that frames the plot. Because the audience never actually sees Carmelo until the end of the film and then from a distance, he will be reconstructed by viewers only through the descriptions and emotions conveyed by Julia. In her search, she travels to Veracruz where she encounters various situations that force her to confront herself. Julia experiences life in two contrasting spaces; first in Mexico City, characterized by work, routine and social convention, and dancing, which in turn is seen as a sensual expression that gives her life meaning. The second space is that of the port of Veracruz, where Julia goes in search of
Carmelo, and which functions as a place of openness, festivity, and unconventional habits as evinced by the resident sailors, prostitutes, and transvestites. It is here that Julia forges new friendships, first with Susy, an artist and transvestite who helps Julia look for Carmelo, and later with Rubén, Julia’s young lover. Throughout her trip, Julia faces challenges to her social prejudices and, consequently, her ideas on love and life waver.

_Danzón_ is ideal for the analysis of the reception of gender for various reasons. First, the film breaks with traditional forms of gender representation in which women are mere objects, or at best, subjects controlled by male desires. _Danzón_ goes about this rupture in a subtle way that is found to be non-threatening by a male audience, which in turn allows an uninhibited discourse to flow from the male subjects. The film’s central characters are all women, and these happen to be of strong character, willing to make decisions and to take control over their lives and dreams. Though we see these characters in scenarios and situations typically ascribed to women, the difference is that in _Danzón_ these are seen from the point of view of the women involved. At the same time, the film “inverts and thus subverts the classic representations of gender and reorients and questions gender roles. Unlike representations of women in prior Mexican cinema, in this film the feminine is not defined in opposition to the masculine” (Hershfield 15), or as the non-masculine. In fact, men are almost absent from the film; when they do appear, they are constructs of feminine discourse and imagination, or feminized subjects. As Hershfield claims, the narrative and visual excesses that traditionally characterize melodrama are made manifest through the female body. In _Danzón_, however, this is made evident through the transvestite whose body is decorated and fetishized, through Rubén’s body which appears as the object of Julia’s desire, and through the non-sexual desire that Julia holds for the mysterious figure of Carmelo. Also, it is Julia who takes the role of the seductress, the conqueror, and the possessor of desire and the gaze that is traditionally ascribed cinematically to the male (Hershfield 15). Another element central to the rupture of traditional forms of representation is that, while it substitutes feminine figures and roles in place of their masculine counterparts, the film documents, narrates, and represents the subjectivity and social reality experienced by women. The fact that _Danzón_ presents a non-traditional form of subjectivity—articulating female relationships of subjectivity and privileging the female voice and gaze—favors the differentiation of various readings of gender. This facilitates my analysis because it evinces the differences in gender with regard to the relationship between audience
and text (Kuhn). Certainly Danzón radicalizes the discourses of gender and thus incites audience discussion around this topic.

Another reason for selecting Danzón is that it presents the feminine perspective in a very commonplace manner, in a tone, as Novaro herself suggests, “relajado y gozoso” (relaxed and joyful), with a musical rhythm that invites conversation and reflection without complication. The simplicity of the plot, in which there is no apparent intellectual reflection regarding the condition of the women involved, facilitates the elaboration of the discourse of gender. Likewise, the importance of the musical element and the symbolism of the danzón, with regard to the power relationship in which the man leads and controls his partner’s movement, favors the development of the discourse of gender in a spontaneous and fluid manner.

III: A Glance at the Thematic Analysis by Group: The Story and What Makes Danzón Special

Two themes that gained relevance in the discussion of every group, which also serve to underscore the different readings and gender relations, are: the story—understood here as the events, action, characters, and settings that characterize Danzón—and the special or distinct character that differentiates this film from others. In the groups comprised entirely of women, talking about the story allowed the participants to connect their stories to Julia’s, while establishing the elements that make the film different from other works in Mexican and international cinema.

