

THE FAILURE OF THE ROMANTIC EXPERIENCE IN *DISTANCES*

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INTRODUCTION

Distances (Les distàncies, Elena Trapé, 2018) is a drama that invites us to share the experience of a romantic disappointment, a breakdown foreshadowed from the very beginning of the film that will also affect the friendships of its young protagonists, whose conflicts worsen as the story unfolds, betraying the frailty of the ties that once bound them. The title of the film refers to both the geographical distance that separates the protagonists (from Barcelona to Berlin) and the emotional distances that become apparent within the group, ultimately fracturing the relationships between its members.¹

The film begins with a prologue in which Olivia (Alexandra Jiménez), Eloi (Bruno Sevilla), Guille (Isak Ferriz) and his girlfriend Anna (María Ribera) arrive in Berlin at the home of Álex Comas (Miki Esparbé). This is followed by three segments introduced by intertitles signalling each of the

three days on which the story takes place: “Friday”, showing the first night the friends spend together and Comas’s departure; “Saturday”, when Olivia waits at home for Comas to return while Eloi, Guille, and Anna spend the day wandering the streets of Berlin; and “Sunday”, when Comas returns to the now empty house and listens to the messages left on his voicemail service.

The trip to Berlin is of decisive importance for the film’s protagonists: they have travelled north, but they are lacking direction, disoriented, without a compass. None of their expectations are met, and as their fantasies unravel, they must confront the pain of loneliness, an incurable solitude that reflects the basic condition of existence. Trapé’s film depicts a “series of disappointments, of truths that are successively negated” (Miller, 2002: 181), of masks that are stripped off one after another to reveal the harshest side of reality. Berlin is the perfect backdrop for the drama, as it is depicted as a strange, cold and hostile place apparently undis-

posed to satisfy desire. In fact, there is not a single love scene in the whole film, either between Olivia and Comas, or between Anna and her boyfriend, Guille, who had embarked on the adventure with the intention of asking his girlfriend to marry him. The fantasy of this trip to Germany, which meant something different to each character, seems to come to an end as quickly as the weekend on which the story takes place, revealing that the relationships between the characters are paper thin and that they are deeply unhappy in their lives.

SCRIPT AND STORY

Distances bears some striking similarities in terms of form and content with Elena Trapé's first film, *Blog* (2010). A direct line can be traced between the two films, running from the exaltation of friendship associated with adolescence to the deterioration of relationships with the entry into adult life, as found in other recent films directed by women, such as *Coward Love* (*Los amores cobardes*, Carmen Blanco, 2017), *A Thief's Daughter* (*La hija de un ladrón*, Belén Funes, 2019), and *Schoolgirls* (*Las niñas*, Pilar Palomero, 2020).

In formal terms, all these films stand out in particular for their slow-paced editing and the use of a handheld camera, a composition that conveys an impression of spontaneity and low-contrast lighting designed to reinforce the sense of realism, together with the sound, although on closer analysis a meticulous compositional organisation and internal editing betray their apparent naturalism. In *Distances*, the aim for verisimilitude, which reflects its adherence to the classical mode of representation (Burch, 1987),² takes on the appearance of a realism reminiscent of Italian post-war filmmakers (Rosellini, De Sica, Zamponi, Germi, Lattuada, Bolognini, Olmi, etc.), filtered through the influence of the early work of Lars Von Trier, with bleak, drab settings that serve to explore the harsher side of life.

In terms of content, the films named above are notable for the dramatic tone of their stories, the presence of female protagonists, and their interest in highlighting the bleaker aspects of day-to-day existence: disillusionment with society, relationship breakdowns, communication problems and feelings of failure, along with the absence of consistent parental figures, broken families and the exploitation of loneliness. It could be argued that these films portray the effects of a society subjected to a de-constructive process that contrasts with the tone of classical Hollywood films starring assertive leading women like Barbara Stanwyck, Katherine Hepburn, Bette Davis, Maureen O'Hara, Joan Crawford, or Lana Turner.³

Elena Trapé's script progresses chronologically in accordance with the well-known three-act structure of set-up, confrontation, and resolution. In temporal terms it thus conforms to a traditional narrative model, ordered according to a conventional pattern, beginning on Friday and ending on Sunday. The narrative time advances quickly, although some scenes are drawn out to create an effect of anxiety or unease, implicitly evoking the films of Antonioni, who, although aesthetically very different from Trapé, was also interested in exploring impossible loves, emptiness, silence, and

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alienation in a world that is falling apart. The motif of the note that Olivia finds in Comas's house, containing the message of a promise, evokes the letter that Lidia (Jeanne Moreau) reads aloud in the final sequence of *The Night* (La Notte, 1961), sealing the conclusion to a story that exposes the shallowness of its male protagonist.

The action in *Distances* develops in the usual settings of everyday life: stations, buses, streets, bars, and a messy house that conveys no sense of homely warmth, as it is nothing more than a stop, a dark and lonely hovel. The dim lighting used throughout the film contributes purposefully to underscore this feeling of sadness and disillusionment that slowly reveals an atmosphere seemingly conceived to defuse desire. The director has chosen to forgo the sensuality of stimulating colours, minimising the expressive potential of an image that is not designed to satisfy the gaze. Indeed, although the film has been shot in colour it is dominated by gloomy settings, with dull grey tones with no brightness or intensity to underscore the emotional tone of the drama.

