

Lessons on Seduction: Three Models of Seductresses in XXth Century Narratives¹

Graciela ESTRADA VARGAS
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México UNAM

The definition of “seduction” found in Vázquez’s *Elogio de la seducción y el libertinaje*² (1996), is drawn from a literary work, Crébillon’s *Les égarements du coeur et de l’esprit* (1736-1738), where the character of Versac reveals to his pupil Meilcour that “*seduction is a system [...] a compilation of knowledge. We may seduce reasonably [...] it is a philosophy of senses. Pleasures are sought with the brain.*”³

This “art of seduction” seems to describe the way a woman like the Marquise de Merteuil, Laclos’ heroine in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), achieves this (powerful and feminine⁴) practice in XVIIIth century French narrative.

Is there any point of convergence between this model of seductress and those presented in contemporary narratives?

To answer this question, we’ll consider Vázquez’s *Elogio de la seducción* and Claude Benoît’s essay “Demi-mondaines, cocottes et l’art de séduire. Sur le modèle de Nana de Zola.” (1998). Both works analyze seduction in literature. The first one studies XVIIIth century libertine novels, and the latter looks at XIXth century *Nana*.

Based on seduction strategies used by characters of libertine novels by Vivant Denon, Laclos and Crébillon, Lydia Vázquez identifies three moments during the seduction encounter: “*deliberation*,” “*communication*” and “*concession*.” While Claude Benoît, referring to Zola’s character Nana, points at the seductress’ traits: exhibitionism, simulation, an effect on sight and smell, the ruination (bankruptcy) of her victims, the animal metaphor (when the seductress is compared with an animal or described with an animal attribute) and the existence of a seductress model that inspires her.

Considering the features in Vázquez’s and Benoît’s texts, this paper proposes to analyze the way three potential seductresses in contemporary narrative justify, vary or deny these seduction strategies.

Kundera’s (1929) *Le livre du rire et de l’oubli* (1978), Guillermo Samperio’s (1948) short story “¡Oh! aquella mujer”⁵ (1986) and Saramago’s (1922) novel *História do Cerco de Lisboa* (1989) constitute our *corpus*. Whereas their female characters “la Mujer Mamazota”/ “*the*

¹ This article was presented at ACLA “Global language and local figures” as part of the Seminar “The art of seduction” on March 26-29 2009 at Harvard University.

² This work is based on her PhD dissertation at the Basque Country University (Spain). Vázquez’s work is an interesting approach to seduction, which we consider in order to present a different proposal from the canonic ones offered by Baudrillard or Kierkegaard and because the author focuses on literature.

³ According to Lydia Vázquez’s summary: “[...] el arte de la seducción es un sistema filosófico, complejo, de espíritu enciclopedista, de compilación de saberes. Hay que seducir razonablemente, con la mirada ardiente y el corazón frío, la seducción es la filosofía de los sentidos. Los placeres buscados con la cabeza. No puede haber fallos. [...]” (Vázquez 1996 : 63). Our translation.

⁴ Vázquez points out that seduction’s power is “esencialmente femenina”/ ‘*essentially feminine*’ (67). This point of view echoes Marguerite Yourcenar’s: “ce divertissement féminin par excellence” in *Quoi? L’éternité* (Yourcenar 1988 : 102)

⁵ Samperio’s short story isn’t translated into English.

*Mamazota*⁶ woman,” Eva and “la doutora Maria Sara,” will be considered as possible seductress models.

1. The seduction encounter

A dictionary definition states that an “encounter” is “*n.* **1.** A coming together, especially when casual or unexpected. (Webster 1998 : 416).

It’s important to notice that according to this definition an “encounter” tends to be “casual,” “unexpected,” yet Vázquez remarks that in the particular case of a seduction encounter it’s never casual, because the two persons face to face are the “seducer” and his/her “object of seduction” (the seduced or victim). In this case the seducer has already made an election, has already chosen the victim, while the latter still ignores his/her role in this kind of encounter.

