



***Moon Over Parador* :**

Caricature or Stereotype?

“Stereotyping has been employed as a literary and dramatic device since the earliest beginnings of those art forms. It is a means of quickly bringing to the audience’s collective consciousness a character’s anticipated value system and/or behavioral expectations.” Clint Wilson and Félix Gutiérrez, in their book *Minorities and Media: Diversity and the End of Mass Communication*, aptly describe stereotyping as a device and, in so doing, address its dualistic nature—that of a functioning narrative element as well as a symbol system communicating a condensed message. On the one hand, the stereotype is a function of genre, beholden to the narrative demands of a conventional storyline. On the other, the stereotype communicates information about a character’s ethnic or cultural background that is intended to stand alone, irrespective of the character’s narrative function. In the comedic film *Moon Over Parador*, director Paul Mazursky relies on both aspects of the stereotype device. Whether farcical or politically charged, his images of Latinos and Latin America

condense rather than obfuscate the ethnicity of the fictional Parador. Yet, where caricature ends and prejudice begins is a debatable, ambiguous ground trod by many audacious filmmakers, including here by Mazursky.

Just as Richard Dreyfuss—playing Jack Noah, a would-be Broadway actor cast in the unlikely role of banana-republic dictator Alphonse Simms—finds himself hired then trapped on the political stage, so too do all of the characters in *Moon Over Parador* similarly prance and preen their way into the limelight of Paradorean society and the gaze of Mazursky’s farce. Secretly impersonating the infamous late President Simms, his physical doppelgänger, Jack Noah steps into the island nation’s puppet dictator tradition, fooling the local dignitaries, the people of Parador, and even Simms’s own mistress. Yet, who is fooling whom? In this fast-paced comedy of errors, the finely drawn characterizations of Dreyfuss as Noah / President Simms, Raúl Juliá as the president’s *consigliere* Roberto Strausmann, and Sonia

Braga as the president's mistress Madonna Mendez serve to insulate the story's key players with humor, while Parador suffers from political and economic oppression outside the palace gates. These farcical scenes, therefore, are not the appropriate loci for a discussion of the negative aspects of stereotype, since farce by definition depends on exaggerated characterizations to fuel slapstick humor and keep the narrative complexities of character at bay. *Moon Over Parador* is unmistakably farce, with all the trappings of that genre. Mazursky, however, also chooses to leave the palace confines—the classic generic stage for farce—and ventures out into Parador. Here, the oppression of its people, only alluded to previously, comes into the spotlight. The question of stereotype during these “straight” scenes is an important one. Re-entering the world of realism through a dramatic rendering, how does Mazursky see his fictitious Latinos? Comparing several scenes from the movie will help to differentiate between the crucial role of caricature in farce and the equally critical need in drama for a realistic, proportioned portrayal of human suffering.

One of the highlights from *Moon Over Parador* is the moment when Noah first addresses his new subjects. As President Simms, the actor fills his coveted role with all the method and bravado he can muster. No scene better captures Mazursky's gift for farce. His cues to the film audience are as varied as they are plentiful. First, the tone of the event is set at breakfast. Noah studies videos of Simms only moments before his speech in order to deliver a believable performance. We have, of course, transcended the real as Noah assumes his role, the rules governing the moment depending on the actor's caprice. As the faux dictator steps onto the palace balcony, strains of “O Tannenbaum” drift across the public plaza below. Dropping his voice into a bass profundo, Noah lulls his audience of Parador denizens, then whips them into an excited frenzy with a finale lifted from *Man of La Mancha*. Whether or not this is political satire, it is good theater! Mazursky's Parador is more a theatrical microcosm than a Latin American parody. Thusly, Raúl Juliá's Chief Secretary, the palace staff, the ever-present pair of soldiers guarding Noah, and the plaza spectators all serve as comic elements within the farce, as foils to Noah's *presidente*—not as Latin American stereotypes per se. They respond to and help intensify the humor of Noah's charade. If, indeed, these foils bear resemblance to Latino stereotypes, they do so in the sense that Wilson and Gutiérrez articulate: without the sting of a national allusion or the presence of an oppressive (Anglo) agent (indeed, Noah, like everyone else, is at the mercy of coincidence), these characterizations assist Mazursky in effecting his largely apolitical farce packaged within a romantic comedy.

