The Other Francisco: 
Film Lessons on Novel Reading

Francine Masiello

Since its inception in 1959, the Cuban Film Institute ICAIC (Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos) has promoted a highly experimental and innovative art, consonant with the objectives of socialist revolution. The demystification of history and the critical training of viewers guide the production of documentary and feature films in Cuba. Concomitant with the goals of political re-education comes a lesson in literary competence designed to teach the public to evaluate the ideological world which art inhabits. The Other Francisco, a 1975 film directed by Sergio Giral, addresses both objectives when it deals with the problem of slavery in nineteenth century Cuba and analyzes the literary fiction which tells that history. It adapts to screen the novel Francisco and, at the same time, draws upon extensive historical research to discuss the perspective and style of its author, Anselmo Suárez y Romero. The prose source describes the life of Francisco the slave; underlying that story is «another» Francisco, a different existence which the novelist neglected to portray. The film’s title suggests an alternative history in order to reconstruct the original text. An expert camera shuffles between printed discourse and a celluloid revision of that statement so that The Other Francisco becomes an exercise in seeing and reading which tests the limits of narrative reliability. Segments of The Other Francisco critically decode the bourgeois novel which inspired it while diverse cinematic sequences comment on and correct one another. The film’s self-conscious exegetic experiments and its recuperation of historical realities produce a highly sophisticated drama, unique in cinematic form.

For this literary lesson, director Giral (who also wrote the screenplay) appropriately studies what was considered the first anti-slavery novel in Cuba. Completed in 1839 and presented in the literary salon of Domingo del Monte, Francisco: el ingenio o las delicias del campo gained immediate recognition — and reprobation — as a defiant attack on human bondage. Cuban landowners of the time vehemently protested the author’s accusations; government officials censored the novel's
distribution; abolitionists—both Cuban and foreign—praised its message and considered it as a model for future anti-slavery literature. Inspired by the author’s experience on the Surinam estate in Guine, Francisco was planned as an ethical denunciation of the abuses of slaves on Cuban sugar plantations. In reality, Suárez y Romero elaborates an individualized drama of frustrated love such that the broader historical concerns of human oppression recede into the shadows of textual discourse.

Francisco begins in medias res and describes the flagellations endured by the hero at the hands of his vindictive overseer. A flashback explains the motives which inspired these cruelties, turning to the story of Francisco and Dorotea, favored domestic servants of the capricious Señora Mendizábal. Denied the privilege of marriage, the two slaves nurture their affections in secret: until Dorotea’s pregnancy betrays their clandestine love and incurs the wrath of their mistress. Ricardo, the traitor son of the landowner, envies the idealized romance between slaves and conspires to punish Francisco mercilessly. Francisco is dismissed from his household duties and sent to work in the cane fields where he shares the hardships of other slaves. The master forces Dorotea to yield to his lustful demands in order to spare her life’s love. When Francisco discovers this final humiliation, he kills himself by hanging.

The novel’s expressed abolitionist motivation confuses the trappings of an idealist, bourgeois perspective which endorses the socio-political status quo. Suárez y Romero ignores class context and the economic determinants of slavery to focus instead on the interplay of individual passions. Narrative tension hinges on one’s anticipation of a happy ending: romance, intervention, separation, and the generalized repression of slaves should find resolution in the traditional promise of marriage. Ricardo, however, for lust and envy, violates the tenets of Christian charity and impedes the romance between slaves. The landlord is vilified for his emotional and psychological aberrations, seen as the product of a doting and permissive mother. Jealousy, then, works as the driving force behind all events in the novel.

The virtuous black heroes, whose passive nature is beyond reproach, only seek the fulfillment of romantic desires. Francisco and Dorotea, defined by their insolation from others of their class, conform to the archetypal literary patterns of the noble savage. Dorotea is beautiful because she is mulatta, almost white in appearance and behavior. Francisco, articulate, handsome, and rational, is likened to the classic white hero. For punishment, they are forced to join the ranks of anonymous barrac slaves, over whom the heroes show a marked superiority. Other blacks move through the text like silenci silhouettes, serving as folkloric relief. Suárez y Romero focuses on the picturesque features of their existence: dance, music, and the occasional reproduction of Mina Ashanti dialogue in Spanish characterize African culture in the New World. Neither flight from or resistance to oppression is within the scheme of possible considerations for the slaves. This literary isolation of exotic types coincides with the romantic tradition of the period while it also satisfies the curiosity of a white reading public.

