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Hitchcock goes to the dogs

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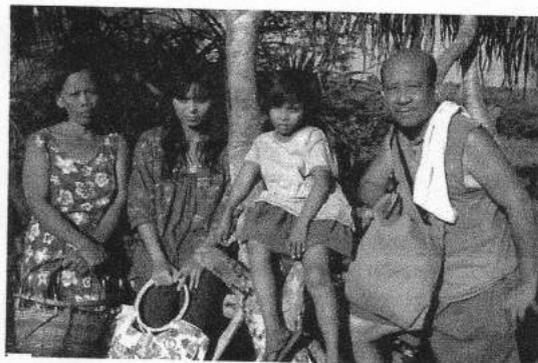
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ONE TAKE, MANY (HI)STORIES

Notes for an appreciation of *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria*

By **Stefano Ciammaroni**

Keywords: Remton Zuasola, *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria*, style, Italian neo-realism, classical Hollywood, art cinema, Third Cinema, single-shot films

In Remton Zuasola's first feature-length film, *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria* (2010), the titular 'Teria' (as she is amicably nicknamed in the film) is a young woman, presumably in her late teens, who is about to be uprooted from her native Filipino island and flown to Europe. There, she will marry a much older German man, Hans – a name so empty-typical that its function is undoubtedly synecdochical – indenting to convey not a person but a general sense of arid northern European-ness to be contrasted with the southern vitality of the Fili-

pino culture Teria is being forced to leave behind. Indeed, this shall not be a marriage of love, but a business transaction of sorts arranged by Teria's mother with the help of an agency 'recruiter' in the hope that the girl's union with a wealthy European man will help the family cope with their pressing debts.

During her last day on the island, the hesitant Teria will have to face a whirlwind of emotions and outside interpellations, all taking the form of characters that alternatively crowd the profilmic space next to Teria, trying to swing her opinion in one direction or another, as she makes her final walk to the port where she is supposed to set sail. There is the usually inattentive boyfriend who now wants Teria to stay; there is the older aunt who wants her to go, despite the fact that her own arranged German marriage resulted in an early divorce and in her premature return to the island; there is the cynical recruiter, who admonishes Teria against sentimentalizing 'third-world' genuineness, by

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Zuasola manages to tell this complicated tale of competing psychologies, agendas and emotions in real time and by means of one continuous, uncut shot.

conversely attempting to lullaby her into embracing the thought of (an alleged) financial well-being in Europe, however contrived the terms of this marriage may be. And, most centrally, there's Teria's own tribulations, as she tries to settle her grudge with a mother responsible for having 'sold her out', while having to also come to terms with an unmanly father sceptical towards this European deal but unable nonetheless to upset the mother's plans.

Exerting a great deal of control over the cinematic apparatus, the actors' work and the malleable space of a highly choreographed *mise-en-scène*, within which characters move with the discipline and precision of a ballet-like performance, Zuasola manages to tell this complicated tale of competing psychologies, agendas and emotions in real time and by means of one continuous, uncut shot. For roughly ninety minutes. One would expect a film so radically committed to one stylistic gesture (and a very catalysing one at that, since it obviously stands out for being such a rarity) to be readable only in the light of that one, attention-grabbing directorial decision. Yet, it is arguable that 'oneness' is not at all the most productive motif to invoke when trying to analyse and appreciate Zuasola's film. More specifically, although the ambition to conceive of one, feature-length shot may suggest a penchant for purity and the workings of an inflexible strategy of refusal (in this case, the total refusal of cutting, namely of one defining aspect of cinematic specificity), what the film ultimately displays is a highly inclusive, highly democratic and fragmented stylistic universe. Zuasola's film presents a story told in one, very long take. Yet, in a manner that makes viewing the film all the more stimulating, this one take pays complicit homage to and houses at its core a plurality of narrative traditions, not all of which fall within the rubric of cinematic experimentation. In fact, these traditions range from classical (Hollywood) dramaturgy to Italian neo-realism and the conventions of what one commonly refers to as 'art cinema' narration. So, just as the catalysing story of Teria's departure

is but the core of a universe from which other stories are extricable (that of the relationship between Teria's parents, that of Teria's aunt and her failed German marriage, that of the relationship between the Europeanized 'recruiter' and everyday Filipino life and culture), the film's defining feature-length take is just one story to tell here with respect to film style, in that a varied corpus of film (hi)stories inhabits Zuasola's single shot, appearing to be the acknowledged patrimony of a film artistry that is everything but monomaniacal.

Since the early theorizations of a 'film art' by the thinkers and practitioners of French film Impressionism in the early 1920s, film criticism and historiography have always tended to define the narrative and stylistic ambitions of national cinemas outside the United States in virtue of their opposing the paradigm of continuity cutting, psychological plausibility and gradual dramatic unfolding, as they were conceived in Hollywood in the late 1910s and would become the standard mode of transnational cinematic narration with the introduction of sound around 1930. Then, whether by taking the cue from the editorial experiments of the Soviet film-makers of the 1920s, or by the loose, digressive narratives typical of Italian neo-realism and European 'art cinema' from the mid 1940s through to the 1960s, a pivotal notion of 1960s film academia was to couch non-American film-making within an effort to create aesthetic and narrative paradigms that were alternative to those pursued by and applied in Hollywood. This is true of the ways in which film analysts approached the study of the 'new waves' that had come out of Europe and Japan in the years following World War II, for instance, but most ostensibly of the ways in which emerging national cinemas in developing countries were tackled, especially with the proliferation of local film manifestoes (in places like Brazil, Argentina and Cuba) that called for the development of indigenous 'Third Cinemas' alternative to both Europe's pretence of 'art' and Hollywood's concessions to 'commerce'.

