

An Artistic Rendering of Lesbian Love and Sex: A Review of *Room in Rome*

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With the cobblestone streets of Rome and an ethereal falsetto voice singing "Loving Strangers," the gentle, yet magnetic adventure of *Room in Rome* blooms into view. *Room in Rome*, originally titled *Habitación en Roma* and directed by Julio Medem, captures a single romantic evening shared between two women from the moment they meet to the moment they depart. Medem has captured the hearts and fantasies of his art-loving audience with nothing less than a vibrant and powerful depiction of a night of passion. However, in order to ensure an ethical and authentic portrayal of an affair between two women, a film on lesbian love created by a male director prompts scrutiny past the charming scenery and beautiful actresses.

The film opens with two women, Natasha and Alba, strangers who have just met in a bar, sauntering toward Alba's hotel room hand in hand. The audience learns immediately that it is Natasha and Alba's last night in Rome before returning to Spain and Russia, respectively – a heart wrenching plot from the start. The women spend the duration of their night in the dimly lit, homely hotel room, exploring one another's minds and bodies as the viewer bears witness.

Despite being criticized for seeming "drawn-out" due to a lack of extravagant plot twists by critics such as Jesse Hassenger, this film contains underlying themes of identity and vulnerability in order to convey how unexpected love is an artistically spiritual experience. Adequate communication of these themes would be impossible without the intentionally tender plot line and leisurely scenes; through Medem's technical decision to craft a slow narrative, the creeping fate of morning, signifying the departure of

Natasha and Alba, is exemplified to the audience. Additionally, as recognized by American poet and writer Djelloul Marbrook in his review of the film, *Room in Rome* is refined rather than minimalist, and the emphasis placed on the characters rather than in an extravagant plot functions to heighten the humanism and emotional intensity of Natasha and Alba. This warrants hyperbole in plot to be unnecessary and, in fact, detrimental – this film is created for an audience capable of celebrating ingrained symbolism and artistic features.

Medem's audience must additionally take an active role in order to recognize the film's full capacity. Corey Nuffer, in her critique, by stating, "over and over, I fought the simplicity and seemingly pedestrian direction the film seemed to be taking," demonstrates the understanding that all viewers of this film must have – there is more than meets the eye. The role of the viewer is an integral element demonstrated by one of the most powerful decisions employed by Medem of the camera never leaving the hotel room. The viewer is infinitely tied to the room; even in the final scenes of the film as Natasha and Alba return to the streets of Rome, a bird's eye camera shot from the hotel balcony is utilized. This perspective emphasizes the dramatic nature of the scene of departure, as well as tethers us to the room in Rome for good – our connection to Natasha and Alba's night is set in stone. We, as well as the two lovers, have experienced a night no one will forget.

Medem strengthens the effect of the bird's eye camera angle through repetition, as it is additionally used towards the end of the film in a moment of dramatic and raw emotion. Natasha and Alba lay intertwined in a bathtub, about to take part in their last supper of breakfast on the balcony. In a powerful moment captured from above, the two women cling to each other's beautiful, nude figures, and roll over one another in the bathtub over and over, splashing water over the white tile floor. This physical rotation

in a fixed point in space and time parallels the circles of identity, conversation, and sex confined to the single location of the room.

The powerful symbolism woven throughout the film by Medem takes shape most clearly, however, through Classical and Renaissance art in the hotel room that mirrors the emotions of the two women. Following a scene focused on Natasha, an art historian herself, the camera pans to Alba's bedside where a statue of the Classical figure Venus – the Roman goddess of love, sex, and beauty – sits. The statue symbolizes Natasha: her beauty as well as the love she holds. Additionally, the figure of Venus is frequently portrayed as covering herself in an expression of shame due to her nudity (Garcia), reflecting Natasha's shy undressing and apprehension surrounding having sex with another woman for the first time. Further, later on, the camera zooms in on the Renaissance fresco on the ceiling that contains a figure of Cupid with his infamous bow and arrow. Through an oblique angle camera shot that functions to emphasize perspective, Alba makes eye contact with this allegorical figure directly after gazing at Natasha in the bathroom; a direct reference to Alba falling in love with her Russian companion. With this tilted angle, the audience is witnessing the moment as if we are Alba: "the camera effectively acts as the character 's eyes [...] often used to create empathy with a character" ("The Film Shot"). These artistic motifs, strengthened by Medem's filming techniques, exemplify the deeply emotional attachment that is unfolding between the women, strengthen the connection of the audience to the characters, as well as provide an ethereal beauty to the narrative.

Another extremely important motif in the film is sex. The scenes of sex and sensuality, as undeniably passionately intense as they are, are not to be taken at surface level. Although initially this may be difficult for viewers who are easily distracted from the sight of two beautifully nude women, Medem ensures that his audience is as well-

adjusted as possible. Following approximately two conversations between the women, the audience is staring at the fully unclothed bodies of Natasha and Alba. Within minutes, the nudity is no longer noticed. By desensitizing the viewer to the uncensored bodies of Natasha and Alba prior to the arguably explicit sex scenes, Medem offers a display of nudity that is not inherently sexual, and instead allows it to function as a symbolic expression of vulnerability and emotional intimacy.