This article proposes a psychoanalytic reading⁴ with the objective of interrogating the feeling—in the sense of that which is *felt*—of the aesthetic experience offered by the film text. The praxis of psychoanalysis, as a method of film analysis, involves an interpretation of the text based on detailed description (Freud, 1987d: 1883; Lacan, 2014: 265) and the examination of the relationships between its different elements. What is important for this type of analysis is not the content of the different parts that make up the text, but—as Lacan suggests in relation to Hamlet—the “comparison”, the “correlation” of the different parts of the “structure viewed as an articulated whole” (Lacan, 2014: 268). It thus involves reviewing the whole text,

deciphering it, trying to approach the conflicts and fantasies coming from the “other scene” (Barthes, 1990: 350; Freud, 1987a: 377; 1987c: 2173), which are written and configured in the text's signifying material, and which revolve around what Freud called a “pathogenic core” (1987a: 158) and Lacan referred to as “the real”: that kind of “bud around which thought weaves stories” (2006: 121).

THE ARRIVAL

The film begins with a shot of Olivia dragging her suitcase along with difficulty, a suitcase with which she literally “can't go on,” while she asks the question: “Is this the stop? No?” The first line spoken in the film proves to be revealing, as it is a question alluding to the goal of a journey that the characters are already taking. The words are combined with her movements to signify a journey that acquires the symbolic value of travel and of a possible transformation: it is about not missing the bus, not missing the meaning of the journey or the moment of surprise.

When she boards the bus, Anna asks the driver to wait until everybody gets there, because they are travelling with a “pregnant woman” (Figure 1). Clearly, Olivia must have a good reason for leaving the father, Gari, in Barcelona, and taking a plane to Berlin when she is seven months pregnant: she wants to see Comas, the great love of her

Figure 1. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)





Figure 2. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

youth, and the man she still loves. While on the bus, the characters discover that their old friend, Álex Comas, is featured on a poster that seems to be everywhere on the streets of Berlin. They all laugh, and when they get off the bus, they take a group selfie with the poster in the background. Now they are all together: together and happy (Figure 2).

The poster shows Comas beside the advertising slogan “My future is secure” (“*Meine Zukunft ist sicher!*”) while he runs smiling towards that supposedly assured future. This is the one image we are given of Comas from the beginning of the film up until the character himself appears: an image directly associated with an advertising model, emblematic of the imaginary object of desire in the capitalist world. However, when Comas finally does appear, we discover a sad, defeated, depressed character, nothing like the happy figure in the advertisement (Figure 3). The disorder in his house, with clothing strewn across the floor, unwashed dishes, the cardboard box, etc., reflect the disorder within.

The reunion of the group begins to falter from the moment that Comas comes into the picture, as this character is shown at all times to be reserved, and clearly displeased with the unexpected visit of his old friends (Figure 4). Shortly after they enter his home, Comas asks them how long they plan to stay, making his desire to see them disappear all too obvious. And later, when they tell him excitedly that their present for him is not the birthday

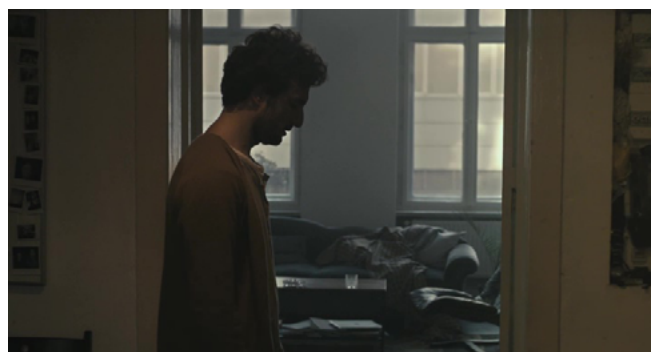
card they have just given him but their presence, Comas replies, half joking and half serious: “Can I return it?”

Comas’s mysterious attitude towards his friends, an attitude that seems to hide a *secret* that will never be revealed (although a few clues invite us to speculate about his aloof manner, his silence and opaqueness), raises a question that could be placed in parallel with the unsettling attitude of Olivia, who has embarked on an *outrageous* journey, given the advanced state of her pregnancy (as various characters point out), with obvious dramatic implications.

THE BREAKDOWN

From the beginning of the segment titled “Friday”, Olivia goes to great lengths to try to sleep with Comas, because, as she puts it, she prefers “a hard mattress”. The hard mattress could be viewed as a metonymic reference to another type of hardness, given the context of the remark and her explicit expression of her desire to share the bed. While not

Figures 3 and 4. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)



daring to tell her no, Comas nevertheless appears aloof, and makes no effort to conceal his alarm at Olivia's pregnant belly (in fact, Olivia herself "can hardly believe" her own pregnant condition).

Olivia's boldness—the trip was her idea, as she dragged the others to Berlin to celebrate her former lover's birthday and share his bed with him—is placed in direct relation to both her "madness" and a questioning of the role and place of the father (Figure 5).

Comas: *Hey, Olivia... this whole thing... Whose idea was it?*

Olivia: *What do you think?*

Comas: *I think you're mad. That's what I think. I can't understand why Gari let you come.*

Olivia: *Well, because Gari doesn't have to give me permission for anything.*

What can bring the father—who is not necessarily the sperm carrier—onto the scene, what can enable him to act as the father, is the mother's desire for him. Thus, as much as Comas may try to accord a place to Gari, Olivia rejects his efforts ("Gari doesn't have to give me permission for anything"), as it is not the biological father of her unborn child that she desires, but Comas. In other words, it is not the real father she wants, but the imaginary father she has placed at the centre of her fantasy, and whose real presence, incidentally, leaves much to be desired.