Leaving aside the arguably no longer practicable dichotomy between 'art' and 'commerce', but acknowledging the fact that, at least in the United States and Europe, the critical approach to the films that periodically emerge from developing countries has not changed significantly since the heydays of film culture in the 1960s, it is worth reflecting on whether *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria* can still be studied by measuring the extent to which it is committed to resist a mode of narration asso-



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ciable with the tradition of classical Hollywood narrative. It is also inevitable and important to determine whether such commitment is in any way enunciated in the film, particularly through the 'politics' of the single shot, whose radicality may at first glance suggest the underlining presence of a statement, indeed of a manifesto of sorts. Yet, the function of Zuasola's feature-length shot is arguably not of the enunciative kind. Zuasola's camerawork is at odds with many modernist usages of the extremely long take, in which the presence of the camera is heavily felt, to the detriment of seamless narration and in favour of an ulterior, non-diegetic motive: whether it is the pure display of technical wizardry (as seen in numerous films by Martin Scorsese and Brian De Palma, to stay within the realm of American 'commercial' film-making) or a more political statement on the timelessness and stagnancy of the historical moment (as in the interminable sequence shots of Hungarian directors Míklós Jancsó and Béla Tarr, or in the celebrated feature-length shot comprising the whole of Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002)). On the contrary, there is a notable effortlessness and seamlessness to Zuasola's uncut film, one in which the cinematic apparatus becomes effaced, almost brought back to its ancestral role of mere recording device, despite the ostensible elegance of the camera movements. By way of this strategy of effacement, whereby the absence of cutting is not such that the narrative potentials of the uncut cinematic image are highlighted, but such that the entire idea of technique as relevant critical discourse takes the back seat, the only dramatis personae are the characters and their tribulations. In sum, despite its apparent, almost deceiving going for the 'wow' factor, this is not a film enamoured with its own technique and technical achievements, nor, consequently, a film that begs to be studied in virtue of such technique. This is, on the contrary, a remarkably humanistic work, one that is about animate beings (the characters), not inanimate objects (the camera). In fact, two traditions of cinematic storytelling, both arguably notable for their humanistic ambitions, must be invoked for a complete appreciation of *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria*: the 'invisible' aesthetics by way

of which classical Hollywood narratives achieve complete spectatorial empathy, and the myth of a merely observational style pursued by Italian neo-realism.

The story of the journey of a character (quite literally here, almost to the extent that one could couch Zuasola's film within the category of the road movie), *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria* is, in the most classical sense, character driven, predicated upon the notion that a character's desire moves the narrative along. The archetypal narrative paradigm would require for such desire to be the formation of the couple, which the spectator also roots for, identifying with what the character wants and fights to achieve. Despite a strategy of reversal whereby neither character nor spectator want this couple to be formed, Zuasola's film abides to this archetype, for it entrusts the creation of pathos with the most canonical narrative question: 'Will they marry in the end?' This archetypal nature of the narrative works to facilitate the empathy of the spectator, whose feeling of anxiety worsens as Teria approaches the harbour. That is, progressively, we come to assign to the harbour a very negative connotation, for we know that this is the site where the film will end, sanctifying at once Teria's separation from her native land and our own separation from Teria, whose predicaments we have been sharing. In fact, and again in a manner that is arguably in line with Hollywood's paradigmatic ambition to heavily manipulate spectatorial empathy and anxiety, Zuasola relies on our fear to lose Teria by teasing us into experiencing this loss, in small doses that nonetheless serve to anticipate the pain of the devastating separation at the film's end. Zuasola achieves this by having Teria periodically disappear from the profilmic. She literally sometimes loses those who follow along her path (and with them, she loses the camera, and us too, by interaction). In these instances, spectatorial reaction is twofold: concerned, because we dread parting from Teria, but also hopeful, because it may mean that she has somehow managed to run off, thus avoiding to be acted upon by a prearranged script.

These constant disappearances from view of the main character are crucial. On the mere level

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of dramaturgy, they are, as we have said, embedded in a structure typical of classical narrative, whereby the event of the climax (in this case, Teria's definitive disappearance beyond the horizon, as she finally sets sail), has to be repeatedly foreshadowed and suggested throughout the arch of the narrative. At the same time, Teria's frequent excursions into the off-screen space are evidentiary of the other tradition in which the cinema of Zuasola appears to sink its roots: Italian neo-realism, and its tendency to have the private tribulations of a character go in and out of focus, so as to alternatively bring to the fore predicaments that are not just private, but collective. From Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (1948) to Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), it is typical of the neo-realist camera to stalk the characters as they roam the cityscape, their experience becoming paradigmatic of a collectively experienced condition. In Zuasola's film, the stalking nature of the camerawork appears similarly predicated upon an effort to pit character against the particulars of a spatio-temporal conjuncture. Unlike, say, the aesthetic strategies of the Dardenne brothers, who constantly place the camera above the shoulder of a character, thereby constructing a purely 'private' vision of the world (in a way that, yet again, seems much obliged to the conventions of classical Hollywood narrative, despite the Belgian brothers' being practically synonymous with a certain tradition of European 'art cinema' realism), Zuasola's camera shares with Italian neo-realism the tendency to remain at a distance, so as to never part character from environment, private from public, subjective from collective desires. In *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria*, technique never drives the narrative, never suffocates the dramatic exigencies of an empathetic tale of private and collective tribulations. In fact, despite their impact (especially the resolution to tell the story in one continuous shot), both technique and dramaturgy feel so unobtrusive to become almost entomological, dispassionate tools to observe and reveal the relationship between a specific sociocultural terrain and its troubled inhabitants.

Contributor's details

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