

Introduction:

The Cinematic, the Personal, and the Political in Latin America: A Continuing Conversation

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In September 2017 a conference on ‘Latin American Women’s Filmmaking’ hosted by the Institute of Modern Languages Research and the Institute of Latin American Studies, in collaboration with the Centro de Estudios La Mujer en la Historia de América Latina (Lima) and the Centre for Iberian and Latin American Visual Studies (Birkbeck, University of London) took place in London. As explained by the conference organisers, the event sought to recognise the vital role played by women ‘in the region’s rich cinematic history’, to advance the study of ‘women’s contribution to the politics and aesthetics of Latin America’s filmic landscape’, and to contribute to the development of ‘the new critical methodologies required to examine these contributions’ (Davies and Geraghty 2017: 377). The papers contained in this Special Issue emerged from this conference and share these objectives. The scale of the initial conference, however, testified to the fact that a global network of scholars and industry professionals also identified with these aims. Indeed, the prominence of notable directors such as Lucrecia Martel, Anna Muylaert, Lucía Puenzo, and Claudia Llosa, among others, had ensured that women’s filmmaking in Latin America was already beginning to receive significant scholarly attention. Due to propitious timing, then, the pioneering volume *Latin American Women Filmmakers: Production, Politics, Poetics* (2017b) was also launched

at the conference and stands today as a touchstone for critical analysis of the topic. In their Introduction to that collection, the book's editors, Deborah Martin and Deborah Shaw, provide both a solid introduction to the history of women's filmmaking in the region,¹ and a genealogy of the critical examination of those practices (2017a). And it is to this same genealogy that we now wish to contribute. Rather than summarise and paraphrase the work of Martin and Shaw, or engage in an act of revisionism, however, we will instead respond to the invitation encountered in Shaw's 'Latin American Women's Filmmaking: A Manifesto' (2017), first presented at the conference, and avail ourselves of the opportunity to continue an important critical dialogue with these scholars to whom we are indebted.

Within the twenty-five proposals included in Shaw's 'Manifesto', only one entry contains a negative instruction where she encourages scholars 'to avoid the pitfalls of ghettoization and ensure we do not remain in the margins in academia/or the industry' (2017). Given that this special issue focusses exclusively on women filmmakers, it arguably runs the risk of treating the topic as a niche and specialist subject, in some way separate from dominant film cultures. This is, of course, a challenge that Martin and Shaw also confronted while compiling their own volume. So, too, their proposal that, 'since gender categories are still pervasive in (Latin American) society and culture, there continue to exist important reasons to spotlight the work of women filmmakers', resonates equally today as it did in 2017 (2). More than this, however, the success of the 2017 conference, the fact that a second iteration held in Madrid in 2019 was equally popular,² and the rising number of specialist publications in the field,³ make it clear that scholars and practitioners find it eminently useful to have their own spaces to contemplate marginalized voices and allow for the development of alternative narratives and perspectives on Latin American filmmaking.⁴ In addition, the creation of spaces within the academy that stake a visible claim for representation closely

echoes important developments in Latin American feminist movements which have taken place in the years since Martin and Shaw published their volume. In her manifesto, Shaw notes the importance of assessing ‘the relationship between women’s filmmaking and socio-political and historical events’ (2017), and it is by considering the relationship between this Special Issue and these events that our contribution to the field can be recognised.

In the Introduction to their book, Martin and Shaw acknowledge their indebtedness to B. Ruby Rich’s seminal essay ‘An/Other View of New Latin American Cinema’ ([1991] 1997) in developing their conception of the ways in which politics and poetics intersect in women’s filmmaking in the region (2017b: 19). Contrasting the New Latin American Cinema movement with North American and European perspectives, Rich first notes ‘the fundamentally political preconditions of cinematic achievement in Latin America’ ([1991] 1997: 277). Thereafter, however, Rich argues that ‘in place of the explicitly and predictably political, at the level of labor or agrarian struggles or mass mobilization’, for example, ‘we often find an attention to the implicitly political, at the level of banality, fantasy, and desire, and a corresponding shift in aesthetic strategies’ which has ‘opened up the field to women’ ([1991] 1997: 281). For their part, Martin and Shaw appeal to this same ‘shift from a public and overt politics to a politics of the personal and the private often found’ in women’s cinema, as a means to counteract ‘a male-dominated vision’ of the ‘historical-political landmarks’ of Latin American reality and cinema which received considerable attention amidst the revolutionary fervour of the 1960s and 1970s, and in the post-dictatorship period following the decimation of such radical political movements (2017b: 1, 19). Thus they argue that women’s filmmaking ‘produce[s] a more comprehensive meaning of the political than that reserved for public realms of popular protest and state control’ (2017b: 21). In this way, both Rich, and Martin and Shaw, return to the second wave feminist argument that ‘the personal is