Olivia: *I really wanted to see you.*

After casting Gari aside, Olivia makes Comas a demand for love that reverberates on the bed

where the two of them are sitting. He looks at her with a serious expression, and at that moment Eloi passes by the bedroom door and burps loudly (Figure 6). The first—and last—time Olivia and Comas are alone together, which looked like turning into a romantic encounter, now falls apart at once and Comas takes advantage of the moment to escape from the room, and shortly thereafter, from the house as well. It is no accident that Trapé chose the sound of a burp, a scatological sound, to mark distances and undermine the romantic moment. Indeed, as will be explored below, disgust will play a decisive role in several dialogues, while oral activity will feature in certain implied actions—implicating both Eloi and Comas—that will underscore the association of the mouth and the tongue with sexual pleasure.

The scene ends with Olivia alone, hugging Comas's pillow and smelling it, while imagining that she is hugging and smelling Comas himself (Figure 7). Smells—synaesthesia—mark distances of meaning and position in the context of the sequence.

Olivia's desire as a woman, as depicted in this scene, is the trigger for the drama. The story places very particular emphasis on *the distance* between *the woman* and *the mother*, between Olivia as a woman (characterised by her desire, by what she lacks) and Olivia as a mother (defined by what she has),⁵ while at the same time underscoring the dual absence of the *man* and the *father*, as Comas, the desired man, does not desire Olivia, or if he does, he cannot be at her side, or maintain

Figures 5 and 6. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)



his presence as either a *man* or a *father*.

The dialectic between having and not having, which is reflected and refracted in the dialectic between desire and power, also comes into play in the conversation between the friends on the first and last night they spend together. The events that unfold on the Friday night effectively group the characters according to two different logics. In one group are Olivia and Guille, in a clearly dominant position: both are supposedly strong, both are arrogant, both brag about their (always phallic) achievements, both have success, work, money, etc., and both raise their voice to shout down their opponents. In the other group are Comas, the mystery man who promptly disappears without saying a word, Eloi, the young man with a childlike quality referred to by Olivia as “the apple of her eye,” and Anna, Guille’s girlfriend, who effectively represents the so-called *weaker* sex because—like Eloi—she is economically dependent, a “kept” woman (Figure 8). The traditional dialectic between the independent woman and the “kept woman” will lead to a confrontation between Olivia and Guille, which will mark the beginning of the end.



Figure 7. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

Olivia: You’re talking as if you like the fact that Anna is a kept woman. [...] Anyway, and I’m sorry to say this, Guille, but your attitude gives me the impression that you’re a typical clueless person.

Guille: Okay, Olivia, tell me something. Do you have any idea how frustrating it is for her not to be able to find work [...]?

Olivia: I’m telling you, you know, because I at least live in the real world.

Olivia’s arrogance, her feigned self-sufficiency, the idea that she lives “in the real world”—triggering aversion in both Anna and Comas, who are unable even to look at her (Figure 9)—reaches its climax when she announces that she is pregnant (Figure 10) (Figure 11).

Olivia: I’m seven months’ pregnant.

Guille: You are not even slightly coherent.

Figures 8 and 9. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)





Figures 10 and 11. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

Olivia: [...] *Say it, I dare you. Say it. Say it. That nobody forced me to get pregnant. Oh! You disgust me, kid! You really disgust me.*

Guille: *You really disgust me too!*

This is not the first time that Olivia uses her pregnancy to overpower the others, exploiting, as Eloi puts it, the “pregnant belly pretext” as if it were a right she can exercise over them. The story here mobilises one of the central themes of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, related to the “appropriation” by women of “their own bodies” and of “the possibility of having or not having children in a non-authoritarian way” (Brousse, 2020: 39). However, this is not a key theme of feminism today. In the new millennium, the feminist struggle no longer revolves around women’s bodies, or the control of fertility and reproduction; instead, the focus is on the fight against the so-called *male domination* that points towards a “total separation of men and women” (Brousse, 2020: 40) and ultimately affects the very possibility of sexuality itself, as Milner (2020) suggests. This context may explain the reference the characters make in the dialogue to the “disgust” they feel, a disgust that will ultimately distance them permanently, and that resonates with disturbing force in the power struggle between the sexes that has increasingly come to characterise our society.

After this first night on “Friday”, following the clash between Olivia and Guille, the fragile bonds holding the group together will be broken. Indeed,

they will never be together as a group again. One after another they leave and split apart. A chasm also begins to open up between men and women. While Olivia and Anna remain in the house, each alone in her own space, the three men head for the bar, where they are also alone and isolated. Comas goes outside for a smoke, and then simply disappears without a trace. He is erased, leaving the scene, fleeing from the social connection and exiting the stage. But what is he running away from? (Figure 12)

TWO WOMEN AND ONE DRESS

After a lingering shot of Comas anxiously fleeing the scene, we cut directly to the third segment of the film, “Saturday”, which begins with an image of Olivia waking up alone in his room. She looks

Figure 12. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)



at the other side of the bed and caresses the sheet and the pillow (Figure 13).