The Other Francisco assembles these basic critical observations, teaching us how to see (read) and interpret the contradictions in the text. Director Giral reconstructs the prose fiction on celluloid, emphasizing the different grammars which distinguish visual from print cultures. The Other Francisco unfolds on five interpretive levels which atomize, reshape, and expand the simple novel plot while an extradiegetic narrator guides our progression through the film (novel) and constantly works to correct what is considered a fraudulent narrative discourse. A single unit of the written text generates a plurality of visual spaces in order to afford multiple seeing (reading) possibilities. With each new interpolation, the film exposes the intrahistory and ideology which governs the nineteenth century fiction. Flashbacks, temporal disentangling, and projections into the future lead to a dialectical understanding of class struggle, a theme ignored in the Suárez y Romero novel. Extra- and extradiegetic narrative levels overlap to amplify the monologic, self-contained prose and to focus on the ideology of literary production.

The film opens with a faithful adaptation of the printed discourse and focuses on the lachrymose encounter of Francisco and Dorotea in a secluded thicket of the Mendizábal estate. As in the original text, a disheartened Dorotea confesses her submission to Ricardo and bids a final farewell to Francisco. The couple’s remorse and despair are complemented by stylized technical effects to create a romantic melodrama. Leo Brower, one of ICAIC’s most talented musicians, arranges a Chopin-like score to accompany the lovers’ lament. Low-angle heroic shots of Francisco and Dorotea framed against the sky move in on full-face portraits to lend epic dimensions to the protagonists. These shots alternate with aerial views that peer down on the slaves, closing in on their sinking despair and sorrow. Naturalistic photography and soft-focus low-key lighting further emphasize the romantic quality of the scene. Music overpowers dialogue, nature overwhelms human presence, pointing to the heroes’ subjugation to forces beyond their control. The first segment ends with Francisco’s suicide, thus closing a highly contrived melodrama which almost defies viewer credibility. This five minute screen episode becomes the source for all future cinematic discourse.

An abrupt cut takes us from the narrative of Francisco and Dorotea to the literary salon of Domingo del Monte where Suárez y Romero completes a reading of his yet unpublished novel. Referential illusion created in the first scene is disturbed by a mise en abyme technique which brings to our attention the film’s fictional antecedent: suddenly, we discover that we have been watching the re-presentation of a novel. This visual trick, recalling to some degree the meta-lingual prose games of contemporary novelists, plays with our faith in narrative reliability.

From the silence of the country, we pass to the animated chatter of the nineteenth century salon. A lavish drawing room, opulent in its decor and clearly indicative of the creole upper class, stands in stark opposition...
to the previous scene of campesial simplicity. The past forces its way to the surface to provide the historical background of Suárez y Romero's novel. An off-screen narrative voice, our guide throughout the film, explores the author's political motives for writing the text and volunteers an analysis of the aspirations and objectives of bourgeois nineteenth century writers. Director Girál thus makes us co-participants in this literary-cinematic study so that we may view with critical distrust all future replays of the opening dramatic sequence, now recognized as a borrowed fictitious form.

The narrator intrudes to inquire about the novelist and his text: «Is this the real view of the slave Francisco?» he asks. What follows is a response to that question. All action stops to study a portrait of Francisco, fashionably garbed in valet's habit, posed in stillness on the screen. The frozen image of noble simplicity, drawn with dramatic lighting and sharply cast shadows, recalls the romantic portraits of nineteenth century genre artists.

This frame locks us into the elegant world of colonial sugar lords for whom blacks were objects to be contemplated with detachment. The viewer, forced to adopt the perspective of slave-owners of Suárez's day, observes with similar dispassion the portrait of Francisco while the film's technical credits are passed on the screen. This marks the film's formal beginning and initiates a re-writing of the two prefatory episodes which will now be elaborated according to the perspectives of different characters with varying class interests.

From the stiffened pose of Francisco, the camera moves to the slave as field hand as he endures his master's arduous discipline. Ricardo describes to his consorts the need to inflict severe punishment on Francisco for his ungrateful and rebellious nature. What one hears, however, is at variance with what one sees on the screen. Francisco appears meek and docile, barely able to stand erect for the thrashings he receives. Overexposure emphasizes the blinding white Caribbean sun which plantation slaves must tolerate and contrasts to the pleasant setting of earlier episodes. Inscribed in the frame of focus is the diminished importance of workers who are posted alongside large, inanimate objects—the towering cane plants, modern industrial machinery, and harsh unprotective nature. Slaves toil in significant silence, accompanied only by a recurring worker chant, «take hands, we're all brothers.» This deliberate asynchronism between speech and labor emphasizes the domination of laborers and their inability to respond to their condition. Only the black foreman speaks, wielding power over other slaves and threatening them with lashings. The narrative takes us up to Francisco's suicide, thus meeting the conclusion of the first filmed episode.