political’, which in Latin America would also be nourished by contemporaneous anti-colonial struggles to develop a clear understanding that in their everyday and personal relationships women were subjected to power relations as they were at the national and supra-national levels. While the articles contained in the present collection similarly attest to the close attention paid to private and personal expressions of politics encountered in women’s filmmaking, what has changed *externally* in the years which separate this Special Issue from Martin and Shaw’s book, is the increased visibility of mass feminist protest movements across Latin America.

In recent years Latin American women have increasingly engaged in popular protest, occupied space, critiqued gendered power imbalances, and made demands for radical change *within the public realm*. While there is no question that these movements emerged prior to the publication of Martin and Shaw’s book, most notably through the ‘Ni Una Menos’ movement,⁵ it is equally clear that they precipitated a wave of mobilisation which has continued apace since 2017 (Corona et al. 2020). To cite but two examples, Chile witnessed the ‘mayo feminista’ in 2018 during which students demanded an end to sexist and misogynistic education practices and denounced sexual violence within Universities (Sepúlveda 2019), and in Argentina feminists organised several massive mobilisations throughout 2019 and 2020 collectively demanding the legalisation of abortion.⁶ Both movements form an important part of an ‘ola feminista’ [feminist wave] which continues to sweep across the region denouncing gendered violence in all its forms, and articulating a range of diverse demands (Corona et al. 2020; P. Martin 2020). Such movements have also experienced significant success; in late 2020, law No. 27.610 ‘de acceso a la Interrupción Voluntaria del Embarazo’ [concerning the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy] was approved in Argentina, coming into effect in January 2021 (Página 12 2021) and, in Chile,

activists have ensured that the constituent assembly which will author a new Constitution to replace that adopted during Pinochet's dictatorship will have equal representation for women (Montes 2020).⁷ This is to say that many of the most visible and important 'historical-political landmarks' in Latin America today have been constructed by and for women. For this reason, we feel it is incumbent upon us, writing after these developments, to situate the films we discuss in relation to these events, and to ask, how do these films (which also preceded these events) attend to the historical conditions from which these movements emerged?⁸

In framing our Introduction in this manner, we are not suggesting that there is a causal relationship between women's filmmaking and these contemporary social movements. Rather, we are proposing that the former has contributed to the creation of a new ethical climate in which the latter can develop. A first response to the question posed above, then, is found at the level of representation. As Wim Wenders put it in an oft-cited maxim, 'what you show people, day in and day out, is political... And the most politically indoctrinating thing you can do to a human being is to show him, every day, that there can be no change' (cit. Levi Strauss 2003: 101). In this instance, the use of the male pronoun is both unfortunate and instructive, for it is precisely this form of male-dominated and patriarchal indoctrination and image-making that feminist activists and women filmmakers are seeking to counter-act. Nonetheless, the pivotal place that Wenders implicitly reserves for imagination in fighting oppression is one to which the articles in this special issue attest. To articulate a more profound connection between recent events and the articles in this collection, however, it is helpful first to look more closely at the objectives and rationale which unite these diverse feminist movements. In this regard, a recent article by Martin and Shaw which analyses the street performance 'Un violador en tu camino' [A Rapist in your Path] by the Chilean activist

group LasTesis and its global after-effects is useful insofar as it explicates one way in which such movements are united in their theoretical world-view.

