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Film Reviews

Patricia Cardoso: *Real Women Have Curves* (2002)

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Real Women Have Curves, Patricia Cardoso's critically acclaimed and very popular tale of a Latino family in Los Angeles celebrates a disturbing retro-romanticism.It is a feel-good story, which turns its back on ethnic borders, softly strokes the edges of economic stress, and sports a superficial veneer of feminist bravado focused on female body images. Benignly unmannered in filmic style, it tells a familiar story and applies it to hyphenated Americans. Thematically an appreciation of self-actualization, it drifts socio-politically in the current wave of American neo-conservatism.

Revealing the story here will not lessen potential enjoyment. In fact, experiencing this film without the expectation of surprise can free the viewer to focus on the characterizations and variations that decorate the all-too-familiar format. Essentially, the plot lies flatly on the common coming-of age template. Ana, a Mexican-American, bright and beautiful, graduates from high school, loses her virginity, breaks away from her debilitating family, leaves her tedious job in her sister's small unprosperous dress factory, and achieves self-actualization elsewhere.

Ana is a strong character. Physically attractive, she has to be described as sort of heavy, only because this becomes significant in the script. As she graduates from Beverly Hills High School, a "good" school she had gained admittance to, her kindly teacher Mr. Guzmán, the classic altruistic empowering professional, urges her to apply for admission and scholarship at Columbia University. He says he has a connection, but there is no mention of quota admissions. We see her reluctant refusal, then partial cooperation, and eventual completion of the application. These brief scenes are interjected among loosely linked views of her life in her rather comfortable-looking extended family home, and her oppressive, steam-surrounded ironing job in the "sweatshop."

Ana has a couple of brief encounters with Anglos. One, her boyfriend Jimmy, is sweet and sensitive, clueless about her life situation, and happily on his own way to college. She manages their little sexual episode like a programmed rite-of-passage, efficiently purchasing and providing a condom. She does not so much lose her virginity as rid herself of it in an anti-mom gesture. He is slender, boyish, unthreatening, and-- it seems-- undamaging. Another

Anglo, the business-suited high-heeled lady buyer of her sister's dresses, is snippy and selfish, hostile and hurtful, and in this encounter, apparently prevails financially.

Holding forth at home is a selfish harridan of a mother, Carmen, played broadly by Lupe Ontiveros. Controlling with cruelty, she consistently denigrates Ana for being overweight (she looked okay to me!), snarls and sneers at her with warnings about sexuality, and asserts Ana's highest and indeed only life purpose is to marry. Her influence wanes as her silliness increases. One of the film's funniest caricatures is the sorry stereotype of this guilt-giving martyr-mother persistently asserting that her symptoms of menopause are signals of pregnancy. As she loses control, she almost gains our sympathy.

Father is passive and kindly. When we see Ana visit him on his landscaping job, he stands in formal pastoral splendor, watering shrubs at a stately manor in a stately manner. No heavy lifting or dirty digging here. He's strong and silent, resourceful enough to give Ana the loan she requests for her sister's business and the blessing she needs to strike out on her own. Older sister Estela, talented and hardworking, is oppressed economically by buyers who sell the dresses she makes for thirty times what they pay her. Because she is unmarried, she is unappreciated by mother Carmen, who works and whines in the factory.

There are two scenes that function thematically. One, funny and memorable, is both a catharsis and a cop-out. In the torrid factory, following a women's talk session on the universal self-deprecating "I'm-sooo-fat" theme, Ana steps out of the steam sweating, and pulls off her shirt. The self-assertion is apparently contagious: the result is a cellulite and stretch-mark celebration, the three variously portly workers and two sisters in a strip-down, underwear everywhere, real women with curves in a half if not a "Full Monte" as mother looks on. Yea sisterhood! This feels good. But wait: will they sell the dresses for more? Real women have curves. Do they also have pay equity?

The concluding scene shows the scholarship-winning college-bound Ana emerging from a subway on to a busy street. It's the sidewalks of New York. Her step is spirited, her head tilted, her eyes bright. This feels good! This self-actualizing young lady never had an issue with her curves. And she never had an issue with quotas in her college admissions. But wait: that's not Columbia. That's 42nd Street, Times Square! Hey real woman, get uptown!