2. Seduction progression

In “La guerra de los sentidos”/ “*Senses’ war*” chapter, Vázquez exposes three moments accomplished by the seducer/tress during this particular encounter: 1- “deliberation”, 2- “communication” and 3- “concession” (112-3).

2.1. Deliberation

Deliberation is when the seductress⁷, after an encounter where she fascinates the victim, feigns not to notice this effect; on the contrary, she pretends to be the one who is seduced, the one who’s sensibility has been aroused (“sensibilizado”⁸).

As “deliberation” includes premeditation, the seductress chooses her victim. And that’s what the “Mamazota” woman of Samperio’s short story does:

[...] una vez que [la Mujer Mamazota] se interesa por el hombre que podrá recibir sus primores, avanza decididamente [...] Llega ante el *predestinado* como por descuido, lo ataca serenamente [...] (Samperio 1986 26) (italic is ours)

[...] *once she [the “Mamazota” woman] is interested in the man who will receive her favors, determinedly she moves forward [...] as by mistake [she] places herself before the predestined, [and] attacks him calmly [...]* (Our translation)

The same case holds true for Eva, seductress in Kundera’s novel. She has two victims. The first one is Karel. Eva writes him a letter explaining that she wants to meet him. She describes herself in this letter as a woman who hunts men, “femme chasseur” (62), and attaches to the letter a nude photo of herself.

Eva’s second victim is Markéta, Karel’s wife. Together Karel and Eva planned a *casual* encounter—a tautology, as we have already pointed out, any encounter must be casual, but

⁶ It would be inaccurate to understand a “Mamazota” as a woman with extraordinary beauty. Samperio defines his character as a woman who seeks to be flattered with the Mexican compliment “par excellence”: “¡Adiós, mamazota!” (23). In Mexico this compliment could be used to recognize a woman’s beauty but also to remark that a woman seeks male attention by the way she dresses or moves. Samperio’s heroine “Sería infeliz si [...] no escuchara la voz que le da sentido a su cuerpo y a su manera de vestir.” (23) / “*would be unhappy if [...] she didn’t hear the voice which gives some meaning to her body and the way she dresses*”.

⁷ Vázquez’s model is based on female and male characters, but for this study we’ll focus on the former.

⁸ We propose to translate “sensibilizar” by making somebody aware of something. Someone “sensibilizado” is someone who is aware of something, as proposed in the *Oxford Study Dictionary*

we seek to accent the premeditated nature, the falseness concerning seduction—between Eva and Markéta.

Karel and Eva's plan is to force Markéta to choose Eva as their partner for a *ménage à trois* as Karel thinks that the orgy experience would be better if both of the women implicated were friends instead of rivals.

Finally their plan works. In Kundera's seductress model "deliberation" is clearly present and confirmed as the narrator uses the word "plan": "Le plan avait réussi [...]" (73)/ "*The plan was successful*".

On the other hand, for the seductress model of Saramago's *História...*, there's no deliberation. Maria Sara simply acts rather than plans. There is quite a contrast between her behavior and that of Raimundo Silva, the main character, who plans but never carries out his objective. Silva wants an "occasional" encounter with Maria Sara. It's raining, Silva has no car, and he waits outside their working place hoping that Maria Sara will notice him and offer him a ride. But Maria Sara leaves the place accompanied by a colleague. Silva, feeling stupid, runs away.

Vázquez's concept of "deliberation" includes the victim's fascination for the seductress and the seductress' pretension of being unaware of this. Samperio's and Kundera's seductress models fascinate their victims. The first example, the "Mamazota" woman, does this by means of a provocative décolletage:

[...] con un escote mayúsculo [...] [la Mujer Mamazota] se acerca a muy poca distancia [...] Una vez que los pechos han realizado su labor cesa la dilatación y los aleja [...]. (Samperio 1986 26)

[...] wearing a wide opened décolletage [...] [the "Mamazota" woman] approaches [the man] very closely [...] Once the breasts have done their work, the[ir] expansion stops and [the woman] moves them away [from the man] [...]. (Our translation)

The second one, Eva, crosses the threshold by showing her naked body:

