

Destiny Has No Favorites (*El destino no tiene favoritos*, 2003)

O. Hugo Benavides

dir. Álvaro Velarde; prod. Alberto Cappa; screenplay Álvaro Velarde; photography Micaela Cahuaranga; music Irene Vivanco. 35mm, color, 90 mins. Álvaro Velarde Producciones, distrib. Wellspring Media.

The Peruvian film *El destino no tiene favoritos* is one of the earliest of its kind. It has left an indelible mark not only on Peruvian national cinema but also on Latin American melodramatic production as a whole. The film uses the genre's carnivalesque strategies to contest and critique the traditional conservative mores of the South American nation-state, and its tongue-in-cheek mode has the audience laugh at itself when the film's tenor and content would otherwise likely prompt a graver emotional response. By the time that one of the maids, Oliva (played by Tatiana Astengo), authoritatively retorts to Ana (played by Monica Steuer), the prickly lady of the house, that »the problem with you, *señora*, is that you have confused marriage with love,« we are completely immersed in the film's seductive melodramatic *tour de force*.

The film presents a very straightforward plot. Ana, the lady and matron of the house, wakes up one morning to the unsettling news that a renowned Peruvian telenovela production, along with their famous actors, have taken over her large backyard. She does her best to protest such an unlikely turn of events, only further complicated by the transgression of class barriers in such a scenario. Her protest consists of thinly veiled complaints of how such lower class beings—i.e., *cholos*—can invade her palatial—i.e., *buena costumbre*—home in such unfathomable fashion.

However, both she and the audience are soon to find out that her husband, just before leaving on vacation, had rented out their home as a telenovela set. It is at this point that the melodramatic structure is put into place, with two immediately concurring implications that are primed to question both the matron's sanity and our social reality. Her home is turned into a commodified space open to consumption, literally to the highest bidder, no matter his or her social (and racial) background. Second, we are supposed to wonder whether the telenovela's melodramatic goings-on in the yard are so far removed from that which occurs *inside* the home—especially the exchanges between the lady of the house, the maids, and the other servants within the confines of the bedroom and kitchen.



At its core, *El destino no tiene favoritos* is a Latin American melodrama in which the boundaries between reality and farce are blurred. At first, and very slowly, we are introduced to contesting notions of what is »real,« or actually happening, in the narrative. However, by the end, these lines are completely blurred, and it is ultimately impossible to determine what is real and what is not. The film allows for a profound questioning of the most deeply held values of Latin America's traditionally conservative middle and upper classes. It disengages love from marriage and, further, interrogates the very nature of what happiness is or might be in quite existential fashion—not to forget the role that sexual pleasure might play in the equation of personal fulfilment and social obligations.

This is exactly what the film does best: pitting social mores against individual desires, allowing the audience to freely identify with one side or the other, with both or neither, until the encounters and exchanges no longer permit such conventional distinctions as clearly as before. The film also quite successfully allows the prohibitive and transgressive nature of desire to take center stage, quietly at first, until at its apex the characters' have seemingly exhausted their roles, and their social reach, consumed by the implications of their plausible authentic self.

The separation between melodramatic fiction and supposed reality is further collapsed when Ana is mistaken for a telenovela actress, something she protests at first but then wholeheartedly embraces. We are privy to her sensual and intimate pleasure as she switches from character to character: from the one she is playing in the telenovela to the one that she performs in her own life and home. Even more striking is that this pleasure is only increasingly fueled, and to some degree sexualized, by the crossing of a racial barrier in making her indigenous maids her confidantes. It is at this point that the melodramatic trap is set for its natural denouement. Little does Ana, nor the audience watching the film, know to what degree this melodramatic farce will call into question our own senses of reality and moral center, including our sense of self-fulfillment and happiness.

This complex reality (or fantasy) is ruptured (or reinserted) when one of her maids, Oliva, is not only hired to work as an actress on the set but even given one of the telenovela's leading roles. It is this moment of democratic equality—or, perhaps more of a Bakhtinian role reversal—that allows the maid to question her ex-employer's life-choices: »the problem with you, *señora*« However, in this moment of intimacy several layers of reality are revealed—above all because Oliva is saying neither something new nor something that Ana does not already know.

The only shift in class and racial dynamics, if any, is the one afforded by the commodifying power of the telenovela set. Now the maid is superior in this game of capital and currency, and race is not only no longer an obstacle but is actually yet another asset to be commodified, open to the highest bidder, just as much as whiteness has been for centuries. It is in this role slippage that all other social mores and taxonomies—such as religion, gender, and sexuality, along with race and class—disintegrate. Because what also becomes visible is the incredible unhappiness of all those involved: the telenovela actors that continue to backstab and sleep with each other on and off set, or the cruel yet erotic relationship between the maids and Ana, neither one happy except in their expert destruction of each other. In this fashion, social categories that seemed stable before the telenovela production company's arrival are disturbed, ridiculed, and exposed as the façades that they are.

This is exactly what seems to be the main issue at hand: The telenovela production is itself a melodramatic recourse, like any other in their (and our) lives. Finally, as the telenovela company departs, they leave the house in shambles, nothing as it was in the beginning. However, by the end we are also privy to two meaningful insights. The first relates to the fact that one can seem to disregard the powerful message of the film, convincing oneself over time (as do the characters in the film) to see in the film a melodramatic release that has nothing to do with one's own life, merely providing an easy laugh.

The second assessment, on the other hand, is far from easy to accept. If taken seriously, the melodramatic farce we have just experienced is not distant from the melodramatic world of telenovelas that, as Latin Americans, we inhabit daily. In this manner, contained in the melodramatic messaging of telenovelas, we know that they are nothing to laugh about—or, worse, to scoff at (Martín-Barbero; Benavides). With this, *El destino no tiene favoritos* adds to our understanding that this is not at all about a telenovela production but about life and its contingencies, along with their almost infinite melodramatic, farcical dimensions in a postcolonial world.

What the final scene makes us privy to—as the maid leaves fulfilled in her newly acquired social role, and the matron is left bereft, hoping that her rich husband does not find out about her sexual infidelities and profound unhappiness—is that this melodramatic farce is what happens to postcolonial subjects, who are daily subjected to global capitalist realities. It is precisely these subjections that make us question the stability of the categories of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and religion that we desperately attempt to hold on to.

Ultimately, we are left with the profound reality that *destiny really has no favorites*. That nothing, no social category and no historical legacy, will protect us from life and its awe-full reality. And if there is one chance at happiness, it has to be taken at the fleeting moment when it is presented, rather than confusing money with superiority, race with civilization, and, above all, reality with stability—or, as the maid so prophetically states, »love with marriage.«

References

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