Verbal and Visual Representation of Women: Como agua para chocolate / Like Water for Chocolate

By MARÍA ELENA DE VALDÉS

Como agua para chocolate is the first novel by Laura Esquivel (b. 1950). Published in Spanish in 1989 and in English translation in 1992, followed by the release of the feature film that same year, the novel has thrust this Mexican woman writer into the world of international critical acclaim as well as best-seller popularity. Since Esquivel also wrote the screenplay for director Alfonso Arau, the novel and the film together offer us an excellent opportunity to examine the interplay between the verbal and visual representation of women. Esquivel's previous work had all been as a screenwriter. Her script for *Chido Guan, el Tacos de Oro* (1985) was nominated for the Ariel in Mexico, an award she won eight years later for *Como agua para chocolate*.

The study of verbal and visual imagery must begin with the understanding that both the novel and, to a lesser extent, the film work as a parody of a genre. The genre in question is the Mexican version of women's fiction published in monthly installments together with recipes, home remedies, dressmaking patterns, short poems, moral exhortations, ideas on home decoration, and the calendar of church observances. In brief, this genre is the nineteenth-century forerunner of what is known throughout Europe and America as a woman's magazine.[1] Around 1850 these publications in Mexico were called "calendars for young ladies." Since home and church were the private and public sites of all educated young ladies, these publications represented the written counterpart to women's socialization, and as such, they are documents that conserve and transmit a Mexican female culture in which the social context and cultural space are particularly for women by women.

It was in the 1850s that fiction began to take a prominent role. At first the writings were descriptions of places for family excursions, moralizing tales, or detailed narratives on cooking. By 1860 the installment novel grew out of the monthly recipe or recommended excursion. More elaborate love stories by women began to appear regularly by the 1880s. The genre was never considered literature by the literary establishment because of its episodic plots, overt sentimentality, and highly stylized characterization. Nevertheless, by the turn of the century every literate woman in Mexico was or had been an avid reader of the genre. But what has been completely overlooked by the male-dominated literary culture of Mexico is that these novels were highly coded in an authentic women's language of inference and reference to the commonplaces of the kitchen and the home which were completely unknown by any man.[2]

Behind the purportedly simple episodic plots there was an infrahistory of life as it was lived, with all its multiple restrictions for women of this social class. The characterization followed the forms of life of these women rather than their unique individuality; thus the heroines were the survivors, those who were able to live out a full life in spite of the institution of marriage, which in theory, if not in practice, was a form of indentured slavery for life in which a woman served father and brothers then moved on to serve husband and sons together with her daughters and, of course, the women from the servant class. The women's fiction of this woman's world concentrated on one overwhelming fact of life: how to transcend the conditions of existence and express oneself in love and in creativity.[3]

Cooking, sewing, embroidery, and decoration were the usual creative outlets for these women, and of course conversation, storytelling, gossip, and advice, which engulfed every waking day of the Mexican lady of the home.[4] Writing for other women was quite naturally an extension of this infrahistorical conversation and gossip. Therefore, if one has the social codes of these women, one can read these novels as a way of life in nineteenth-century Mexico. Laura Esquivel's recognition of this world and its language comes from her Mexican heritage of fiercely independent women, who created a woman's culture within the social prison of marriage.[5]

Como agua para chocolate is a parody of nineteenth-century women's periodical fiction in the same way that *Don Quijote* is a parody of the novel of chivalry. Both genres were expressions of popular culture that created a unique space for a segment of the population. I am using the term *parody* in the strict sense in which Ziva Ben-Porat has defined it: "[Parody is] a representation of a modeled reality,

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which is itself already a particular representation of an original reality. The parodic representations expose the model's conventions and lay bare its devices through the coexistence of the two codes in the same message" (247).