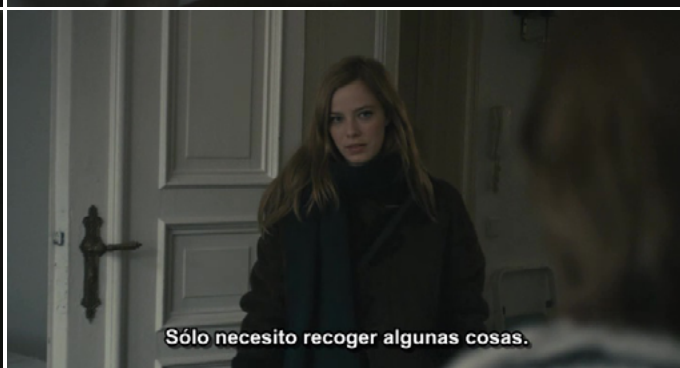
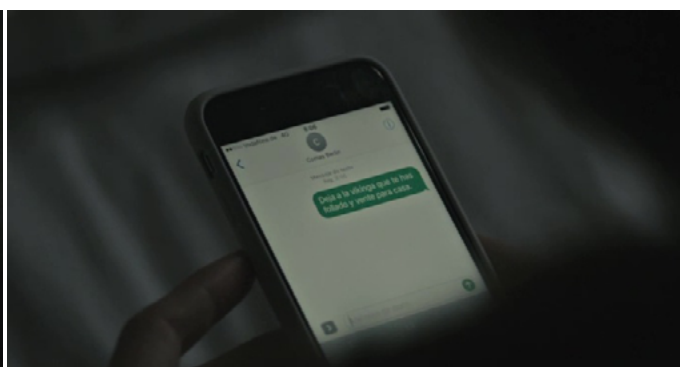
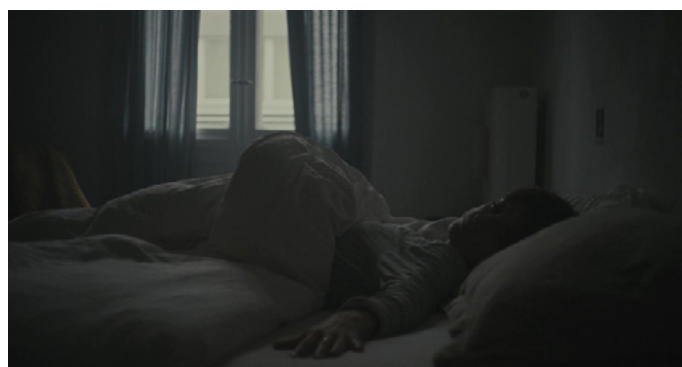
Comas's departure resonates in this empty space on the bed. For Olivia, the empty space is an enigma related to the desire of the man she loves: why is he not at home? What does he want? She will respond to this mystery by constructing a fantasy. The daydream that invades this scene, triggered by Eloi's remark that "he left with some chick," is contained in the text message Olivia sends to Comas: "Leave the Viking girl you've been fucking and come home" (Figure 14). In other words, leave the Other Woman and come home to me, because I am your woman.

In light of Comas's mysterious absence, Olivia decides to stay in the house, while Guille, Anna, and Eloi head out onto the streets of Berlin to do some sightseeing. From this moment on, throughout the "Saturday" segment, we will be watching what is happening in and outside the house through parallel editing. Olivia's position is associated with the home and with waiting, as she be-

gins making a birthday cake for Comas while she anxiously awaits his return. However, it won't be Comas who comes through the door, but Marion, his former partner (Figure 15) (Figure 16). Marion's presence may already have been hinted at in the film, not just at the beginning with the moving box and Comas's despondent mood, but also in Olivia's fantasy of the "Viking girl" that she identifies from the outset as the Other Woman, a younger, more beautiful, and, of course, thinner woman who has become the object of Comas's desire.

The two women begin bustling around the kitchen in synch with one another, thereby outlining the imaginary mirrored meaning of a relationship that transcends the level of their movements through space: the two women are allies (as both are affected by Comas's departure) and rivals. Thus, both deploy their weapons as they try to take control of the kitchen space, in a conquest operation that will quickly be redirected to the territory of the bedroom: Who has more

Figures 13, 14, 15 and 16. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)





Figures 17 and 18. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

experience in Comas's bed, and more specifically, with the *hardness* of the mattress? (Figure 17)

Marion: *The bed is comfortable. The mattress is hard. I'm Marion, by the way.*

Olivia: *Olivia.*

Having introduced themselves, the women begin exploring, each observing the drama of the other, until at one point Olivia asks whether Comas has ever talked about them (or more specifically, about her), to which Marion replies that she thought they “weren't so close” (Figure 18).

Marion: *He's mentioned his university friends, but I thought you weren't so close anymore.*

Olivia: *No, no, no, no, no, no.*

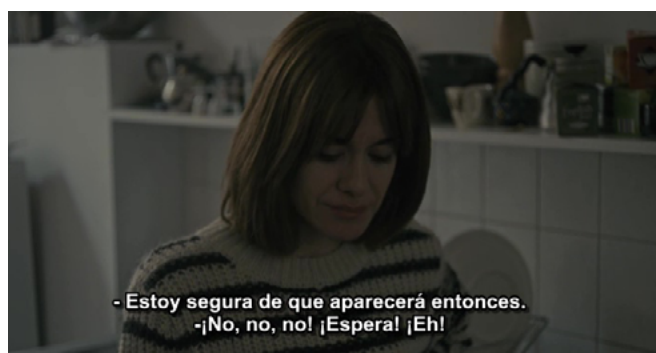
What becomes clear in this duel between the two women, which takes place exactly at the film's half-way point, is that if there is anything that characterises Olivia, it is her reluctance to know—or her desire not to know—anything about Comas. She thus refuses to accept that they