In every group made up of women, despite differences in age, sexuality, or nationality, there was clear consensus in terms of the characteristics of the story. For these groups, Danzón alludes to a lifestyle that makes reference to the past, but also to the present because it deals with and speaks of human nature but from a woman’s perspective. This is precisely what makes it “different from the rest of Mexican cinema” (DG3). This point becomes important because it is the exact opposite of traditional cinematic representation in which it is the man—as a subject of gender—who represents not only humanity, but the entire universe.

Various women define the story as “different from what we are used to seeing” (DG1), a film “about everyday life” (DG1, DG3), the life of a “woman like many” (DG1) who is not only an object (who is spoken of) but a complete subject (who thinks and has beliefs). Danzón is the story of Julia’s experience and transformation; a film “about reality” (DG1, DG2, DG3). In such a way, Danzón is perceived to narrate a Mexico different to that constructed
by the heroes (always men) encountered in textbooks, films, and even the statues that decorate main avenues throughout Mexico. _Danzón_ imagines a Mexico built by simple people, by micro-histories of women almost always relegated to the invisible. This film thus questions and subverts nationalism and the process of nation building by deconstructing the nation as it is written by the patriarchy.

The story tells the tale of different kind of love, “of a woman who looks for a man with whom she can dance” (DG3), “a film without violence” (DG3), “a drama without tears” (DG3), the story “of a particular way of thinking” (DG3), the story of a woman “who goes in search of something but finds herself” (DG2). These discussion groups also recognize the complexity of the main character as well as that of the story. For the female audience, the complexity and depth of the film is not tied to the sophistication of the plot, but to the complexity and depth of the main character. Julia is seen as a subject not only complex but also full of doubts and contradictions. For all these women, it is clear that Carmelo is not the center of the story: “he seems to be a trigger, an excuse to continue the movie” (DG5). His departure “is at the base of the tale, the plot evolves precisely because that man never shows up; if he arrived there would be no movie” (DG5), but as the groups agreed, the story is really about Julia’s liberation.

In contrast, according to age and sexual orientation, the groups comprised of men took varying positions with regard to the story that _Danzón_ tells. The same characteristics valued so positively by the women’s groups—the realism and the uniqueness of the film—furnished motives for the younger heterosexual males to disparage the film. For these men, _Danzón_ “focuses on a theme that has no transcendence” (DG6); it is the life of a “mediocre” person (DG7a), “very common” (DG6), who wants to succeed through dance (DG6, DG7a) and “whose adventure isn’t really that big a deal if looked at from the point of view of a normal person” (DG7a). No doubt, what these comments reveal is that these men see themselves as a measure of normalcy. They also state that “it is the story of a woman locked up in her world” (DG6), that it is a “romantic and innocent plot, a fairy tale” (DG6), that it “contributes absolutely nothing” (DG6); it is a film without dialogue that wanders “with excessive music” (DG6); that is centered around “a story that is not very real” (DG6). For the young heterosexual males, the film is not only simplistic, poor and unrealistic, it also sends the wrong message (from a moral point of view) by depicting the sexual openness of the protagonist.

The “unrealistic” aspect of the film is also perceived in that a
woman “like her” (without fully knowing what this means) be-
friends prostitutes and “associates with homosexuals” without re-
jecting them (DG6). The “negative side of the film” is found
precisely in its depiction of this unreal story, and the unrealistic
seems to be related to the fact that it is a story about a common
woman who takes certain liberties with her life. It is for this reason
that the film cannot be seen as having “a positive message” (DG6).
For the majority in the young heterosexual group, the film makes
reference to themes that do not interest them, to “negative” issues
that do not affect them, or to matters that are so invisible that the
men can claim that they do not exist or are not real. For them,
Danzon is the story of a Mexico they did not experience and with
which they do not identify, and it is the story of a character
deemed unrealistic because she is not like them. In an explicit way,
the young men present themselves as the frame of reference for
what is human; that is, man (as a subject of gender) can represent
humanity, but not so in the case of a woman. For another sector
of the young heterosexual group, the problem with the plot is not
moral—though their reasoning is—but rather the problem lies in
the narrative logic of the film; they define Danzon as a “simple”
(DG7a) film in which “there are no problems” (DG6).