Obviously, for the parody to work at its highest level of dual representation, both the parody and the parodic model must be present in the reading experience. Esquivel creates the duality in several ways. First, she begins with the title of the novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, a locution which translates as "water at the boiling point" and is used as a simile in Mexico to describe any event or relationship that is so tense, hot, and extraordinary that it can only be compared to scalding water on the verge of boiling, as called for in the preparation of that most Mexican of all beverages, dating from at least the thirteenth century: hot chocolate (Soustelle, 153–61). Second, the subtitle is taken directly from the model: "A Novel in Monthly Installments, with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies." Together the title and subtitle therefore cover both the parody and the model. Third, the reader finds upon opening the book, in place of an epigraph, a traditional Mexican proverb: "A la mesa y a la cama / Una sola vez se llama" (To the table or to bed / You must come when you are bid). The woodcut that decorates the page is the typical nineteenth-century cooking stove. The fourth and most explicit dualistic technique is Esquivel's reproduction of the format of her model.

Each chapter is prefaced by the title, the subtitle, the month, and the recipe for that month. The narration that follows is a combination of direct address on how to prepare the recipe of the month and interspersed stories about the loves and times of the narrator's great-aunt Tita. The narration moves effortlessly from the first person to the third-person omniscient narrative voice of all storytellers. Each chapter ends with the information that the story will be continued and an announcement of what the next month's—that is, the next chapter's—recipe will be. These elements, taken from the model, are never mere embellishments. The recipes and their preparation, as well as the home remedies and their application, are an intrinsic part of the story. There is therefore an intricate symbiotic relationship between the novel and its model in the reading experience. Each is feeding on the other.

In this study I am concerned with the model of the human subject, specifically the female subject, as it is developed in and through language and visual signification in a situated context of time and place. The verbal imaging of the novel makes use of the elaborate signifying system of language as a dwelling place. The visual imagery that at first expands the narrative in the film soon exacts its own place as a nonlinguistic signifying system drawing upon its own repertoire of referentiality and establishing a different model of the human subject than that elucidated by the verbal imagery alone. I intend to examine the novelistic signifying system and the model thus established and then follow with the cinematic signifying system and its model.

The speaking subject or narrative voice in the novel is characterized, as Emile Benveniste has shown, as a living presence by speaking. That voice begins in the first person, speaking the conversational Mexican Spanish of a woman from Mexico's north, near the U.S. border. Like all Mexican speech, it is clearly marked with register and sociocultural indicators, in this case of the land-owning middle class, mixing colloquial local usage with standard Spanish. The entry point is always the same: the direct address of one woman telling another how to prepare the recipe she is recommending. As one does the cooking, it is quite natural for the cook to liven the session with some storytelling, prompted by the previous preparation of the food. As she effortlessly moves from first-person culinary instructor to storyteller, she shifts to the third person and gradually appropriates a time and place and refigures a social world.

A verbal image emerges of the model Mexican rural, middle-class woman. She must be strong and far more clever than the men who supposedly protect her. She must be pious, observing all the religious requirements of a virtuous daughter, wife, and mother. She must exercise great care to keep her sentimental relations as private as possible, and, most important of all, she must be in control of life in her house, which means essentially the kitchen and bedroom or food and sex. In Esquivel's novel there are four women who must respond to the model: the mother Elena and the three daughters Rosaura, Gertrudis, and Josefita, known as Tita.

The ways of living within the limits of the model are demonstrated first by the mother, who thinks of herself as its very incarnation. She interprets the model in terms of control and domination of her entire household. She is represented through a filter of awe and fear, for the ostensible source is Tita's diary-cookbook, written beginning in 1910, when she was fifteen years old, and now transmitted by her grandniece. Therefore the verbal images that characterize Mamá Elena must be understood as those of her youngest daughter, who has been made into a personal servant from the time the little girl was able to work.

Mamá Elena is depicted as strong, self-reliant, absolutely tyrannical with her daughters and servants, but especially so with Tita, who from birth has been designated as the one who will not marry because she must care for her mother until she dies. Mamá Elena believes in order, *her* order. Although she observes the strictures of church and society,

she has secretly had an adulterous love affair with an African American, and her second daughter, Gertrudis, is the offspring of that relationship. This transgression of the norms of proper behavior remains hidden from public view, although there is gossip, but only after her mother's death does Tita discover that Gertrudis is her half-sister. The tyranny imposed on the three sisters is therefore the rigid, self-designed model of a woman's life pitilessly enforced by Mamá Elena, and each of the three responds in her own way to the model.