Il [Karel] lui avait dit qu'elle [Eva] était belle sur la photo qu'elle lui avait envoyée et il lui avait demandé [...] si ça l'excitait de se montrer nue. "Je suis une exhibitionniste", avait-elle dit, tout innocemment, comme si elle avait avoué qu'elle était anabaptiste. (63)

He [Karel] told her that she [Eva] was beautiful in the picture that she had sent to him and asked her [...] if showing herself naked was exciting for her. "I am an exhibitionist," she answered innocently, as if she were saying that she was Anabaptist. (Our translation)

The quotation not only marks Eva's exhibitionism, but also shows the way in which she simulates innocence. In a certain way, Eva completes the stage of "deliberation," as she doesn't feign ignorance that her victim is charmed, but rather pretends not to know her victim's identity and relationship to Karel. Eva approaches Markéta seeking to become her friend and entices her as she enables immediate communication: "Ce qui séduisait Markéta chez Eva, c'était le charme de sa singularité : Ne serait-ce que cette façon de lui adresser tout de suite la parole! (57)" / "*Marketa finds found Eva seducing by for her particular charm: the way she addresses her immediately.*"

Concerning Maria Sara in Saramago's *História...*, she doesn't try to fascinate Raimundo Silva, but she does it anyway. Silva will keep thinking about her. Her clothes and movements will awaken Silva's imagination: "[...] croisant les jambes, elle portait une jupe d'un tissu épais qui la moulait juste ce qu'il fallait, et elle alluma une cigarette." (Saramago, 104) / "*crossing her legs, she [Maria Sara] was wearing a heavy fabric skirt that fit her snugly and then she lit a cigarette.*"

When, further on, Maria Sara asks Silva if he would like a cigarette, he becomes flustered: “[...] il baissa les yeux, emportant l’image d’un corsage avec un décolleté en pointe, d’une couleur qu’il fut incapable de définir tant il était troublé.” (Saramago, 105) / “*he [Silva] looked downwards with the image of a V neck blouse in a color that he wasn’t able to define as he was too aroused.*”

Also, the three seductresses differ from Nana’s fascination with herself which Benoît describes as narcissistic or a form of self-seduction (Benoît 1998 : 32-33):

Nana livrée au plaisir solitaire que lui procure le reflet spéculaire de son corps (32) [...] la jeune femme, dans cette scène d’auto séduction, ‘absorbée dans son ravissement d’elle-même (Zola, 225) [...] sorte de mise en abyme du désir. Toutefois, ce qui se produit chez Nana, ce n’est pas tant l’attraction de soi pour sa propre image, que pour sa faculté de séduire. [...] (33).

Nana indulges in the solitary pleasure produced by the specular reflection of her body [in the mirror] [...] the young woman, in this scene of self-seduction, is immersed into self-rapture (Zola, 225) [...] kind of mise en abyme of desire. However, what occurs in Nana, isn’t so much an attraction for her own image, but an attraction for her faculty to seduce. [...] (Our translation)

Yet, as we have already shown, Eva and Nana have in common the use of their bodies as efficient means to their success as seductresses: “son corps, instrument précieux de son succès [...]”(34)/ “*her body, invaluable instrument of her success*” (Our translation) writes Benoît about Nana.

2.2. Communication

Communication is the second stage of the seduction encounter. It takes place when the victim contacts or approaches the seducer/tress as the latter feigns to accept the *communication* “rules” established by the victim. But the seducer/tress’ passivity is false.

Certainly Samperio’s seductress character communicates but she does it in a different way than that which Vázquez describes. The “Mamazota” woman doesn’t pretend to respect the rules of her victim, she just feigns a bit of shame that disappears right away. Yet simulation is present as this character makes her victim think that the two are friends, and that she trusts him. For that reason, she finds that embarrassment is unnecessary:

Una vez que los pechos han realizado su labor [...] los aleja [...]. Avergonzada y disculpándose [...] Hace como que se fastidia de la manifestación de tales pudores y da a entender [...] que a final de cuentas ya existe confianza entre ellos [...] (Samperio 1986 : 26)

Once the breasts have done their work, [the “Mamazota” woman] moves them away [from the man] [...]. Ashamed and apologizing [...] as if she is annoyed at showing embarrassment implying [...] that, after all is said and done, they feel at ease with one another. (Our translation)

Two aspects of Vázquez’s stage of *communication* remain in Samperio’s model: 1-approach and communication with the victim, 2-simulation.

