

TIME AND SILENCE

Julio Medem's Feminist Time Traveller

Julio Medem films are a celebration of women.

His last film, *CHAOTIC ANA*, was specifically developed as a homage to women – to their power, creativity and humanity. Medem describes his film as a 'feminist fable' and 'an ode to the feminine instinct of women.'

Without recourse to fashionable new-man feminism, Medem's film is a deeply felt critique of the oppression of women by men. Medem has spoken of his shame at being a man. His films express the grief of women subjugated by men. In *CHAOTIC ANA* he provides a portrait of man's persecution of women and their suffering through the centuries – in a line from Dylan Thomas:

... their arms round the griefs of the ages.

CHAOTIC ANA was released in 2007. Medem's previous two films, *SEX AND LUCIA*, and the documentary, *THE BASQUE BALL: THE SKIN AGAINST THE STONE*, had both been released six years earlier in 2001. *CHAOTIC ANA* was preceded by several years of silence from Medem, following the tragic death of his sister, the

artist Ana Medem, who was killed in a road accident as she travelled to an exhibition of her work in Valencia. Grief prevented Medem from engaging in his film career in the years following his sister's death. The film itself was therefore a working through of grief, an expression of mourning.

Not only was *CHAOTIC ANA* inspired by Ana Medem, but in part it is also a celebration of her life and her art. The art in the film is taken from Ana Medem's work, some of it adapted and animated by Medem's other sister, Sophia Medem. The film was therefore a way of letting the public experience Ana Medem's work. Her presence as well as her paintings haunts the film.

This inner strand represents a vein of memory, a film within the film. The art work is an expression of love and mourning, but also a record. The film engages as an archival medium in providing a visual repository of Ana Medem's work much in the same way that Wong Kar Wai put the old Hong Kong on film in *IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE* and *2046* before it disappeared, again using cinema as an archive. In *CHAOTIC ANA* Ana Medem's work is permanently preserved on film.

Ana Medem was the inspiration for *CHAOTIC ANA*, but also the Ana of *LOVERS OF THE ARCTIC CIRCLE* and Lucia in *SEX AND LUCIA*. All Medem's female protagonists share certain

similarities, most notably an affinity with nature and the natural order. They are intuitive, creative women, free spirits, who don't really fit into conventional society. They are outsiders, freethinkers. The Ana of CHAOTIC ANA looks unconventional and out of place on a city street, linking with other humans by intuitively touching them, physically connecting with other lives.

CLIP 1

Medem's feminist credentials have been questioned because of the way Ana's character is presented on screen. Her beauty, sexuality and frequent nudity have been said to undermine the film's progressive ambitions by playing the Hollywood card.

Yet Medem's bold, visceral depiction of sexual relations are far removed from the coy, sanitised norm of Hollywood. Medem shows the pain as well as the power of sex, the violence of love-making as well as its beauty. It seems perverse to suggest that a feminist heroine cannot be beautiful, reminiscent of the old chauvinist argument which seeks to blame women for the abuses of men. Like Lucia before her, Ana's open sexuality, her unselfconscious naturism are important expressions of her free, non-conformist personality and an important Medem theme.

The two versions of Ana and their blood sister Lucia in Medem's later films are linked as kindred spirits, reincarnations of each other, doppelgangers. The Ana of *CHAOTIC ANA* is an artist who at the beginning of the film lives in a cave on an island.

Islands are very important in Medem's films and contribute to the element of magical realism often sustained by them. Medem is greatly influenced by Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE* and his films contribute to the tradition of magical realism in Spanish art, although in his films magical realism is closely aligned with alternative reality and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two.

In *SEX AND LUCIA*, Lucia is a character who has escaped from the pages of a novel and takes flight to an island where she attempts to reincarnate herself as a real person and become free of the tyranny of the novelist. The phallic symbolism of the lighthouse and the hole in the rocks nearby into which Lucia Alice-like falls gives the landscape of the island a surreal constructed feel.

Likewise the cave on the island where Ana lives with her feral father – her 'grizzly beast.' The cave contains ten doors and suggests more the idea of an interior landscape, a terrain of the mind, than one of physical reality. Medem is a forceful symbolist.

Doors are a recurring and important symbol in the film – sometimes doors open, sometimes not.

Medem's island seascapes are populated by characters in a state of withdrawal from the world. When I interviewed Julio Medem in Madrid last April, he spoke of the Mediterranean and how he had come to like it, especially its bright white light. He had made visits to the Mediterranean at a very fragile time in his life and he found that the white light cleansed him and he could forget his immediate past. The light gave him energy.

Later he went to Athens to rediscover the white light of the Mediterranean. The light burning off the turquoise water enabled him to lose himself. He likened its appearance to snow with the sun shining on it.

The characters in Medem's films – the Lucias and the Anas – also become suffused by this bright white light and momentarily seem swallowed up by it, the light which enabled Medem to forget. Yet the escape from pain and self-awareness can only be temporary.