Once again, viewers are dislodged from the comfortable observation of uninterrupted, linear narrative in order to scrutinize what is presented. A new narrator—teacher mediating between filmic discourse and its fictional and historical sources in order to question the nature of romance between slaves. The still frame which prefaced the last episode reappears on screen. Quickly, this frozen image of Francisco comes to life, a tableau vivant begins to move and act. In this new episode, the most lengthy section of the film, the camera moves back in narrative time to study a literary antecedent not previously described. The voice-over narrator reads from Suárez y Romero's novel while the camera simultaneously observes the incipient love between slaves as they work in the mansion of their mistress. This intrusive commentator peels off another layer from the multi-stratified story to question whether romance can be the principal pursuit of an oppressed people. In this way, the plot is recreated to discuss the abuses inflicted on female slaves and their children. Dialogue presented in previous scenes is reproduced in a new context to create a viewer sensation of déjà vu. Those interactions are now expanded to accommodate additional narrative perspectives.

The film explores the growing conflict between Francisco and Ricardo—who both pursue the affections of the mulatta. While Francisco's passions are inspired by genuine, candid devotion, Ricardo is motivated by lustful possession. To question the forces behind these vindictive desires, the camera cuts abruptly from the plantation scene to the landlord's parlor where Ricardo discusses the heavy financial burden of slavery.

This story within a story studies the contradictions facing nineteenth century Cuban slaveowners who embarked upon a nascent capitalist adventure without a profound understanding of their historical project. Ricardo and his contemporaries admit that slavery has outlived its usefulness and hint that a free labor system might offer greater efficiency. These debates are complemented by the presence of the local clergyman who endorses the systems of slavery (lest freedom provoke revolution) while urging blacks to show Christian tolerance in the face of exploitation. Ironically, the priest blesses the machine powered mill which will be the source of future oppression for his black congregation. In this interjected lesson, Girál teaches that private lives of whites and blacks are totally controlled by the dominant mode of production not by jealous or irrational desires, as the Suárez y Romero novel would have us believe. Instead, a growing sense of impotence before an economically unprofitable system leads Ricardo, in a somewhat mechanistic manner, to ventilate his anger on the servant slaves. This cinematic sequence comes full circle to comment on an earlier part of the episode, to clarify not only the nature of Ricardo's hostility but also to explore further the repression of slaves in general.

From the broader problem of slavery, the camera moves in discontinuous succession back to the desperation of individuals. Francisco's suicide is reenacted on film, accompanied by the comments of a skeptical narrator who doubts that a typical slave would resort to suicide in order to resolve a frustrated love.

To answer such questions, the camera returns to the literary salon of Suárez y Romero where the author discusses his class background. When asked how Francisco can be tame and passive, Suárez confesses
that his hero is an exception among slaves who helps to take a critical stance against slavery. Although the novel's favorable reception may suggest a charitable inclination of Suárez and other slave-owners, the narrator intervenes to remind us of a logic of financial experience which shaped the literary production of the time. We learn at this point in the film that British commissioner Richard Madden, dispatched to Cuba in 1836, sought to advance an abolitionist campaign to satisfy English mercantilist interests, endangered by the competition of slave-trade economies. Calling for an end to slave labor, Madden tried to introduce British machinery on the Cuban plantations, thus changing the prevalent mode of production. As part of his reformist mission, Madden recruited Cuban literary talent of the day to prepare a series of essays and fictions denouncing the abuse of slave lords. In response to Madden's request, Suárez prepared the novel Francisco. Disobedient, unproductive slaves, enraged over their condition, hastened the growth of the abolitionist movement in Cuba. The film turns to focus on rebel slaves, headed by the field hand Crispín. For the first time in the film, slaves begin to talk and discuss their oppression and stage plans for future revenge. This film episode counters the novel's picturesque descriptions of tragic and inert workers overcome by despair. «The same machete that cuts cane, will now cut heads» the film's heroes declare. Growing slave unrest coupled with severe economic losses give rise to a reformist movement among whites. In that way, the film explains the historical background which informs Suárez's novel while, at the same time, it draws a parallel between the author's bourgeois consciousness and that of Ricardo. The attitudes of Ricardo and Suárez converge: author and character are one in their ideological formation.