As Martin and Shaw note, 'Un violador en tu camino', first performed in 2019, is a mass public performance which 'incorporates a powerful and catchy chant, references to Chilean national songs', including the 'Himno de los carabineros de Chile' [Anthem of the National Police Force], and points the finger 'literally, through the dance moves, as well as figuratively', at the 'instruments of the state, including the president', ultimately naming them as perpetrators of rape (2021: 1-2). To summarise Martin and Shaw's argument, they essentially propose that the performance entails a tripartite function. First, it denounces overtly repressive state functions, including the humiliation of detained women by the police in Chile. Second, the participants mimic the ideological function of the state, pointing directly at the viewer and declaring that 'el violador eres tú' [the rapist is you], thus exposing the way in which the State calls individuals into being as political subjects within a patriarchal structure whose apparatus they also implicate in collective violation. And finally, the performance 'interpellates its audience through live street performance and through social digital media' – which as Martin and Shaw note 'are non-exclusionary, highly accessible forms requiring no educational or cultural capital for participation or understanding' – and invites them to join an alternative and 'disobedient' community (2021: 1-5). This latter term is drawn directly from the work of Argentine feminist theorist Rita Laura Segato, whom LasTesis cite as inspiration for their performance, and is discussed in detail by Martin and Shaw both to explicate how 'Un violador en tu camino' constituted an act of political resistance within Chile, and how it disrupted 'the neo-colonial power structures of social movements' once it became a transnational phenomenon performed in various locations throughout the world (2021: 3-10). For our own purposes, however, considering another text

in which Segato reflects on rape culture allows us to perceive how the articles in this collection cohere and construct their own theoretical narrative.

In an article whose primary purpose is theoretically to examine the abhorrent murder of women in Ciudad Juárez, México, Segato also reflects on an investigation she conducted with prisoners convicted of rape in Brasilia. As she explains, she found that their very words ‘respalda la tesis feminista fundamental de que los crímenes sexuales no son obra de desviados individuales, enfermos mentales o anomalías sociales, sino expresiones de una estructura simbólica profunda que organiza nuestros actos y nuestras fantasías y les confiere inteligibilidad’ [supported the fundamental feminist thesis that sexual crimes are not the work of perverted individuals, the mentally ill or social anomalies, rather they are expressions of a deep symbolic structure that organises our acts and our fantasies and makes them understandable] (2008: 84). From this basis, Segato notes that rape is directed towards the annihilation of the victim’s agency, signified by their loss of control over their own body. As such, it is a violent allegory for State sovereignty, which similarly exercises ‘control legislador sobre un territorio y sobre el cuerpo del otro como anexo a ese territorio’ [legislative control over its territory and over the body of the other as an annex to that territory] (2008: 84). Thus Segato unites protests against femicide, LasTesis’ denunciation of the patriarchal State, and the struggle for control of the female body present in demands for safe and legal access to abortion.⁹ Moreover, Segato’s analysis of the connection between rape and the State form also provides a means to connect contemporary feminist movements to their militant revolutionary forebears active in the 1960s and 1970s. As she notes, insofar as rape is a form of ‘violencia cuya finalidad es la expresión del control absoluto de una voluntad sobre otra [...], la agresión más próxima a la violación es la tortura, física o moral’ [violence that aims to express absolute control of one person’s will over another’s, physical

or mental torture is its closest equivalent] (2008: 85). It is this theoretical and historical analysis that allows us to perceive the narrative strands which bind the articles in this Special Issue together.

Cumulatively the pieces in this collection construct two narratives, one negative and one positive, which intersect at the level of the body; the point of connection between private and public expressions of politics. On the negative side, the articles describe the role women's filmmaking plays in illustrating and exposing the history of patriarchal violence described above by Segato. This is to say that the articles trace a narrative dispersed across the films they discuss that runs from the torture of political prisoners and revolutionaries in the 1960s and 1970s in Brazil, through the corporeal and psychological after-effects of extreme political violence in the subsequent generation in Peru, to discrete forms of structural violence which condition and constrain the female body in Argentina and Peru, finally to return to contemporary depictions of the complex and myriad forms of violence entailed in sex work and the 'War on Drugs' in Mexico. Throughout the collection our contributors draw on various different theories to explain the ways in which the female perspective eschews dominant tropes and depictions of this violence. While the theme of embodiment is a pressing concern in contemporary film theory more generally, our authors cumulatively demonstrate that the films they analyse utilise cinematic experimentation to demonstrate how patriarchal violence is variously embodied at different times and places, according to diverse local realities. While this theme is made explicit in Niall HD Geraghty's engagement with Laura U. Marks' *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000) and Dominika Gasiowski's use of Sue Cataldi's *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space. Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Embodiment* (1993), it implicitly underpins the other contributions which essentially examine the ways in which