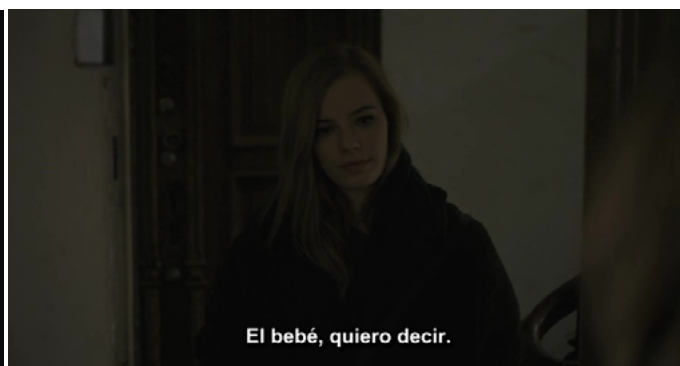
are no longer “so close” (“May Berlin and Barcelona never be far apart” she writes in Comas's birthday card), that they are no longer twenty years old, that the days when they used to listen to the 90s indie band Los Fresones Rebeldes and make typically youthful promises (“Olivia and Comas promise that if they're still single at 35 they will give each other another chance”) are long gone. But if there is anything that she really desires not to know, it is that if Comas isn't there, it isn't because something has happened to him, or because he doesn't want to see Marion, but because he wants to get away from her, to keep his *distance*.

Marion, who has a clearer understanding of her situation—she knows that she doesn't want “to be with someone who doesn't know what to do with his life”—and isn't intimidated by her competitor's attacks, upsets Olivia's fragile stability when she tells her—rubbing salt into the wound—that she is sure that as soon as Olivia leaves, Comas “will turn up” (Figure 19). The *mise-en-scène* underscores an opposition between presences and absences expressed through the on-camera/off-camera relationship, which will affect the development of the resolution: to be there or not to be there, to stay or to go.

Olivia reacts desperately and once again refusing to accept the truth, she constructs a brilliant fantasy, telling Marion between sobs that her “baby” is Comas's (Figure 20) (Figure 21).

Figure 19. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)





Figures 20 and 21. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

Olivia: No, no, no! Wait! Hey! You see... It's Alex's. The baby, I mean. It happened when he was in Barcelona in August.

Marion: That's not true!

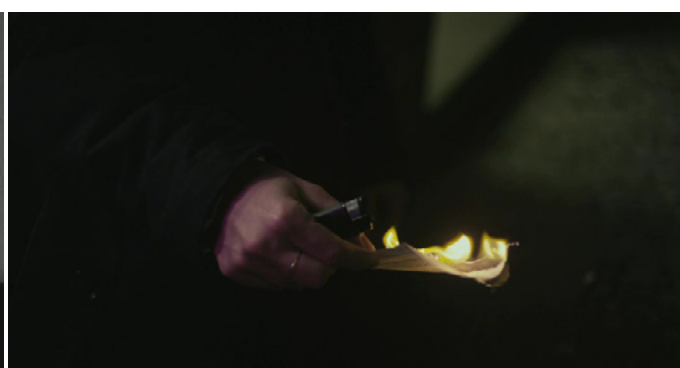
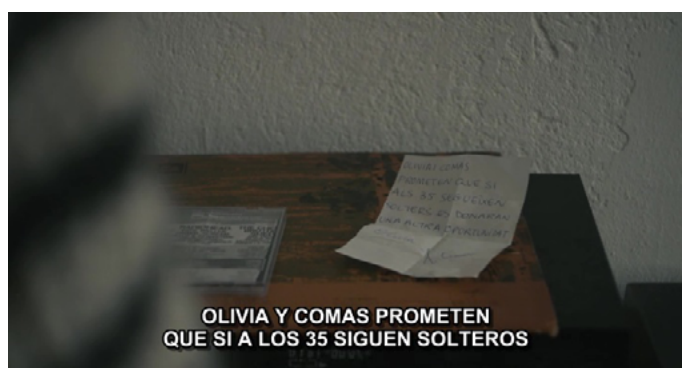
This is in fact a fantasy implicit from the beginning of the film, which is finally expressed in this sequence; the fantasy that compelled her to embark on this long journey. It is a fantasy that can be summed up as follows: from Olivia's point of view, the *baby* she is expecting is the only thing that could make her worthy of being desired by Comas, something other than herself, the object—the living thing—that she can offer him. She has not been so bold as to embark on a long trip out of the simple desire to see him and celebrate his birthday, *despite* being pregnant; she has embarked on the journey precisely *because* she is pregnant. The desire expressed in her fantasy attempts to solve the mystery of Comas's desire, and

that solution is the baby she is expecting. For the very real foetus in her womb Olivia invents an imaginary father, modelled on the man she loved years ago, in a time that no longer exists. This is in fact the very essence of fantasy, which uses “an occasion in the present to construct, on the pattern of the past, a picture of the future” (Freud, 1987b: 720; 1987c: 1345).

Importantly, moreover, this response is coupled with the demand for a commitment that would complete her fantasy, but that will end up being fuel for fire: a real fire that destroys the written word, due to the absence of a flame of desire (Figures 22 and 23).

In the fantasy scenario represented by Olivia, in the imagined sexual encounter between Comas and her in Barcelona, constructed for and aimed at Marion, there is of course something more: the hope of vanquishing the Other

Figures 22 and 23. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)





Figures 24, 25, 26 and 27. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

Woman, the Viking girl, by snatching away the man they both desire and turning him into an unsuspecting father. The fantasy thus conceals the horror of the void of the father, the denial of the father, simultaneously producing what it attempts to hide.

Olivia, who appeared to be so self-assured, who made a show of “living in the real world”, loses the plot, and even loses her mind, as once Marion has left the scene, she goes directly to the moving box, takes out a dress and puts it on (Figure 24).

The combination of the previous scene with the decisive moment in this scene results in the typical female fantasy of being the Other Woman, in this case Marion, in the sexual encounter with Álex Comas in Barcelona. It is thus a dual displacement as a means of regulating desire. Of course, Olivia will never be Marion and will never have Álex Comas’s child. The desire therefore remains unquenched.