From the writers' drawing room, we turn to the story of Francisco. Now the «other Francisco» emerges, forging a third and final story. The humble, passive slave here becomes resistant and proud, conscious of his historic mission. The romantic aspects of the novel yield to a dialectical interaction among slaves who join in struggle. Romantic music is abandoned for Afro-Cuban congas. The camera alternates rapidly between the incipient plantation revolt and the elegant parlor where landlords discuss their increasing financial losses. From oppressor to oppressed, from Ricardo to Francisco and back again, the camera moves with intensity to portray the surging violence. The film gains dramatic momentum as it focuses on armed rebellion, the sabotage of plantation works and the burning of crops. Death comes to Francisco, this time: in the midst of battle. Previous scenes are repeated, and expanded so that private drama becomes part of a collective struggle against repression.

The revolt of Francisco and comrades is explained as one in a series of uprisings, preluding the efforts of Maceo, Agramonte, Martí, Gómez and finally the July 26th movement. Because Francisco's struggle is an integral part of the revolutionary process in Cuba, narrative closure is impossible.

The Other Francisco bombards the integrity of narrative discourse to recast Suárez y Romero's work within the infinite cosmos of social change. It is an important and compelling film not only because it calls to question the nature of oppression, racism, and struggle, but also because of a technical complexity rarely seen in cinema. The film teaches a Marxist analysis of literature, dissembling the novel plot to expose its ideological content. In this way, the novel is examined as a text produced by someone — and for someone — in a historical time and place. In an interview cited by Tricontinental Film Center, Giral explains the inspiration for his method:

If we had stuck to a simple movie version of the novel, we would have missed a chance to show all the behind-the-scenes socio-political shenanigans going on at the time. To a certain extent, these goings-on reflect the political dilemma faced by the vast majority of Cuban slave owners and ideologies — either pro-slavery or against — in their search for a solution to the economic problems brought about by the crisis of the slave system.

For this political demystification, Giral plays with a plurality of semantic film networks. He prises open and expands the univocal denotation of the prose fiction in order to uncover a multiplicity of signifieds. In this way, Giral challenges the bourgeois symbols co-present in the film's initial sequence to elicit another narrative mode. In The Other Francisco, the disparity between fictional and screen instances is constantly emphasized so that parallel stories, of Francisco and of his author, punctuated by subjective and non-diegetic inserts, organize the film's discursive structure. Each new episode transforms the literary source while transgressing the narrative film code which preceded it. Reality is defined like a game of Chinese boxes, each correcting and expanding its antecedents. The compression and distension of temporal sequences found in the narrative syntax work toward a demystification of writing and filming.

The film's autonomy is used to comment on the drawbacks of the print system while, at the same time, revealing the scaffolds on which cinema is contrived. In this way, a new code of critical consciousness is created for the viewer. The continued intervention of the narrator makes us question the nature of the spectacle observed. Characters die and come to life to reenact an alternative existence. Scenes are duplicated, intervened, and rewritten, emphasizing the reversible grammatical logic of film. Giral unravels coherent filmic spaces to recast the whole within an ideological framework.

The Other Francisco is not a mere adaptation of novel into film but a thorough ideological interpretation. In that sense, it defines the constraints of the bourgeois novel which tames reality and conforms the text to the needs of the dominant class. The film negates that text of a static, descriptive realism and offers, instead, a public and private view of events. Through clever montage which interweaves motifs and scenes, the
narrative action is detained and reexamined, giving a visual lesson in reading while inviting the audience to participate in the formulation of decisive questions about the textual moment observed. It offers a call to action, activating the viewer with the constant movement of an open form. The film challenges closure and, much like the revolutionary process itself consolidates a model for dialectical thought and action. *The Other Francisco* is governed by an irreversible process which culminates in revolutionary victory and so, as one long chain of events, the 1839 text spirals toward the present moment.

**NOTES**

1 Alfredo Guevara, director of the Film Institute, explained ICAI's efforts to educate the Cuban public about the nature of artistic production: «We must not separate ourselves from the rest of the people, from all the tasks of the Revolution, especially those that fall into the ideological field... Our work is not simply making or showing movies, everything we do is part of a global process toward developing the possibilities of participation—not passive but active, not as recipients but as protagonists—of the public.» Cited from *Memories of Underdevelopment*, ed. Michael Myerson (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973), pp. 19-20. Through the implementation of cine móviles, or mobile projections, ICAI has set itself the task of reaching and educating audiences throughout the island.