For their part, the group of young Spaniards (DG10) saw Dan-
zon as a film about “the journey of a woman in search of her sexual
identity” (DG10). In general terms, for them it is the story of femi-
nine identity and its function, a film that speaks of the relations-
ships women have but with the peculiarity that these are seen
through a woman’s gaze. For this same group, what sets Danzon
apart from other films is that while depicting the relationship be-
tween a man and a woman, it takes into account women and their
emotions. For this reason, as with the group composed of adult
males, this younger group recognizes a sensibility in the film that is
different from the norm. Both these groups also expressed doubts
regarding the feminist nature of the film; they saw it as more “de-
monstrative” (DG10) than “accusatory,” more “in favor of tradi-
tional femininity” (DG10) than as something that questions the
order of gender.

In clear contrast, the group composed of younger gay men
spoke of story of Danzon in a manner similar to that registered in
women’s groups. For the group of young gay men (DG8), the film
is not only a romantic love story, but also it also exposes a particu-
lar way of being. Very much apart from the group of young hetero-
sexual males, this group defines the story as romantic and, above
all, realistic. They find the story interesting because it deals with
change; it tells of a woman who contrasts two life experiences that
are quite different: one is very traditional, mired in routine, and even prejudiced in Mexico City, and the other is a freer and more ludic existence in Veracruz. For them, Danzón is a story that depicts the possibility of change, in which a woman “dares to risk her job” (DG8) for the sake of searching for what she wants, which—beyond Carmelo—is a life in which she has the central role to play. The possibility of change in a female character composes a subversive element that upsets the distribution of power in gender relations. For this group, Julia becomes a model in that she is congruent with what the younger gay men seem to admire. Dance is her life; she “gives herself completely to it” (DG8) and Carmelo’s disappearance puts her way of life at risk. Her search for Carmelo therefore, is seen as a search for herself.

Evidently, for the group of young gays the search for oneself, daring to take a position, and the establishing of and commitment to principles are key components when facing a society that constantly rejects and attacks homosexuality. For this group, the film is “different from traditional movies” because it is a story “told from the perspective of a Mexican woman” (DG8), but also because it is the story of “traditions,” “values,” “customs,” and “the roots of Mexico” (DG8), all of which speaks to a particular sensibility that distances the young gays from the group made up of young heterosexual Mexicains.

For their part, the adult heterosexual males agree that Danzón does not speak to or develop a “great theme, though it is well made” (DG7b). For them, it is a story that “invokes the past” (DG7b) but, at the same time, deals with the present. It is the story of “a woman who arrived at a stage of maturity in which tedium, work, responsibility, and routine place her in a situation of solitude” (DG7a). The story would be very ordinary if it were about a male protagonist. “There are many movies in which a mature man falls in love with a younger woman” (DG7b), but what makes Danzón special is that “here things are reversed . . . and that is what makes this case uncommon” (DG7a), that there is a woman at the core of the story and that it is she who possesses desire. It is the story of a woman and her strong ties and solidarity with other women, “of the sisterhood among the matriarchs” (DG7b), of the “world of women . . . in which they speak with clarity, woman talk, from mother to daughter” (DG7b).

For both adult heterosexual and gay male groups, Danzón is characterized as being non-violent and non-sensationalist for its artistic and almost poetic tone. It is a story full “of fantasies and hope” (DG9), a tale “where nothing is exactly as we suppose it should be” (DG9). The film is seen as a depicting an enriching,
positive view of life that proposes a world “of hope” (DG9). It is full “of symbolisms, told in a slow rhythm, boring, like the danzón that doesn’t step out of line” (DG9). It is a story that maintains the rhythm of danzón music, with well-developed and “defined” characters that “each have their own personal dramas, interests, defects, and qualities” (DG9). Thus, it is the character’s complexity and the experience, as well as the treatment of solitude, that makes the film attractive to the adult males. They too recognize María Novaro’s cinematic strategy of involving the audience as something positive: “She laughs at us with all . . . the sentimentalism of Mexicans and our the songs. She carries us, captivating us, with the voyage, the lover, love. But in the end, it just so happens that life is not as it is depicted in songs . . .; it isn’t exactly like that, so it allows us to see that life can be something else” (DG9). And it is exactly the proposal that life “can be something else,” perceived by the majority of the discussion groups, that comes to be recognized as the value of the story; this is precisely what makes Danzón different and perhaps subversive.