The scene that reveals Olivia’s desire to be the Other Woman reaches its climax when she tries

to take the dress off but cannot (Figure 25). This seems to underscore the point that it is as ridiculous to think that she could fit into the dress of the Other Woman as it is to make a birthday cake for someone with no desire to eat it (Figure 26). The cake also reveals the motherly side of the woman that Olivia represents: feeding her children and her husband,⁶ even though love, of course, cannot be bought with food. We might also expect that Olivia will end up eating the whole birthday cake by herself. What could be sadder and more disappointing than sitting alone eating the cake you made for your beloved? More than the cake, she will have to swallow her own dissatisfaction.

In the end, Olivia’s journey will take an unexpected turn, as after leaving the house and burning the promise of love she had made with Comas all those years ago, she cuts Marion’s dress up with a pair of scissors (Figure 27), an act that involves *dis-covering* her swollen belly, and thus perhaps finally “believing” in her own pregnancy, marking a change or point of no return in her journey.

SEXUAL PRETENSIONS

While Olivia is wrangling with the phantasmatic idea of the Other Woman—an idea at the very heart of her sexual fantasy—we are also taken out to the streets of Berlin, where Eloi, Guille, and Anna reveal a similar focus on the sexual, in this case by bringing into play the prevalence of the phallus as a metaphorical signifier: first, with the tiny banana wielded by a laughing Anna (Figure 28); then, with the frankfurter that Eloi and Anna want to eat to “play the tourist a bit”; and finally, with an app—Tinder—that positions the problem of the phallus as its central focus.

Guille, jealous of the mutual understanding between Anna and Eloi (the weak ones, the kept partners), brings up the subject of Tinder to poke fun at his friend, suggesting that it is an app for “desperate” people, for people who aren’t normal, who “are a bit oversexed or have a little one.” Eloi tries to defend himself by saying that he hasn’t slept with anyone since he broke up with his girlfriend, a revelation that Guille then seizes on to attack him and question his manhood, stating bluntly that he doesn’t know how to make love⁷ (Figure 29).

Guille: Man, it would do you good to get some practice in, because if you’d had a few good shags with Marta maybe she wouldn’t have left you.

Failure on the sexual level clearly occupies a prominent place in the story. And its importance increasingly revolves around the phallogocentric dialectic of having or not having. Eloi is a have-not: he has no house, no girlfriend, and no sex. He is a symbol of precarity. In contrast, Guille considers himself a “normal person” because he, in keeping with social expectations, does have things: a house, a girlfriend, and sex. But at this very moment the situation takes an unexpected turn when Guille, who makes a show of the fact



Figures 28, 29 and 30. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

that he knows how to fuck, that he “knows how to have a good shag”, shifts from having (a girlfriend and sex) to not having (Figure 30).

The trio breaks up. Guille and Anna walk on without a word and, as we will later learn, Guille asks Anna to marry him (in an omitted scene) despite the fact that it is clear that they no longer love each other: “You don’t love me anymore,” he admits, “and I don’t love you either.” As is made clear in the confrontation between Olivia and Guille in the last scene of the “Saturday” segment (which replays the confrontation they had on “Friday” night), Olivia’s decision to drag her friends to Germany (like a pack



Figures 31 and 32. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

of “lap dogs”) to win back Comas is no less outrageous than Guille’s use of this “trip with friends” to propose to a woman he no longer loves (Figure 31).

Olivia: What have you come for, Guille? To ask your girlfriend to marry you. For that you could have worked out your own plan instead of using a trip with friends.

Guille: Come on, Oli [...]. Each of us has come here for our own reasons, haven't we? You've spent the whole day shut up in here, making a fucking cake!

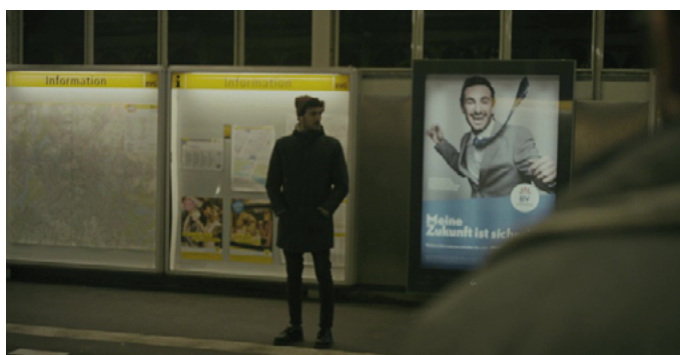
It would thus seem that both Olivia and Guille are trying to use their supposed friends as shields to protect themselves from the danger of the inevitably hazardous encounter with the other sex, revealing that behind their façades of strength and self-assurance, both are in reality cowardly and afraid. They have been unable to deal with the circumstances, to confront reality without using their friends as a crutch, or to take responsibility for their own desire. They have not had the courage to face matters of love on their own,

and so they have used a group of friends that is falling apart to cushion their encounter with failure—because under such circumstances failure is of course inevitable.

While it becomes obvious that both Guille’s and Olivia’s plans have failed, Eloi, who has ended up alone, happens to catch sight of Comas coming out a door, and he trails him like a bloodhound through the streets of Berlin until Comas enters the Kino Babylon, a famous independent film theatre located in Kreuzberg (Figure 32).

The name of the cinema might allude to the myth of the Tower of Babylon, in which God, to punish the arrogance of humankind, decides to split them up by making them speak different languages. The same confusion that lies at the heart of this myth not only hovers over Guille and Anna at this point in the film, but also informs the scene of the face-to-face encounter between Comas and Eloi at the underground, after Comas leaves the cinema (Figures 33 and 34).

