

Cinema

Love, Luck and Destiny Play Double in New Ripstein Film

Juan Rulfo's story *El gallo de oro* (*The Golden Cock*) was written into a film script by Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez and Roberto Gavaldón, who finally made the movie in 1964. The script was an effort to remain faithful to the spirit of Rulfo's original and its main themes, namely chance, gambling, love and fortune, and the story of the two main characters caught up in them. The narration follows Dionisio Pinzón, a character caught up in a perfectly circular structure in which he sets out from zero or nothing and eventually ends up back in the same place. When Gavaldón translated the script into time and space on film, he produced a correct, clean-cut movie mid-way between classicism and academicism, and did not delve further into the themes indicated in the script.

In 1985-1986 Arturo Ripstein shot a new version of Rulfo's story called *El imperio de la fortuna* (*Fortune's Dominion*), this time based on a script by Paz Alicia García Diego. She picks up on the recurring themes of Rulfo's story —chance, gambling, love, fortune and destiny— all linked around the central topic of duality. Thus, the passing of time exists only as an extension and unfolding of the same theme.

There is a world of difference between the two versions. For one thing, there's a basic and seemingly external aspect: the time when the story takes place. *El gallo de oro* happens in an undefined time, in a rather vaguely mythical time and space whose only reference to reality was to a series of folksy Mexican

stereotypes. The story in *El imperio de la fortuna*, on the other hand, has a precise time and place between the 1950s and the 1970s.

The time situation is very important in Ripstein's film because everything, or nearly everything, depends on it. His film is set in a time and place when the urban world and values are devouring the rural world, a time when the undefined petit-bourgeois culture of diminished suburbia (architecture and colors, for example) are overtaking the culture of a fading pastoral rural society. Thus, unlike *El gallo de oro*, Ripstein's film has no room for handsome *charros* (Mexican cowboys in flashy silver-studded dress), fancy folkloric costumes, professional singers with a great voice, *mariachis* (singing *charros*, etc. *El Gallo* is really a *charro* film with faithfully stereotypical *charro* whereas *El imperio de la fortuna* is "the first *charro* film without *charros*," as Ripstein himself put it.

"I have chosen to show a more immediate Mexico, one that better fills my eyes," says the director. "I care about how the rural areas have been urbanized, how the city has directly influenced the countryside. The action in the film takes place over a span of 18 years between the 50s and the 70s, and is a saga about the rise and fall of a man and his family. The past is Arca-

dia for the poor, whereas for the rich the future is paradise. I show a combination of both, and how the characters voluntarily go against that destiny," wrote Ripstein in the presentation to his movie for the 19th International Film Festival held in Mexico City during November and December, 1986.

In Ripstein's counterfeit rural world we find a series of characters whose relations are determined by chance and fortune, disguised as the destiny they try to go against. Dionisio Pinzón, a poor hawker in a miserable town, is hired as a cockfight caller. By the end of the match he is given a dying cock that would otherwise be put to death by its owners. This animal will eventually change his new owner's fortune, though just at a time when Pinzón loses his mother and cannot even bury her because he's so poor.

Pinzón travels through fairgrounds making money at cock-fights. He meets and is fascinated by la Caponera, a singer who moves around like he does, and whom he comes to regard as a good luck charm. She is the mistress of Lorenzo Benavides, a professional cock-fighter and gambler. When Dionisio loses his own rooster he goes to work for Benavides, and learns the secrets of card-dealing from him under the watchful eye of La Caponera. Dionisio then launches

on his own life as a gambler, and runs into La Caponera who languishes in the golden cage of her life with Benavides and longs for the noise and color of the fairgrounds. The two gamble until Dionisio finally wins Benavides' house from him. From then on La Caponera, his good-luck charm, will remain imprisoned in her golden cage as the wheel of fortune continues to turn and deal its blows.

Because of the story's structure, time had a circular movement in *El gallo de oro*. Time is apparently linear in *El imperio de la fortuna*, but it is broken down into fragments. The movie starts out as a typical story of gambling and of the relationship between a gambler and fortune and destiny. Yet this is merely a starting point, as from there Ripstein ironically makes the seemingly linear story branch off. The very form of the episodes makes the characters move in circles, and this only emphasizes the passing of time as a series of repetitions of the same incidents or themes.

From this point of view, it seems the characters really boil down to two, Dionisio and La Caponera. All other characters are merely doubles of some sort. Benavides is Dionisio's double, and in a fair switch, Dionisio stands in for Benavides when he disappears. La Pinzona, Caponera and Dionisio's daughter, is a double of her mother's but also, as her name indicates, stands in for her father, Dionisio Pinzón.

Dionisio himself builds the different stages of his life by constantly repeating or unfolding himself. Initially, he is a character circumscribed by a poor and limited space, a man in a slumber. His first unfolding will come about through his mother's death and the resurrection of the rooster. Film-critic Mario Alberto Quesada put this very well: "Dionisio Pinzón, in waking from his slumber, will spare no effort to keep the fighter-cock alive, for it involves the resurrection and birth of his own virility, of his own power as a man. He is nourished like a vampire by his mother's death, and he will become a mutilated macho travelling through the cock-fight arenas, an apparently new world which is really only an extension of the filthy hut he lived in with his mother." Furthermore, this vampire syndrome will be repeated with Caponera and Benavides, as in a certain way Dionisio nourishes himself from them, destroys

them so that he may go on living.

Thus, each one of the film's seven episodes corresponds to a cycle. Each episode is really an unfolding of the one before it, they take one another's place as if in a relay race. Bernarda Pinzon's story is a good example of this. La Caponera dies because of her loss of freedom and the denial of her womanhood, but steady in the line of duty as Dionisio's good-luck charm. When Dionisio loses his power at cards (the loss of his amulet stands in for his loss of virility), he commits suicide practically over La Caponera's dead body. Then Bernarda Pinzon takes up the baton and begins traveling through fairgrounds, repeating her parents' itinerary. Surely the new cycles to come will be further unfoldings of those before them.

This is the best of Arturo Ripstein's latest films. In *El Imperio de la fortuna* he renovates achievements previously attained in *El castillo de la pureza* (*The Castle of Purity*), *El lugar sin límites* (*The Place Without Limits*) and *Cadena perpetua* (*Life Imprisonment*), although this film is enriched by humane vibrations that seemed somewhat absent from his other works.

Ripstein's film is visually faithful to its initial pretense of showing the urbanization of rural life, the appearance of suburbia (Mexico City's periphery) in the countryside in the form of colors, spaces and physical concepts as well as in the changing values of rural inhabitants. From the moment the characters shut themselves up in the museum-school house, the castle of purity, and La Caponera takes over for Dionisio, the movie changes in visual terms and space and colors become unreal, emphasized by Angel Goded's excellent photography. The tone is set by La Caponera's frustrated dream.

There's a scene that visually sums up one of the film's main themes, when the fighter-cock struggles against his own image in a mirror, his double, a reflection. This is what the characters do throughout the film; it is Dionisio Pinzón's path from miserable hut to unlikely castle, what La Caponera does with her dreams of freedom and what Bernarda Pinzón will surely do with her own heavy baton.★

Tomás Pérez Turrent



Photo by Imcine

A scene from *El imperio de la fortuna*