The apparent simplicity of the plot, or better yet, the simplicity and commonplace aspects of Julia’s existence, make it difficult to respond briefly to the question “what is the theme of the movie?” Defining what a movie is about supposes a capacity to discern and synthesize the principle nucleus of the plot, or as stated by Casetti and Di Chio, it requires that one find the unity of content that drives a film. For the groups made up of women, the theme of Danzón is the woman, though there are stated differences in what symbolically represents the concept of “woman.” For the young heterosexual females, “the theme is that of a woman who is creating paths for herself” (DG1). Julia represents a woman fighting against established norms, not in an abstract way, but in a specific context in which she is easily identified as a “Mexican woman” who faces “tradition and that which is determined according to macho society” (DG1).

For the adult heterosexual females, the content of the film corresponds to “the life of women” (DG2), but a life that not only represents Mexican women but humanity as a whole. As such, this group also affirms that the theme of Danzón is “the life and experience of humanity” (DG2), “its innocence, its values . . . , its fears,” and “its solitude” (DG2).

The young lesbian group defined the theme in two levels; first, in a non-symbolic way, as “a woman who looks for a man with whom she knows she can dance” (DG3), only to later affirm that the theme revolves around life and dance, life as a dance, or “the dance we all carry within,” that “something special that, whether
we like it or not... moves us” (DG3). The young Spanish females defined the theme in similar terms: it is the “feminine world,” “what a woman feels,” seen through dance.

In general, for the male heterosexual group the content of the film was very direct and less symbolic: it’s all about Julia and the danzón. In the case of the younger males, it is about “the life of a woman that does not transcend.” The group of young Spanish males describes the theme as having two dimensions: it “is a story of love, affection, and tenderness” between Julia and Carmelo, but it is also “the search for happiness and affection,” and the “relationship between a man and a woman” (DG10).

For the groups made up of gay males however, the plot is not centered around Julia or any other character—as is the case with the heterosexual males—but with more far-reaching and symbolic aspects. For the young group, the theme revolves around “the traditions, values and roots of Mexico” but it also deals with “the search for love” (DG8), “the search for what one desires” (DG8). For the gay adults, the nucleus of the theme is “the routine of life and work” (DG9), “loneliness and fantasy,” and also “dance as an escape” (DG9). It is interesting to note how the theme of solitude is a key aspect that guides these comments and observations, as it did with the rest of the groups involved.

Regarding the distinct character of Danzón, there were also particular differences according to gender. For women the film was considered special in that its main characters are all female and masculinity is portrayed as a feminine construction: “The masculine world is here seen as imagined by the feminine” (DG5). The young women claim that men are not a part of the film, but that the machismo that characterizes society is very present; in other words, they recognize that the masculine, while not embodied in any one character, is felt throughout the movie as a power struggle that attempts to exercise dominion over female characters.

The groups comprised of women also note that the characters in Danzón are very real, common, and everyday-like, with conflicts, fears and contradictions, but also with possibilities for change—all of which contributes to create an affinity with the audience. These groups highlight the complexity of the relationships among women of different ages (between mother and daughter, friends, co-workers, etc.) and in different contexts.

Another aspect central to what makes Danzón particular to these groups is its treatment of the concept of love and the relationships between couples and friends. This love is not perceived
as sexual, but as sensual; it is a love that is not happy in the traditional sense, but “somewhat melancholic, absent” (DG1), a “sublime relationship that is given through dance” (DG4). In the case of the female friendships, their love is filled with camaraderie and sentiment. “It is a film that promotes the sentimental” (DG3) and that “works the romantic very much” (DG3), that presents human relations that are established through forms of communication quite different from the norm which include body language in general, and the eyes in particular. Thus, an aspect that is retained by these groups is the “corporal” communication that transcends the sexual and is perceived as sensual.