The recovery through mourning reflects the influence of Krzysztof Kieslowski on Medem, especially the THREE COLOURS TRILOGY and particularly the THREE COLOURS BLUE – one of the most

powerful depictions of grief and the creative process of mourning ever committed to celluloid as a woman struggles to come to terms with the death of her family. Kieslowski's luminous blue associated with the grieving woman unable to face the world is the equivalent of Medem's Mediterranean white light.

The Kieslowski influence goes further than the treatment of grief and mourning. Like Kieslowski, Medem is very interested in the themes of fate and chance, coincidence, destiny, palindromes, duality, doppelgangers. In *CHAOTIC ANA*, Ana leaves her island home and her bearish father for artistic patronage in Madrid where she lives in a commune called 'Wonderland,' again underpinning the aura of magical realism. She begins to experience mental storms as visions from the past beset her.

Ana discovers that she has eighty doppelgangers – past reincarnations of herself in different societies across two thousand years. In each manifestation Ana has died violently as the result of male patriarchy only to be reborn again.

Through hypnotism, Ana is enabled to time travel between her different identities. The portmanteau structure of the film is determined by numbered chapters which represent the hypnotist's countdown and the timeline to Ana's own fate and destiny: will she also be a casualty of male violence?

Ana is required to recall memories of events she did not experience. In doing so she is communicating two forms of memory – personal and collective. This manifests itself in two kinds of mourning – the personal grief concerning her now dying father, and the collective grief of historical persecution experienced through the contours of time by the reincarnated Ana. Her body becomes the site for the collective process of recalling atrocities enacted upon the eighty previous Anas. Their suffering becomes Ana's suffering. Her body is a conduit for the pain of the past, ritually experienced and exorcised.

CLIP 2

Ana's past lives represent important historical figures who died in tragic circumstances, invariably at the hands of the male violence. The power of myth and the weight of the past are important threads in Medem's film, where reincarnation and time travel are inextricably linked to the fact that the journeys made are in the protagonist's mind, that the reincarnations are psychological.

Medem has engaged with the theme of reincarnation in earlier films, notably in *COWS*, (1992), *THE RED SQUIRREL* (1993), and *LOVERS OF THE ARCTIC CIRCLE*, in which Ana as a schoolgirl

believes that a schoolboy called Otto is a reincarnation of her dead father. Otto also reincarnates into a younger version of himself as a way of coping when he discovers the body of his mother after she has committed suicide.

These psychological constructions decentre the narrative and refute mono-reality. Medem is not interested in presenting a universal experience but in dramatising the variegated nature of memory filtered through individual perceptions. His characters construct memories of events they have not directly experienced and where collective memory is refashioned as a symptom of trauma, a crisis of identity. Ana's chaos is internal.

Many film artists provide narratives which are constructs of the lead protagonist's trauma. In both David Lynch's *MULHOLLAND DRIVE* (2001) and David Cronenberg's *SPIDER* (2002) the viewer is deceived regarding the status of the narrative, believing the unfolding stories to be each film's reality, only to be disabused when the narrative conceit is revealed as a representation of the lead protagonist unconscious imaginings. Narrative therefore becomes an externalisation of trauma.

Likewise Ana's supermemory persuades us of her reincarnated status and of the validity of her multifarious recall. Under hypnosis her grief is palpable: she mourns with intense

physicality the deaths of her forebears with the same emotional force as the death of her beloved father. The exorcism of her former selves is part of the grieving process.

The chaos in Ana's mind represents the turmoil of change. Her time travelling becomes epic, embracing many global destinations, both psychological and actual.

At the beginning of the film, Ana is an unfinished woman, a fledgling artist who chooses not to paint in depth for fear of the emotional consequences – as if she instinctively knows of the dislocation which awaits her. She is a sexual and social innocent. She finally emerges at relative peace with herself, released both by the death of her father and by her survival of a violent ordeal visited upon her by a male chauvinist, a modern day man of war.

Ana travels to New York and then to Arizona, where she visits a Native American Reservation in the desert. Here Ana undergoes a traumatic psychological fugue as she summons in her mind the brutal murder of a Native American woman who was hacked to death by a tribal antagonist and a historical man of war.

Back in New York, working as a waitress in a hotel, Ana is propositioned by a contemporary man of war, a sexist American

politician in the George Bush mould who has been involved in prosecuting the war in Iraq. To Ana this man is anti-life and the encounter grows ugly. Ana's life becomes threatened. The confrontation is intercut with the savage execution of the Native American woman by the historical man of war. We suspect that the modern-day Ana will be killed by the American politician. Her time for death and reincarnation has now come. Instead Ana delivers what Medem describes as a 'lyrical punishment.'

CLIP 3

Medem's film ends optimistically and with hope for the future. Nothing is rendered inevitable or predestined by the pattern of history. Ana has ended the cycle of death and rebirth, symbolised by the breaking of the necklace. Her defiance has won through, saving her from her own death at the hands of the American, which had seemed inevitable. Our last image of Ana is on a New York street – beaten, bleeding, yet emancipated.

John Foster

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