Regarding Kundera’s Eva, she’s good at communicating. She speaks to her victim (Markéta) almost immediately after they meet by the pool. She also tries to decrease tension between her friends, Markéta and Karel, by continuously talking: “[...] elle bavardait de plus belle pour dissiper les nuages qui avaient envahi la pièce.” (69)/ “*she chattered even more to clear up the foggy atmosphere*”. Her strategy works as she convinces Markéta to reconcile with Karel (69).

Eva speaks a lot (“Eva, heureusement, était bavarde.” (65)), and when seducing she’s brave, straight and intrepid (“Directe, intrépide.” (62)). Her naked body, sensual and

irresistible, could be seen as a means of communication. At least Karel cannot resist a naked Eva (who sometimes reminds him of woman who fascinated him earlier, Mme. Nora⁹).

Exhibitionism is a point of convergence between Kundera's Eva and Zola's Nana, "personnage type de la demi-mondaine" (Benoît 1998 : 31). Benoît points out exhibitionism as one of the characteristics that makes Nana a seductress.

Anyway it should be said that if both of them, Eva and Nana, exhibit their naked bodies as a seduction strategy, they are different as Nana does it simulating innocence, which is not found in Eva:

En exhibant sa nudité avec une impudeur *apparemment* innocente, Nana utilise le désir des males comme élément *tactique* de sa *stratégie* de séduction. (our emphasis) (Benoît 1998 : 32).

Exposing her nudity with an apparently innocent shamelessness, Nana uses male desire as tactical element in her seduction strategy. (Our translation)

Benoît writes that Nana allowed her victim to watch the intimate details of her *toilette*. In this way the seductress sexually stimulates in a hidden way, while feigning innocence and decency (34). Simulation is one of Nana's seduction strategies, that includes the use of makeup and fragrances. At this point Samperio's "Mamazota" woman has a point of convergences with Zola's character, as she also wears makeup, "lipstick" (Samperio 1986 : 24).

Concerning Saramago's character, Maria Sara, the way she communicates with Silva reflects self-confidence. This woman doesn't have a hidden agenda. When she needs to know if Silva cares about her, she simply phones him and clearly explains her needs:

Alors, écoutez-moi, je vous ai téléphoné parce que je me sentais seule, parce que j'avais envie que vous me souhaitiez un prompt rétablissement, parce que [...] (Saramago 1986 : 234)¹⁰

Listen to me then, I called you because I was feeling alone, because I wanted you to tell me to get well soon, because [...] (Our translation)

and expresses her feelings : "[...] je suis folle de joie" (235) / "*I am so happy*".

Maria Sara doesn't act or simulate. She communicates her feelings directly. Her self-confidence ("une femme aussi sûre d'elle" (Saramago 1986 : 168) / "*a very self-confident woman*" contrasts with Silva's shyness which prevents him from communicating.

2.3. Concession

This is the third and last stage of the seduction encounter, which in fact, together with the previous stages, allows the seducer/tress more time to work her wiles. While increasing communication with the victim, it stimulates the progression of *sensorial awaking* (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell and the sixth sense "no-sé-que"¹¹ / "je ne sais quoi") which will push the victim downwards into seduction.

The sixth sense, "el-no-sé-qué" is the consequence of the reunion of the first five senses (Vázquez, 168).

⁹ At this point we can find another similarity between Eva and Nana. In *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli*, Mme Nora, a friend of Karel's mom has fascinated him as he saw her naked once (Kundera 2003 : 83), Mme. Nora's naked body seduced Karel before that of Eva. In *Nana*, writes Benoît, there's the character of Irma D'Anglars, Nana's seductress model, her *demi-mondaine* paradigm (37). Both novels include the seductress predecessor, which contribute to viewing seduction as continuity.