Rosaura never questions her mother's authority and follows her dictates submissively; after she is married she becomes an insignificant imitation of her mother. She lacks the strength, skill, and determination of Mamá Elena and tries to compensate by appealing to the mother's model as absolute. She therefore tries to live the model, invoking her mother's authority because she has none of her own. Gertrudis does not challenge her mother but instead responds to her emotions and passions in a direct manner unbecoming a lady. This physical directness leads her to adopt an androgynous life-style: she leaves home and her mother's authority, escapes from the brothel where she subsequently landed, and becomes a general of the revolutionary army, taking a subordinate as her lover and, later, husband. When she returns to the family hacienda, she dresses like a man, gives orders like a man, and is the dominant sexual partner.

Tita, the youngest of the three daughters, speaks out against her mother's arbitrary rule but cannot escape until she temporarily loses her mind. She is able to survive her mother's harsh rule by transferring her love, joy, sadness, and anger into her cooking. Tita's emotions and passions are the impetus for expression and action, not through the normal means of communication but through the food she prepares. She is therefore able to consummate her love with Pedro through the food she serves.

> Tal parecía que en un extraño fenómeno de alquimia su ser se había disuelto en la salsa de rosas, en el cuerpo de las codornices, en el vino y en cada uno de los olores de la comida. De esta manera penetraba en el cuerpo de Pedro, voluptuosa, aromática, calurosa, completamente sensual. (57)
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> It was as if a strange alchemical process had dissolved her entire being in the rose petal sauce, in the tender flesh of the quails, in the wine, in every one of the meal's aromas. That was the way she entered Pedro's body, hot, voluptuous, perfumed, totally sensuous. (52)

This clearly is much more than communication through food or a mere aphrodisiac; this is a form of sexual transubstantiation whereby the rose petal sauce and the quail have been turned into the body of Tita.

Thus it is that the reader gets to know these women as persons but, above all, becomes involved with the embodied speaking subject from the past, Tita, represented by her grand-niece (who transmits her story) and her cooking. The reader receives verbal food for the imaginative refiguration of one woman's response to the model that was imposed on her by accident of birth. The body of these women is the place of living. It is the dwelling place of the human subject. The essential questions of health, illness, pregnancy, childbirth, and sexuality are tied very directly in this novel to the physical and emotional needs of the body. The preparation and eating of food is thus a symbolic representation of living, and Tita's cookbook bequeaths to Esperanza and to Esperanza's daughter, her grandniece, a woman's creation of space that is hers in a hostile world.

Not only was the film adaptation of *Como agua para chocolate* written by the novelist herself, but in this case the screenplay represents a return to her original discipline. There are many cinematographic elements in the novel, primarily the numerous cuts and fade-outs of the story in order to feature the cooking. The camera is intrusive and can engulf its subject in a visual language that is unique to the voyeur or can replace verbal referentiality by overwhelming the viewer. For example, the opening shot of the film, filling the entire screen with an onion that is being sliced, plunges the viewer into food preparation in a way that no spoken word could parallel for its immediate effect. Similarly, the numerous close-ups of food being prepared, served, and eaten heighten the dominance of the performance of cooking and eating as both sustenance and social ritual. Contrast these images and this emphasis on the joy, sensuality, and even lust of eating the Mexican cuisine of Tita's kitchen with the scenes of the monks eating in Jean-Jacques Annaud's screen version of *The Name of the Rose* or the raw meat displayed in the monastery's refractory, where the emphasis is on the denial of the flesh through mortification. (Gabriel Axel's film *Babette's Feast*, on the other hand, contains both poles of this opposition between gratification and mortification of the body. The minister's two daughters, who substitute religious practice for living and who eat as punishment for having a body, are suddenly exposed to the refinement of food as art, pleasure, and gratification.) In the film *Como agua para chocolate* the preparation of food is expressed visually, and the consummation of eating is seen in the faces of the diners; but it must be also emphasized that there is a full spectrum of effects here, ranging from ecstasy to nausea.