Figures 33 and 34. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)



A secretive Comas, the one who fled the scene—and who appears here beside his own image in the advertising poster plastered all over the city—gives Eloi an embarrassed glance. Nothing more. Not even a word. Then, he simply disappears, and nothing more is heard from him until the final segment of the film, titled “Sunday”, when he returns to his empty home and listens to the seven messages left on his mobile phone: the voices of a machine that he doesn’t want to talk to.

In response to Comas’s radical silence and radical absence, Eloi, like Olivia, will construct a fantasy which, again like Olivia, will end up making him look ridiculous and placing him in a situation of confinement: while Olivia was trapped in Marión’s dress, Eloi is detained at a police station.

Olivia: *Don’t you know how ridiculous I feel sitting right now in your kitchen, wondering where you are and who the fuck you are?*

The question that Olivia asks herself at this point in the film about Comas’s identity (“who the fuck you are”) (Figure 35) will be answered by Eloi, with the graffiti he scrawls on nine of the ubiquitous advertising posters: a penis pointing at Comas’s mouth, and the words “*Ich bin ein Schwan-zlutscher*” (“I am a cocksucker”) along with his phone number inside a comic strip-style speech balloon (Figure 36).

The image seems to suggest that Comas’s mysterious disappearance is not due merely to his desire to escape his former university friends, but also to the fact that he may be earning a living by providing indecent services, like a kind of midnight cowboy, perhaps in an effort to hide a professional failure that even his move to Germany has not been able to free him from.⁸ This point is important, because Comas’s status as a “cocksucker” was already established early in the film, when Guille takes out his phone to show Comas an image very similar to the one drawn by Eloi, and tells him “it’s already been done” (Figure 37). Statement is confused with enunciation to highlight the ambiguity of a sentence that could refer equally to graffiti or to fellatio:

Guille: *Look, tomorrow we can take another photo, but under this poster.*

Comas: *It’s come out really nice.*

Guille: *No, no, no; it’s already been done.*

Comas: *Well, in a way it’s really flattering, you know? Coming from an expert in cocks, I mean.*

As is made clear in this scene, the three men, Guille, Comas, and Eloi, all participate in different ways in the fantasy of *being a cocksucker*: Comas, when looking at the picture on Guille’s phone, tells him it’s “flattering” coming from an “expert in cocks.” What makes Guille an “expert” is the fact that he slept with “a chick” who in fact turned out to be “a guy who was totally hot.” And then, after making it clear that the guy he slept with was not a

Figures 35, 36 and 37. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)



“transsexual woman” (or at least, “not yet”), Guille then tells Eloi: “And don’t you laugh so much; it’s been so long since you’ve had sex with anyone that you’d love to get it on with her,” to which Eloi replies, laughing: “Bloody hell! You’re right!” (Figure 38)



Figure 38. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

For Eloi, Comas’s entry into the Kino Babylon could thus be understood as confirming a *dark secret* that they already suspected—a secret hinted at from the beginning of the film with the image of the famous kiss between Erich Honecker and Leonid Brezhnev (Figure 39)—and that cannot be spoken of in the underground or anywhere else.

Eloi’s act of vandalism, both infantile and moralising, not only betrays a *repressed* truth, but also suggests an unmasking of Comas to publicly humiliate him, to turn him not into an object of desire but into an object of disdain, although this act appears to have no effect, except perhaps on Olivia, who when she sees the poster remarks simply that it is a “joke” (Figure 40).

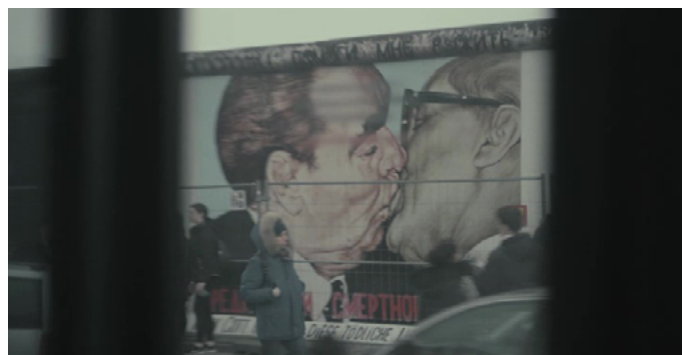
The vandalised poster of Comas is thus presented as a kind of still frame, a static image that displays and reproduces the crux of the problem afflicting the men in the film. The image exposes the ridiculous nature of the phallus, which is revealed in classical comedy as a secret signifier of desire (Lacan, 2014: 332; 1999: 270; 1992: 373), marking a contrast with the smiling image of the ad, which is repeated like a hollow refrain in conventional advertising campaigns. What is at stake

is the very presence of the phallus, a misplaced phallus which, because of its misplacement, cannot be enjoyed by Olivia, despite the fact she had it within her reach.

In essence, what the character of Comas does is open up a void, a hole in the very heart of the story, which each character will try to fill with his or her own fantasy: Eloi and Guille by triggering a homosexual fantasy that links Comas’s absence to his status as a male prostitute, a *cocksucker*; and Olivia by creating a fantasy around the love triangle that she has constructed, whereby Comas’s absence is due to the presence of the Other Woman.

Whatever its cause may be, the void opened up by Comas operates as a revolving platform that will trigger different imaginary productions related to what could be described as the so-called *pleasure of the Other*, a pleasure placed outside the frame, about which nothing can be known, which serves only to underscore the yawning chasm that separates the film’s characters.