It would be wrong to ignore the fact that Medem is toeing the line of putting his film in danger of hypersexualization despite his attempt to desexualize nudity. In fact, *Room in Rome* falls under a category explicated by Mattias Frey in "Aesthetic Innovation and the Real: Academic Debate over Sexually Graphic Art Films" of sexually explicit films that support the narrative pattern of an "initiation scenario." This narrative pattern refers to a young woman's self-discovery, or the "transition from innocence to experience"(165). In *Room in Rome*, Natasha, as an identifying heterosexual woman, experiences her first dip into sapphic love with Alba and even voices her concern for being unable to be pleased sexually without penetration. Even following her first experience of lesbian sex, with her line, "This stays here, okay? In this room," Natasha voices shame and apprehension surrounding her decision to experiment. Although her shame disappears almost as quickly as her clothing does, this initial dialogue and character portrayal of Natasha represents Medem's awareness of the appeal of a woman experimenting with her sexuality and points to his undeniable play into this narrative trope.

Moreover, when creating a film heavy on lesbian sex, the abundance of steamy scenes may appear to be a mere attraction for male viewers. Within art as well as outside of it, romantic relationships between two women are frequently sexualized and depicted solely for the male gaze. In fact, in *Room in Rome*, the only supporting character

is Max, the cheerful opera-singing hotel attendant. Jesse Hassenger, in his review of *Room in Rome*, characterized Max as pointless, yet Hassenger blatantly misses the deliberate inclusion of a male figure into this heavily feminine narrative in order to comment on the sexualization of gay women by men. In the film, Max comes to Alba and Natasha's room upon a request and misinterprets the situation to be one of an invitation for a threesome. Although he handles the rejection he receives in response with grace, Max, by sexualizing Natasha and Alba for his own pleasure, functions as societal commentary. With his character, as well as Natasha and Alba's decline of his sexual advances, Medem represents his awareness of the cultural implications of the film.

Medem's awareness, although appreciated, unfortunately does not equate to his work being safe from misinterpretation and tarnishing. In fact, scenes from the film – of sex as well as mundane nudity that functions as a communication of intimacy and budding vulnerability between Alba and Natasha – are available on the internet on dozens of pornographic websites. The disappointing twist of this beautiful narrative into hypersexualized videos characterized as pornography reflects the inability to appreciate art when it's "clouded" by some girl on girl action, and the all-too-familiar pattern in the daily experience of queer women. The fight to legitimize love and sex between two women without falling into the dangerous waters of heterosexual men often feels like a hopeless one.

Although Medem's film falls outside of the category of a deliberate display of lesbian sex for the male gaze, this pattern of hypersexualization perpetrated by heterosexual men can be argued as inherently connected to attraction to women in general. Kristin Puhl suggests in her master's thesis, "The Eroticization of Lesbianism by Heterosexual Men," the "male preference for overt, and by definition sexualized, lesbian imagery is part of a positive affective reaction (...) it is not simply the presence

of two women that generates these positive attitudes; the sexualization of the women is an intrinsically rewarding component” (6-7). This assertion references the danger of exposing a wide audience to explicit sensuality between two female lovers as it inherently appeals to an attraction to women by heterosexual men. As seen in the case of *Room in Rome*, this exposure may result in branding a beautifully intimate encounter within art as meaningless and pornographic.

In addition to desexualizing nudity and introducing an allegorical character symbolizing the heterosexual man in society, Medem attempts to counteract the defiling of lesbian love by the incorporation of sex scenes through a narrative pattern. After each conversation between the women, conversations that shed layers of identity as well as clothing, the women have sex. Through this repetition of revealing dialogue followed by sex, Medem is directing the audience's attention away from the sex to the greater significance of their physical intimacy and asserting the idea that for these two women, as well as many of his viewers, it feels safer to be physically intimate than emotionally intimate. For Alba and Natasha, it is easier to share an orgasm than a secret. With this pattern, Medem stresses that Natasha and Alba's sex is more than just sex, and a central theme of vulnerability is introduced, only to be strengthened later in the light of the dreaded next morning.

The sight of the illuminated bodies of Natasha and Alba appearing for the first time in the light of day is jarring; the time of playing with the tricky shadows of identity throughout the night is over. They emerge utterly visible and vulnerable to one another as the realization of the love they now share stares them in the face. This clever technical use of light by Medem provides a visual and rhetorical climax that leaves the audience holding their breath; the women have reached an epitome of exposure to one another and are now faced with the burden of the love they have built. The sunrise comes with

the inevitable decision Natasha and Alba must make - to part with a kiss or to abandon their lives and run away with their impulse desires.

The theme of vulnerability and the pattern of sex replacing difficult conversations introduce the equally important theme of identity. The women compulsively lie to each other initially; Natasha uses the existence of a twin to muddle the realities of her life with that of her sister's, and Alba narrates the life story of her mother as her own. As they continue their bouts of speaking followed by sex, more and more truths are revealed. By the finale, any walls constructed have crumbled, and Natasha and Alba are completely bare to one another.

With technical features, such as light and camera angles, a deliberately refined plot with an emphasis on characterization, and artistic symbols supporting themes of vulnerability and identity, *Medem* gifts us all a beautiful narrative of destiny and love. Art that is impactful is nearly always controversial, and *Room in Rome* is no stranger to this. Although there are hurtful misinterpretations, those of us with the patience and heart to understand the intentions of the film are rewarded with a work of art that, as stated by Marbrook, affirms our "power to transcend circumstance" and the "power of chance encounter to transcend our settle notions." This night, saturated in the beauty of Rome, is branded on the audience as well as Natasha and Alba, and the pain of goodbye lingers on the cobblestone street that we are left staring at. Fortunately, *Medem's* audience is gifted the unique ability to return and relive this night over and over again, though the most we can do is wish the same gift upon Natasha and Alba.

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