2 *Francisco: El ingenio a las delicias del campo*, ed. Mario Cabrera Saqui (La Habana: Dirección de Cultura, 1947). Suárez y Romero (1818-1878) prepared Francisco in response to the request of Domingo Del Monte, influential and celebrated literary critic of the era who encouraged a liberal, reformist literature among young Cuban writers such as José González del Valle, Cirilo Villaverde, José Benacourt, Ramón del Palma, and José Echeverría. At Del Monte's suggestion, the novel's ironic subtitle was added. Because of its abolitionist stance, Francisco circulated only in manuscript form until it was finally published in 1880 in New York, by Néstor Ponce de León. On the activities of Del Monte's literary salon, see Salvador Bueno, «Ideas literarias de Domingo Del Monte», in *Temas y personajes de la literatura cubana* (La Habana: Ediciones Unión, 1966), pp. 9-28.

3 *Francisco*, which was frequently compared to Uncle Tom's Cabin, received the praise of Suárez's contemporaries and later served as a model for imitation. The Cuban writer Mario Antonio Zambrana, for example, imitated Suárez's text in *El negro Francisco* (Chile, 1875). On the novel's influence in anti-slavery fiction, see G. R. Coulthard, *Race and Colour in Caribbean Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).


5 In the film, the cleric tells a slave rebellion similar to the one in Saint Domingue in 1791 after which slaveowners of that island sought refuge in Cuba (Rout, p. 288). Moreno Fraginals discusses the close relationship (dating from 1602) between sugar barons and the Church (pp. 46-55). «Reformism with slavery» became the formula adopted by Cuban Church officials who endorsed the slave-dominated sugar economy.

6 In a letter addressed to Domingo Del Monte, Suárez describes his hero: «En efecto, yo trataba de pintar un negro esclavo ¿y quién se halla gimiendo bajo el terrible y enojoso yugo de la servidumbre pueda ser tan manso, tan apacible, tan de anécdotas y santas costumbres como él? —Francisco es un leoncillo, una excepción muy singular, no el hombre sujeto a las tristes consecuencias de la esclavitud, no el libro bueno donde los blancos, viendo sus errores puedan aprender a ser humanos. Verdad es que yo procure pintar a los mayordomos, mayordomos, etc., como son; pero he demostrado que si los negros son malos, es porque lo son los amos» (Cited from the Academia de la Historia de Cuba, *Centenar epistolario de Domingo Del Monte*, 1839-1840 [La Habana, 1930], IV, 44 in *Francisco*, prologue by Cabrera Saqui, p. 33). This discourse is reproduced in identical form in the film when Suárez addresses his literary colleague.

7 Madden formed part of an arbitration commission formed in 1817 which sought to enforce the legal suppression of slave traffic in the Spanish colonies. Upon his return to England, Madden published two books based on data compiled in Cuba: Poems by a Slave in the Island of Cuba, recently liberated (London: Thomas Ward, 1840) and *The Island of Cuba: its resources, progress and prospects* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849). In the prologue of *The Island of Cuba*, Madden admits that the British colonies are unable to meet the competition of the slave dominated economies and declares the need to put an end to slave traffic: «The present state of those islands makes the subject of the slave trade and slavery, in the Spanish colonies, and Brazil, one of deep interest for us, and one that must very soon engage the attention of statesmen in this country. If the present state of things in our colonies should endure for two years longer, without any effective efforts to ameliorate their condition, the cultivation of sugar must be totally abandoned in the» (p. vii).

8 Madden requested that Del Monte gather abolitionist documents to assist in the preparation of his texts. Madden prepared his two volumes based on the following materials: a document prepared by Del Monte on the relations between Church and the slave economy in Cuba; an autobiography with poems and letters by the slave-poet Juan Francisco Manzano; the *Elegícas cubanas de Matamoros*; a poem by José Zacarias González del Valle which treats the question of slavery; and Suárez y Romero's novel, *Francisco*.

9 Statistic cited in the film concerning the economic losses incurred by slavery correspond exactly to the data provided by Madden in *The Island of Cuba* (pp. 156-161). What becomes readily apparent is Giral's management not only of the novel *Francisco*, specifically based on the Cabrera Saqui edition, but also Giral's consultation of the Madden documents.

10 Distributed in mimeographed translation by the Tricontinental Film Center (New York-Berkeley), which is also the distributor for the film.