Apart from scenes that establish a light tone, Mazursky's inclusion of serious moments, such as the terrorist bombing of the peasant village or Madonna Mendez's public address, provides another arena in which to consider the notion of stereotype.

Leaving behind the insular space of the farcical palace, Noah confronts the consequences of his perilous game when he attends a public groundbreaking ceremony attacked by terrorists. Despite the poor living conditions surrounding him, his government fails to respond in a meaningful or effective way to their plight. The tone of this scene is quite different from the preceding ones. As an audience, we are cued in by the television footage, the auditory assault of guns and helicopters, and the scattering crowd at the chaotically interrupted ceremony, more than anything up to this point, to acknowledge the real life happenings in this fictional world, a world that only here resembles lived experience in a Latin American nation.

At this juncture, Mazursky as storyteller must make an important decision: Shall he maintain the farcical attitude? Will his characters remain caricatures? Or will they spring to life as real human beings confronted with issues of life or death? The palace setting, conveniently, allows for role playing. In the village scene, however, the ability to believe and identify with the suffering of Parador's citizens is necessary to achieve the filmmaker's narrative ends. Here, Mazursky succeeds. His crowd of spectators, unlike in the earlier palace-balcony scene, are filmed in medium shots and close-ups. They are given identifiable faces and screen time to respond. Spanning all ages, the peasant villagers become a formidable audience in the face of Noah's impersonation, and Mazursky is not afraid to allow the clear sense of village oppression to stand in stark contrast to, if not mock, the comedic escapades of the preceding scenes. When the terrorists attack, Noah and Mendez separate from the rest of the official entourage, seeking safety. A friend of Madonna's initially sympathizes with the fugitives but ultimately asks that they leave—her safety is in danger as well. With this short, poignant scene, Mazursky is explicit about the narrative he's telling: the villagers, despite their status and ethnicity, still have control over their own reality, their lives, and, to some extent, their future. They are characters with agency. It is the Anglo—the buffoon, the charlatan, the fool—who is turned out and forced to deal with the consequences of his ill-advised charade.

This theme of people taking control of their own lives is central to any message that *Moon Over Parador* might wish to convey. The farcical, slapstick moments are clearly tooled by the hand of humor—all characters, therefore, are pawns in the director's comedic game, regardless of status or ethnicity. The high-cholesterol Paradorean diet, for example, is offset by Noah's ridiculous request for low-fat yogurt and national aerobics. In this regard, discussion of stereotype is pointless. However, in the moments where the film departs from the genre of farce, the character representations demand more consideration. Sonia Braga's speech as Madonna Mendez, the chosen successor to President Simms, is another poignant scene. As a Latina ascending from demeaning circumstance, Mendez's professed vow to

transformative political action is heartfelt and transcends stereotype. Mazursky effectively juxtaposes frivolous caricatures with flesh-and-blood human beings. The despicable duo of Strausmann and CIA stooge Ralph (played by Jonathan Winters) is offset by the engaging, humanitarian couple played by Braga and Dreyfuss. Their Latina / “Gringo” romance lifts *Moon Over Parador* from mere farce to an enjoyable, winking take on cultural stereotypes that helps to puncture their prejudice. “Torture and hunger may demean the presidency” in Parador, but Mazursky’s comic fare feels more like kisses.

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Hispanic Images in Hollywood Cinema, RTF 365

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CRB – Nice analysis, good writing and provocative ideas. But in order to say that the film as farce does not stereotype, I think you have to look at what is being presented to laugh at. A farce makes us laugh at human foibles, whereas a comic stereotype makes us laugh derisively at the character’s difference. I think you need to demonstrate this—show that the farce operates independently of stereotyping. Good work. B