The most notable character for women is Julia, who despite being a person with particular prejudices who guides herself with tradition and norms (as evinced by her virtuosity when dancing danzón), is also a woman accepting of others different than her. She is neither “afraid of prostitution, nor homosexuality” (DG1), and in general terms she is not quick to judge others. She is someone who wants to change, but at times feels trapped by multiple limitations of class and gender.

Another aspect brought up by the female audience is the moderate treatment of violence and aggression in the film, especially as it refers to the female body. These groups repeatedly refer to how Danzón differs from other films because it does not employ the female body as a place upon which violence is expressed; rather, this female body is portrayed as the center of sensuality. This is further recognized when characters linked to prostitution and the transvestite spectacle are brought up in discussion: the film does not treat them with much violence or with a sensationalist tone as tradition would dictate. Reference is also made to how the majority of Mexican cinema presents women as objects of male desire, which then results in a loss of feminine eroticism, which again makes Danzón a totally different kind of film: “In the film there is no violence, no sexual aggression. . . . The scene on the boat where the sexual encounter is suggested is beautiful, all of which happens without actually showing us anything. With the waves, with the movement of the sea” (DG2).

It was also evident to these groups that there is an enormous amount of symbolic detail in the film. Some of the widely recognized details are, for example, the names of the ships: “Papanicolao,” “See me and suffer,” “Lost love,” or the name of the restaurant where Julia looks for Carmelo: “Hope.” Another detail that caught the eye of all women is the scene in which Julia, after a sexual encounter with Rubén, smokes a cigarette while observing
his semi-naked body. This scene is exactly the opposite of the habitual, and it leaves no doubt that feminine desire is central to the film. It is worth noting that this same scene, which brought much pleasure to the women involved in this study, made the men—especially the younger heterosexual cohort—quite uncomfortable, to the point of feeling offended.

It is worth noting that the women’s groups also brought forth the differences that they expected would be presented by men in their reading of the film’s details. They wondered how a male audience would confront these details; surely an audience of men would feel “offended” or not identified or even “apt” to understand the messages and symbolism in the film. Lastly, the women made the point that the film is not accusatory; instead, it is a film that questions but leaves an open-ended answer: “it leaves you in doubt so that each person can reflect on what happens” (DG1). The women recognize that Danzón “suggests” but does not impose; “it makes you think” (DG3), even when you don’t realize it. And this is one of the triggers used for questioning whether the film is a feminist proposal or simply feminine.

For their part, the various groups composed of male subjects also recognized many elements particular to Danzón, though these were different in importance and ascribed value than those mentioned by the groups of women. Similar discrepancies also appeared between the groups composed of heterosexual and gay, younger and older, and Mexican and Spanish males. Importantly, among the groups of younger heterosexual males (DG6 and DG7a) there was no reference made to these symbolic aspects nor to the details that other groups mentioned, with the exception of three minor comments.

For the group of older heterosexual males, the discussion surrounding what makes Danzón special focused on one central theme; the most distinctive characteristic for them was the treatment of sexuality and the almost non-violent nature of the film, especially because it portrays a marginal aspect of Veracruz populated with fringe social characters. For them, the film deals with a real social problem in a “non morbose” way; the transvestite is portrayed “without violence, without aggression” (DG7b) and as a complex subject, but above all with affection and solidarity. The difficulty of this marginal existence, the limitations and “economic suffering” of a supposedly “vulgar” (DG7b) way of life, is depicted with “candor” and “warmth” (DG7b). Another important aspect that makes Danzón unique for the older males—both heterosexual and gay—is the unaffected way in which the film conceives of the plot, themes, characters, situations, and even the acting. This sense
of normalcy is tied, as they point out, to the realism, to the everyday, and to the “simplicity” of the story. Also, the sense of unaffectedness is also ascribed to the mise-en-scène, to how it all comes up on the screen, which points to—explicitly in the discourse of the older gay group (DG9), but not so in the older heterosexual cohort (DG7a)—the direction of actors and the research that went into the development of the “psychology of the characters” (DG7b). In this way, these groups point to the amount of work and creativity required to make the film, transcending the idea that it is simply a woman’s natural way of expression. They recognize, especially the group of older gay men, the quality of María Novaro’s cinematographic work. It is important to note the difference between groups of men and women as regards the fact various groups of women centered their discourse around the story itself, while the men argued for the particularity of Danzón by focusing more on the extra-narrative elements, including María Novaro’s job as director. In both younger and older adult male groups, there is ample recognition of the challenge that María Novaro must have met in order to make the characters and the plot appear so commonplace. “It’s as if you were in there yourself” (DG7b). “The simplest things are hardest. They must have studied a lot to be able to work such natural acting characters” (DG7b).