Figures 39 and 40. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)



CONCLUSIONS

The analysis presented in this article has confirmed that the text of *Distances* speaks for itself, and that simply deciphering its content can uncover unexpected elements, the mechanisms of a desire that is constantly seeking expression through omissions, verbal displacements, juxtapositions of shots, or the movements of its characters through the space. It has also helped to shed light on the intimate relationship between the narrative development of the story and the dimensions of a series of unconscious fantasies that are triggered over the course of the film, ultimately unravelling in the final moments, like the advertising slogan that tried to convince us of the existence of an assured future, free of anxiety and uncertainty. Nothing could be further from that illusion than the reality the film offers us: a reality where nothing goes as expected and everything ends up falling apart.

A future study might explore the factors that lead certain filmmakers to devote so much energy to representing situations of failure and powerlessness, building on the sense of malaise that has marked a decisive proportion of contemporary art, rejecting even the possibility of establishing loving relationships with others. Indeed, Trapé's film seems to be conceived for the purpose of opening an immense chasm, an insurmountable distance between men and women, where each individual ends up speaking their own language, highlighting the "fragmentation of social ties" that has come to characterise so-called capitalist discourse (Soler, 2007: 136), rendering it impossible to maintain strong relationships of friendship and love. In short, this is a film that exposes both the breakdown of the symbolic order evoked throughout the story—reflected most powerfully in the collapse of the father role—and the deterioration of romance and of the experience of sex in general.

NOTES

- 1 A song by the 80s band Décima Víctima titled "*Detrás de la mirada*" ["Behind the Gaze"] (Grabaciones Accidentales, 1982) offers a perfect summary of the kinds of situations that arise between former friends as represented in this film: "Once as naive as their friendship, time has turned them into enemies. / Words are hard when they see each other again, lying, pretending not to understand. / In the same goal a single interest, claws prepared like fangs. / They look for weakness in the other, stalking, pretending not to understand."
- 2 To demonstrate its adherence to the formal (if not symbolic) structure of the classical narrative model, Trapé's film could be compared to *Week-end* (Godard, 1967), which also takes place on a weekend but displays the full repertoire of the aesthetics of deconstruction, with spatio-temporal distortions, direct appeals to the spectator, breaking of the fourth wall, exposure of the device, etc. Godard's film is completely unrelated to the film of the same name directed by Pedro Lazaga three years earlier, also titled *Weekend* (Fin de semana, 1964).
- 3 Numerous examples of such films could be cited, from *Stage Door* (Gregory La Cava, 1937) to *Love Has Many Faces* (Alexander Singer, 1965), and including *Lady Scarface* (Frank Woodruff, 1941), *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), and *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945).
- 4 Within the field of film theory, authors such as Metz (2001, 2002), Burch (1987) and Aumont (1992), as well as González Requena (1996, 2006) and Martín Arias (1997) in Spain, have treated psychoanalytic theory as the "*Via Regia*", as Freud would say, for exploring the emotional experience triggered by a film. Although he would criticise some of the approaches taken in different studies, warning that they are open to "serious objections", Rudolf Arnheim acknowledged as early as 1952 that "the only specific theory of artistic motivation presented with consistency and vigor is the psychoanalytic one" (1966: 21).

- 5 On the divergence between the *mother* and the *woman*, Soler notes: "Both certainly refer to phallic lack, but in different ways. Her being as mother resolves this lack by having, in the form of the child, a substitute for the phallic object that is missing in her. [...] [H] owever, the mother's being as woman is not entirely resolved in this substitute for having the phallus. Precisely inasmuch as her desire diverges toward man, it is rather to being or receiving the phallus that a woman aspires: to being it, by the love that phallicizes her; to receiving it, by means of the organ from which she gets off. The price of both aspirations is that of not having the phallus. Feminine poverty indeed!" (2006: 128).
- 6 In relation to Olivia's motherly attitude, it is worth noting that the film ends with a message from Comas's mother, praising Olivia for going to visit him for his birthday.
- 7 The trouble arises, as Lacan would suggest, when the "pegs" don't fit into the "holes" (1995: 166).
- 8 The fact that he has to resort to these kinds of services in the heart of Germany, Europe's economic powerhouse, like a failed immigrant, is open to other interpretations of a more political and economic nature: the idea of moving to Germany to suck it dry.

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THE FAILURE OF THE ROMANTIC EXPERIENCE IN DISTANCES

Abstract

This article presents a textual analysis of the film *Distances* (Les distàncies, Elena Trapé 2018), a dramatic story that revolves around lack and loss, the passage of time, false hopes, and everything that breaks the human heart, dividing it and tearing it apart. Trapé's film brings together a group of old university friends in Berlin to depict both the fragmentation of the social ties that once bound them and the failure of the romantic experience, a failure that may serve as evidence of the deterioration of the "matters of love" that characterises the contemporary era.

Key words

Distances; Spanish Cinema; Fantasy; Love; Sexuality.

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EL FRACASO DE LA EXPERIENCIA AMOROSA EN LAS DISTANCIAS

Resumen

En el presente artículo proponemos un análisis textual de *Las distancias* (Elena Trapé, 2018): un relato melodramático que, como tal, pivota en torno a la falta y la pérdida, el paso del tiempo, las falsas ilusiones, todo lo que parte el corazón, que lo divide y fractura. La película de Trapé reúne a un grupo de viejos amigos de la universidad en Berlín para poner en escena tanto la fragmentación de los lazos sociales que les unían como el fracaso de la experiencia amorosa; un fracaso que podría servir para evidenciar el declive de las 'cosas del amor' característico de nuestra contemporaneidad.

Palabras clave

Las distancias; Cine español; Fantasía; Amor; Sexualidad.

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