both history and theory affect and are affected by the female body and the female gaze. Just as Martin and Shaw argue that ‘Un violador en tu camino’ paradoxically ‘produces the female body as both subject and object, as both resistant and subjugated’ (2021: 6), so, too, the authors in this Special Issue describe how different female directors probe the limits of historical and political embodiment, and examine the ways in which the female body can resist or supersede the limits placed upon it. In this they reveal the crucial role that filmmaking plays in moving from the particular to the general, from the individual to the collective. Thus, the collection contains a second positive counter-narrative that operates on the level of form, rather than content. This is to say that the pieces sustain an appeal to collective feminist storytelling, which signals one of the ways in which women’s filmmaking contributes to creating the conditions necessary for bodies to occupy public space in collective action.

For the reasons outlined above, the Special Issue opens with Patricia Sequeira Brás’ nuanced reading of Lúcia Murat’s documentary *Que bom te ver viva* (1989) which blends documentary and fiction, switching between interviews with former female political prisoners and fictional accounts of torture experienced during the military dictatorship which came to power in Brazil in 1964. Thus Brás establishes the historical and thematic base for all subsequent contributions by analysing the State torture of militants of the 1960s and 1970s through a feminist lens. Given that this film was also discussed directly by Rich in ‘An/Other View of New Latin American Cinema’ ([1991] 1997: 291), the article also serves to inscribe the collection within the critical genealogy described above. Moreover, Brás’ focus on reciprocal narratives, that is the way she links Murat’s narrative choices to the practice of collective storytelling that finds its roots in the consciousness raising feminist groups of the 1960s and 1970s, allows it to function as synecdoche for the collection as a whole. While the

combination of testimony and fiction in a documentary format provides a starting point for examining the ‘tenuous frontier’ between fact and fiction in visual representation, which implicitly raises questions about the reliability of dominant historical narratives, Brás’ analysis is underpinned by Adriana Cavarero’s philosophy of narration, that frames storytelling as a form of reciprocity that involves exposing the self to others. Thus the private and unutterable experience of torture is transformed into a public and collective utterance. The article also examines the connection between testimony and embodiment, through careful consideration of Murat’s own embodied experience of torture as a political prisoner, which surfaces in the layering of different narrative voices and bodies.

Continuing with the theme of embodiment, the issue moves from documentary to feature films with Geraghty’s examination of *La teta asustada* (2009). Provocatively, the author posits the potato, which the central character Fausta inserts into her vagina, as the main protagonist in Claudia Llosa’s film. This critical focus on the potato as a fetish object, contextualised within both the (post-)colonial history of Peru and the immediate aftermath of the country’s devastating internal conflict, serves as an analytical lens through which Geraghty discusses inter-generational trauma and cultural anxieties related to female embodiment. Drawing on the works of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and the aforementioned Marks, the author makes the potato in Fausta’s vagina a locus of disparate theories that all seek to make sense of the connection between embodiment and power within the context of post-colonial Peru. Paradoxically, the shift in critical focus from the female protagonist to the fetish object of the potato allows Geraghty to frame Fausta’s body as agentic, powerful and capable of exceeding expectations, but also subject to the formidable subjugating forces of patriarchy and colonial legacies.