However, the group of younger Spanish males (DG10) doubt whether the unaffected fluidity of the film and the plot is a strategy or simply an ability proper to women in general and, in the particular case of María Novaro, of her “Hispanic-American nature:” “While the American is much more commercial, and seeks bigger things, the Hispanic-American many times . . . looks for her reality in the little things, in more humble things, right?” (DG10).

Another aspect that comes up, especially brought up by the group of older heterosexual males, is the “recovery” the film makes of the particular “way of life” of “the culture of danzón” (DG7b). This group also recognizes—as the women’s groups do—that an important aspect of the film is that it makes the audience think without necessarily imposing a position or ideological line. They point out that the film does not impose a “conclusion” (DG7b), but rather that it leaves open the possibility for each audience member to conclude the story according to his or her experience, without any attempt at moralizing.

The majority of the male groups also recognized that Danzón is centered on feminine characters, on “woman problems” where it is “all told from their perspective” (DG6). But, in contrast to the women who brought up this point, this “makes some uncomfortable” when the men realize, as subjects of gender, that they have
no place in the story or that there is a “negative representation of men” in the film.

Another element that was also highlighted by the adult male group as particular to the film—a point that was never brought up by the women—is that Danzón does not concern itself with a more far-reaching social and political context. In other words, in the men’s reading, the film did not require a more social discussion to reinforce or situate Julia’s personal problems.

IV: Conclusion

The group discussions appear to bear witness to the way in which Danzón contributes to the deconstruction of the traditional categories or identities of gender, while it modestly intervenes in the process of creating a new symbolic order. Danzón’s narrative stance, the theme it undertakes, the connections that it makes regarding social issues, the gaze it proposes, as well as the distinctiveness of its characters, allow the film to question and oppose dominant cinema, thereby provoking the audience to question cinematic codes and issues of gender identity. The incitement to critical questioning is a key element that contributes to the transformation of the relationship between text and spectator. Thus, the experience of seeing and discussing the film does not go unnoticed, but rather requires the audience to take a position regarding the theme and María Novaro’s presentation of it. The understated, almost entirely non-aggressive manner used in the film subtly confronts the spectator both with regard to the cinematic code and gender relationships. This allows us to consider Danzón a deconstructive effort. Its deconstructive nature is marked by the active and critical relationship that it establishes with the audience.

For María Novaro, as for the female audience, Danzón constitutes the aesthetic and political possibility of redefining both the feminine and the masculine. It is an aesthetic and political exercise in “self-representation” that confronts and questions representations made by the dominant culture. Its capacity for questioning is thus transformed into power; as Millán defines it, power “with the capacity to impose a sense, to re-signify and re-symbolize significant networks that compose the world of the human” (“El placer” 95). In the realm of research, this power is manifested in the possibility of analyzing through gender theory an audience’s interpretative processes; both the theory and the audience interpretation contribute to the repositioning and shifting of gendered identities. As regards the present study, the differences among the groups...
involved, according to sex, age, sexuality, and nationality, prove how these “factors” are central to the construction of gender, which makes it necessary to speak of masculinities and femininities. However, recognizing the diversity of gender cannot shield us from certain constants, which should not necessarily imply recognition of a “natural” or essential masculine or feminine, but the current incapacity to deconstruct the more radical cultural and social pillars that support the universal characterization of gender.