Perhaps the major difference between Esquivel's novel and the film version is that there is a visual intertext in the latter that evokes the Cinderella fairy tale by using the ghostly appearance of the mother

and making her death the result of an attack on the hacienda by outlaws. In the novel Mamá Elena does not die until long after the attack and lingers on in partial madness, convinced that Tita is trying to poison her. By cutting short her death to one sudden violent episode and having her visage return to taunt Tita until the latter is able to renounce her heritage, the film makes Tita the Cinderella-like victim of personal abuse. In the novel the rigidity and harshness of Mamá Elena is overwhelmingly sociocultural and not peculiar to Tita as victim.

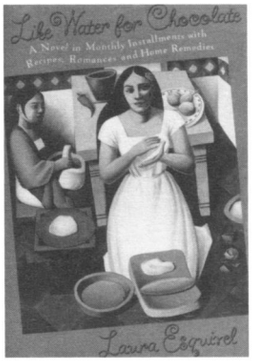
The visual intertext of fairy-tale language creates an effective subtext in the film, bringing out the oppression of the protagonist and her magical transcendence. Instead of a fairy godmother, Tita has the voice of her Nacha, the family cook who raised her from infancy amid the smells and sounds of the kitchen. Instead of a magical transformation of dress and carriage to go to the prince's ball, Tita is able to make love through the food she prepares; she is also able to induce sadness and acute physical discomfort. She is therefore able to keep Pedro from having sexual relations with Rosaura by making certain that Rosaura is fat, foul of breath, and given to breaking wind in the most nauseating manner. Mamá Elena's ghost first appears one hour into the film and quietly gains the upper hand, since she threatens to curse the child Tita is presumably carrying. The final confrontation between Tita and the ghost comes ten minutes later: Tita defeats the ghost by revealing that she knows Gertrudis is illegitimate and that she hates Elena for everything she has never been to her.

The film's visual language is able to evoke images of provocation, contempt, and abuse that are not in the novel. From the fortieth to the forty-fifth minute of the film, part of Tita's immensurably Cinderella-like duties are enacted. Tita is the only one permitted to assist Mamá Elena in her bath and with her dressing. The despotic abuse of Tita by Mamá Elena clearly borrows the visual images of the cruel stepmother. The magical intermediary is not a beautiful woman in a ball dress, but rather a wrinkled old woman, the cook Nacha, who had given Tita the love Mamá Elena denied her. Nacha's voice and face guide Tita. It is Nacha who tells her to use the roses Pedro gave her for the preparation of quail in rose petal sauce, and it is Nacha who prepares the bedroom for the final consummation of love between Tita and Pedro at the end of the film.

Tita's magical powers are all related to food, with the exception of the kilometer-long bedspread she knits during her lengthy nights of insomnia. Tita's cooking controls the pattern of living of those in her household because the food she prepares becomes an extension of herself. The culmination of this process of food as art and communication is food as communion. The transubstantiation of Tita's quail in rose petal sauce into Tita's body recalls the Roman Catholic doctrine of the communion wafer's becoming the body and blood of Christ, but on a deeper level it is the psychological reality of all women who have nursed an infant. When the baby Roberto loses his wet nurse, Tita is able to take the infant and nurse him in spite of the fact that she has not given birth. Her breasts are filled with milk not because she wishes she were the mother of the child, but because the child needs to eat and she is the provider of food.

The viewer of the film *Como agua para chocolate* must develop her expressive capacity as she broadens her affective experience. Mexican women—and to some extent Latin American women—seeing the film relive their family history, and this is so not only because of the strong and open cultural links between Latin American women in this century, on which both the novel and film draw, but also and perhaps primarily because of the skillful use of the parodic model. The intertext of women's magazines and the loves, trials, and tribulations featured in the stories they published is used by Esquivel as a discursive code that transcends whatever regional differences may exist. The social registers, the forms of address, the language of the female domain are somewhat lost in translation, because as in cooking, the substitution of ingredients changes the taste. The representation of women in Esquivel's novel and in the film touches on that deepest reservoir of meaning which is the human body as described, seen, and, on the deeper level, understood as the origin of identity.