Female protagonists who defy the audience and society's expectations are also the subject of analysis in Vedrana Lovrinović and Mario Županović's article on Claudia Llosa's *Madeinusa* (2005) and Lucrecia Martel's *La niña santa* (2004). Both films offer coming of age stories of teenagers who precariously negotiate their impending womanhood in an attempt to liberate themselves from the constraining expectations of others, and the structural violence which underpins those same expectations. Lovrinović and Županović anchor their analysis in the theoretical framework of posthegemony and duplicity in order to examine the ways in which the personal and social development of each young protagonist contests and supersedes the ideological functions of patriarchal hegemony. This discussion also raises questions about the connection between *individual* resistance based on third wave feminist concepts and *collective* forms of indigenous struggle through the depiction of Llosa's indigenous protagonist, provocatively challenging liberal assumptions about communal indigenous practices. By focusing on how each young woman defies expectations, the authors also offer a close reading of the directors' depiction of the embodied emancipation of their protagonists, observed through oppositional gaze strategies that destabilise the phallogentric gaze.

The questioning of power dynamics resurfaces and is extended further in Verónica Abrego's piece on the Salta Trilogy by Lucrecia Martel. Where Lovrinović and Županović highlighted possible sources of tension in individuals interpolated by more than one marker of marginal identity, Abrego positions Martel's work as a feminist intervention from the South and employs the concept of intersectionality to analyse how the narrative arcs of *La ciénaga* (2001), *La niña santa* (2004), and *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008) represent issues of race, class, age, and religion. Expanding on the concept first developed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, the author explains privilege and power as an effect of 'intertwined

naturalizing discourses' which together marginalise, exclude, and obscure others from view. By focusing on the distorted representations of middle-class life in Martel's work, Abrego examines how racial, class and other differences surface in the intimate lives of the director's protagonists, analysing the embodied representations of white privilege and subjugation. Intersectionality, then, becomes a powerful interpretative tool that enables Abrego to examine the famously disconcerting nature of Martel's work and crystallise it as a visual questioning of structural violence that carries political consequences.

Visual examinations of different forms of violence that carry political effects are also pertinent in the last two articles, which shift the focus of this special issue back to documentary filmmaking. Turning to contemporary documentary production in Mexico, Lucy Bollington examines necropolitics and hydropolitics in Tatiana Huezo's *Tempestad* (2016) and Betzabé García's *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* (2015). Huezo's film is focused on two distinct narratives of violence suffered by women at the hands of gangs and corrupt officials, while García's work represents the systemic nature of criminality and infrastructural failures that affect whole communities in the flooded town of San Marcos. Bollington shows that the visual elision of people affected by violence, which is replaced by a focus on landscape and water, creates a critical distance from the images of violence ubiquitous in Mexican media and cultural production. Tracing Rulfian influences in the visual poetics of ruined landscapes, the author examines how non-human forms serve as a poetic proxy for representations of embodied suffering. If, in a certain sense, Geraghty posits a relationship between the body and the landscape by discussing the insertion of a potato into the protagonist's vagina as a response to violent trauma in *La teta asustada*, Bollington somewhat inverts the process, describing the dissolution of bodies into the liquid Mexican landscape in *Tempestad* and *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* as a means of representing

unrepresentable violence. In each case, however, there is connection drawn between the female body and the national territory, as in the work of Segato cited above.

Staying in Mexico, the last article offers an examination of documentary work that contrasts Huezo's and García's elision of human embodiment with an intimate exploration of womanhood against the background of macho violence. Thus Gasiorowski examines Maya Goded's documentary film *Plaza de la soledad* (2016), which offers a snapshot of the lives of women working in Mexico's oldest red-light district – La Merced. Goded's intimate portrayal of sex-workers embodying themes of violence, resilience, love, and healing is characterised by its tenderness. Gasiorowski's examination of this work is anchored in feminist theories of embodiment, in particular Cataldi's aforementioned theoretical exploration of emotion, depth, and flesh. The film and its analysis posits the female body not as a site of male violence, but primarily as an agentic and resourceful embodied life force, in circumstances where surviving and thriving constitute acts of physical resistance against subjugation and violence. In addition, Gasiorowski concludes the Special Issue by invoking a return to the types of collective storytelling practices first discussed by Brás. Attentive to the ways in which Goded provides an alternative to the male gaze, Gasiorowski also carefully examines the techniques deployed by Goded which allow her subjects to share their own stories without the imposition of a guiding narrative. As Gasiorowski explains, conscious of the power imbalance between documentary filmmaker and subject, Goded retains a visible presence in the film as means to ensure that she is an involved observer. Thus, in her own way, Goded, too, engages a form of reciprocity that involves exposing the self to others in her storytelling practice, as in Murat's *Que bom te ver viva*. While the other filmmakers discussed in this Special Issue may not approach the task in the same manner, they nonetheless bring individual, private stories to the screen to be shared by the audience such that they become collective experiences. That these