¹⁰ Only then Silva will interrupt her to say : "Maria Sara, je vous aime [...]" (234). / "*Maria Sara, I love you*".

¹¹ It isn't possible to translate this expression precisely, but we may understand it as something nameless or indescribable.

Concession happens when the seducer/tress acts as if being moved by the victim's dignity and honesty and pretends to give up, pretends to regret being licentious, feigning his/her transformation into a virtuous individual (the virtue of denying oneself all sensual¹² delight). During *concession*, the seducer/tress acts as being trustful and honest (Vázquez 1996 : 113).

Vázquez remarks that at the same time that the seducer increases his/her communication with the victim and their intimacy progresses, the latter has no great communication with others (“in-comunicación”), as he/she spends time with the “virtuous” and “uninterested” seducer who shows a false passivity.

Among our three seductresses, only Eva fills this third phase. Samperio's “Mamazota” woman does it partly as she pretends to appeal to the virtue of friendship, but the limitation of the victim's communication isn't described or present. Concerning Maria Sara she isn't interested in appearing as trustful or honest. She's everything but a seductress like the XVIIIth century seductress Marquise de Merteuil, but the fact is that Maria Sara makes a great impression on Silva¹³ whose imagination recreates and invents this woman's clothes: her skirt, her blouse and these images seduce him.

Ce n'était pas la première fois qu'il avait pensé à la doutora Maria Sara pendant la matinée [...] Maintenant [...] elle portait sous la gabardine ou le manteau une jupe moulante dans un tissu épais, et une blouse, ou un chemisier, peu importe le nom, dans les deux cas le mot est d'origine française, d'une couleur [...] blanc auroral [...] (Saramago 1986 : 130)

It wasn't the first time that he had been thinking about doctor Maria Sara during the morning [...] Now [...] under the gabardine or coat, she was wearing a form-fitting skirt in a heavy fabric and a blouse or chemisier, the name doesn't matter as both words have a French origin, in a dawn white color [...] (Our translation)

The color of the blouse, “blanc auroral”/ “dawn white” will be the same as the rose that is on Maria Sara's desk and which awakens once again Silva's imagination:

[Silva] tourna ses regards vers la rose blanche, il en est si près qu'il peut voir son Coeur d'une suavité extrême [...] et il entendit, pour incroyable que cela semble, l'ineffable frôlement des pétales, ou bien était-ce le frôlement de la manche contre la courbe du sein, mon Dieu, ayez pitié des hommes qui vivent d'imaginer.” (Saramago 1986 : 167).

[Silva] turned his eyes toward the white rose, he's so close that he can see it's extremely soft heart [...] and listened, as difficult as it may seem, to the ineffable petal's stroking or was it the sleeve's stroking the curve of the breast? Oh God, have mercy on men who live for their imagination fantasies. (Our translation)

Maria Sara makes a fascinating impression on Silva through the senses, at this point she's similar to Nana, whose seductress' traits include an effect on sight and smell as marked by Benoît.

To conclude, two of our XXth century narrative seductress models, Eva (Kundera) and the “Mamazota” woman (Samperio), partly continue a seductress type or tradition to be found in XVIIIth and XIXth century narrative. They present important points of convergence: exhibitionism, simulation (that will be a kind of disguise or mask, which includes wearing makeup) and premeditation (where we can include the “Mamazota” way of dressing).

Maria Sara (Saramago) may not fit into this kind of seductress, but she certainly seduces Raimundo Silva, whose imagination is to blame. This could be another way to approach the theme of seduction in literature, studying its relation with imagination.

¹² “sensual [...] **2.** Pertaining to the body or the physical senses; also fleshly; carnal: opposed to *spiritual* [...]” (1146).

¹³ Silva can be labeled an anti-seducer, as his acts contradict the seducer strategies described by Vázquez and Benoît: Silva plans but never carries out his plan, communicates seldom and is not an exhibitionist. He has no women *catalogue*, he's not seeking to multiply his adventures as Don Juan does.

Divergences with former seductress models were also found, as the fact that self-seduction or a narcissistic form of seduction noted in Nana, is not present in the contemporary narrative figures.

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