In all groups involved in this research, but more noticeably in the younger set than in the adult group, in the women when compared to the men, and in the Spanish compared to the Mexican, there is an internal debate and conflict that results from the questioning of gender identities in contemporary society. Women reject the patterns assigned by models of traditional femininity, but they do not find satisfaction in the current feminine model and they insist on one that allows for the opportunity of expressing distinct possibilities they, as complex subjects, claim to possess.

In the case of men, one can see how they discursively censure and deny a model of virility based on machismo. That is to say they discursively critique this model much like they question traditional masculine identity; however, they do not openly propose a new masculinity. In other words, traditional masculinity supposes that men are, among other things, straight, unemotional in general, and even among themselves, unable or unwilling to display emotional, physical, and erotic contact. In some male groups, there was a clear rejection of these normative characteristics, as was the case with the group of young Spaniards that said the film brought out their awareness in the limitations of traditional masculinity. They stated that Danzón only showed the capacity of women to be friends, colleagues, and to support each other, while it portrayed men as solitary individualists always ready to stalk women, all of which evidently limits their human capacities. The discussion and reconstruction of Danzón offers a glimpse of the crisis of limits that marks gender identities; in the case of the masculine model, some groups, or at certain moments in a group’s discussion, the rejection of the traditional macho model was proposed; they questioned ancestral virility but failed to openly recognize the possibility that masculinity could include, accept, and be compatible with the feminine. In practice, the dualism of gender is more problematic and is lived more intensely for women who, with great difficulties and conflicts, have incorporated traditional gender roles into their lives and are still in search of a balance of feminine and masculine aspects. While in general, heterosexual men are in a process of questioning traditional masculinity, they still refuse to
adopt and recognize the feminine aspects that compose their identity. This refusal relates to the fact that traditionally the masculine category has been attributed with more value than the feminine and, thus, the appropriation of lesser valued characteristics is perceived as a more arduous task.

The greatest conflict related to the younger set of males is related to their historical circumstances. They have grown up and matured amid feminist movements that have forced a questioning of gender roles and identities. At least with regard to the groups studied here, the historical circumstances are more often conceptualized by the younger group when compared to the adult cohort, by the gay when paired with the heterosexual, and by the Spanish more than by the Mexicans. However, all groups, to a lesser or greater extent, were forced to bring up, discuss, and question the limits of gender identities, and the costs and benefits that these limitations have on the everyday practice of social relations. The differences between groups of men and women were less apparent in the Spanish than in the Mexican, which seems to imply that there exists a greater rupture with the limits of gender identity in Spain than in Mexico, or at least, that there is a greater development and concern toward these matters in their discursive practices that permit a more complex discussion of gender within those groups.

The differences uncovered in this study with regard to the interpretation of Danzón give credence to the importance of gender, sexuality, and age, and they confirm the need to work in the field of representation and analyzing the specific cultural categories of the feminine and masculine. For an adequate analysis of identity categories not only is it necessary to have a cultural imaginary that includes the voices and perspective of diverse groups, we also need a critical sensibility that takes into consideration the filmic text itself and the way the text is received and interpreted by the community at large. Exploring how different groups respond to a particular film it is possible to uncover emergent meanings in the film itself as well as the social categories the film destabilizes.

Translated by José Pablo Villalobos.

Notes

1 As Elizabeth Gross points out, subjectivity here goes beyond an individual, personal or idiosyncratic position and is considered an interference in the “objective” procedures of knowledge similar to how the theoretical productions of men arise as a function of their life experience (89–90).
I mean this only in the sense of recreating the dilemma these women face and not so much as an attempt to question it.

In terms of dominant cinema, I am referring to the way in which mainstream film reproduces gender conventions guided by a phalocentric order in which the feminine is subordinated to the masculine and in which there is an ideological reproduction of the dominant symbolic order. This cinema is characterized by a series of textual mechanisms and signs that have been constituted as recurrent models or patterns that reflect the position of women in the patriarchal unconscious (See Kuhn “Cine de mujeres” and Millán Derivas).

Works Cited