stories expose the ways in which patriarchy constructs and constricts the female body and posit various culturally specific forms of resistance to that form of control, demonstrates that these films attend to the concerns and disputes of contemporary feminist movements in Latin America. Moreover, it is one way that we believe such films have quietly contributed to raising women's consciousness in Latin America and have helped to create the atmosphere necessary for these social movements to flourish. While this may be a somewhat utopian vision of women's filmmaking, by framing our discussion in this way, we also hope to express our solidarity with, and make our own small contribution to, those same struggles.

Notes:

1. Paolo Antonio Parangua also provides a useful history of the pioneers of women's filmmaking in Latin America (1989).
2. The conference was entitled 'Modos de hacer: cines y mujeres de América Latina' and took place from September 11th to 13th at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. The website for the conference can be found here: <https://coloquiomodosdehacer.tumblr.com/> Accessed 26/01/2021.
3. See, for example, the collection edited by Marta Álvarez and Annette Scholz (2018) and the monograph written by Traci Roberts-Camps (2017).
4. See, too, the website for the Red de investigación del Audiovisual hecho por Mujeres en América Latina (RAMA): <https://red-rama.com/> Accessed 22/02/2021.
5. Ni Una Menos draws its name from the work of Mexican poet and activist Susana Chávez Castillo who participated in the denunciation of feminicides taking place in Ciudad Juárez in the 1990s and was herself killed in 2011. The slogan re-emerged with renewed vigour in 2015 in Argentina and became a rallying call against femicide and all forms of gendered violence across the region. See, (Corona et al. 2020; Tabbush 2015; Minuto Uno 2015)
6. For further information on the Argentine mobilizations, see the numerous articles hosted on the official website for the Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto, Legal, Seguro y Gratuito, <http://www.abortolegal.com.ar/> Accessed 26/01/2021.
7. Such achievements are, of course, not without precedent. For example, Colombian activist group Mujeres por la Paz mobilised to ensure that the peace process initiated in 2012 and concluded in 2016 included a specific 'Subcomisión de Género' and a role for women in elaborating the final agreement. See (Fernández-Matos and González-Martínez 2019).
8. This is not to suggest that Martin and Shaw and their contributors ignore important political developments and social movements and their connection with cinematic production. For example, in her own contribution to the volume, Martin situates the cinema of Lucrecia Martel in the context of Argentina's legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2010, and the passing of a transgender rights bill in 2012. She is also attentive to the violence which transgender people continued to experience despite these advances (Martin 2017: 241-42,

259n1). Such advances in Latin American gender politics also serve to contextualise the more recent feminist wave we discuss here.

9. Through its focus on control and violence, this explanation of patriarchal power also eschews any reliance upon essentialist conceptions of the female body in resisting said violence. As is well known, trans women in Latin America face horrendous levels of violence, as they do throughout the world (Nogueira 2019; Revista Medicina y Salud Pública 2020).

Filmography:

La ciénaga (*The Swamp*, Lucrecia Martel, 2001)

La mujer sin cabeza (*The Headless Woman*, Lucrecia Martel, 2008)

La niña santa (*The Holy Girl*, Lucrecia Martel, 2004)

La teta asustada (*The Milk of Sorrow*, Claudia Llosa, 2009)

Los reyes del pueblo que no existe (*Kings of Nowhere*, Betzabé García, 2015)

Madeinusa (*Madeinusa*, Claudia Llosa, 2005)

Que bom te ver viva (*How Nice to See You Alive*, Lúcia Murat, 1989)

Plaza de la soledad (*Plaza de la soledad*, Maya Goded, 2016),

Tempestad (*Tempestad*, Tatiana Huezo, 2016)

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