Women from other cultures and other languages can develop an empathetic relationship with Tita, her cooking, her love, and her life. Men of any culture, but especially Mexican men and Latin American men, have the greatest deficiency in experiencing this film and therefore have the most to learn. They must gain access to some fragment of the expressive code of visual and verbal images that are the infrahistoric codes of their mothers, wives, and daughters. If they cannot gain access to the expressive system, they will not have access to the affective



experience of these lives. The imagery of nourishing the body in both the novel and the film provides us with the means for articulating the experiences of cooking, eating, making love, and giving birth in previously unsuspected ways, and thus allows the male intruder a peek into reality.

Women's recuperation of artistic creativity within the confinement of the house, and especially the kitchen and the bedroom, is presented by Esquivel not in an ideological argument but rather by means of an intertextual palimpsest which is the hallmark of postmodern art.[6] I want to conclude with three observations on feminist art in this context. 1) This is not a protest movement; it is a celebration of the space of one's own which may have been hidden from view in the past but is now open to all. 2) At the center of postmodernism there is the vesting of creative weight on the reader, and this makes intertextuality a means of providing an interpretive context; in the case of Esquivel that context is our grandmother's kitchen and bedroom. 3) The maturity of feminist criticism has moved beyond the need to go headhunting among the misogynist hordes of patriarchy; the challenge today is to celebrate women's creativity in the full domain of the human adventure, from the so-called decorative arts to the fine arts and science.

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[1] Mexican cookbooks in the nineteenth century were often handwritten, hand-sewn books which were passed on from one generation of women to the next. I am fortunate to have inherited such a book. The recipes and home remedies are all presented through a running narrative together with short stories prompted by the recipe in question. In the United States Irma S. Rombauer's first edition of *The Joy of Cooking* (1931) follows the same tradition. Unfortunately, Rombauer's daughter Marion Becker has not chosen to continue the narrative tradition.

[2] Susan J. Lombardi has written an important critical analysis of the genre in English as a significant mode of gendered discourse.

[3] The U.S. feminist critic Elaine Showalter recognized seventeen years ago that the cultural situatedness of women must be the starting point for any esthetic consideration of their work. She writes: "Women have generally been regarded as 'sociological chameleons,' taking on the class, lifestyle, and culture of their male relatives. It can, however, be argued that women themselves have constituted a subculture within the framework of a larger society and have been unified by values, conventions, experiences, and behaviors impinging on each individual" (11).

[4] Judy Chicago's efforts to raise the esthetic awareness of women to their work for the home has been revolutionary. Laura Esquivel's novel is written as a Mexican recognition of this woman's art form. Chicago states: "A dinner party where family traditions are passed down like the carefully preserved tablecloth made by a beloved grandmother. A dinner party where women provide an environment of comfort, an elegant setting, and a nourishing and aesthetically pleasing meal. A dinner party where women put the guests at ease and facilitate communication between them. A dinner party, a traditional female act requiring both generosity and personal sacrifice" (8–21).

[5] There have been numerous reviews of the novel and the film around the world. Each reviewer finds points of comparison to the local culture and, to varying degrees, expresses fascination or dismay at what he or she calls the magical realism of the novel and film. Of course, magical realism is a category invented by critics who are not from Latin America. The dimensions of the real in Latin America are very much a part of the oral tradition and the hybrid creation of extreme variability. The best review from Latin America of the novel/film that I have read is that published by Carmen Ramos Escandón.

[6] A recent study of the film by Gastón Lillo offers an interesting neo-Marxist interpretation. Although the generalizations he makes about Mexico's unique configuration of social class structure and race relations are obvious demographic factors, he ignores three basic facts about the film which almost completely mitigate his negative views: 1) the screenplay is an adaptation of a novel and uses filmic narrative techniques to present a life story rather than an epic of the Mexican Revolution; 2) the novel is a parody of nineteenth-century women's writing which carries with it a strong sense of recovery of women's space; and 3) the way of life along the Mexican-U.S. border from the 1850s to the narrative time of 1895–1934 was a period of constant border-crossing and thousands of continuing intimate ties not only within families whose members had been arbitrarily separated by the border, but also between Mexicans and Anglo newcomers. It is only in the post–World War II era that the border has become a barrier.

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