

1-1-2012

# In Our Own Image: An Oral History of Mexican Women Filmmakers (1988-1994)

Isabel Arredondo

SUNY Plattsburgh, [arredoi@plattsburgh.edu](mailto:arredoi@plattsburgh.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.plattsburgh.edu/modernlanguages>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Latin American Literature Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Arredondo, Isabel. 2012. *In Our Own Image: An Oral History of Mexican Female Filmmakers 1988-1994*. Trans. Mark Schafer, Jim Heinrich, Elissa Rashkin, and Isabel Arredondo. Web.

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ SUNY Plattsburgh. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages and Cultures by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ SUNY Plattsburgh.

Copyright 2012

In Our Own Image:  
An Oral History of Mexican Women Filmmakers  
(1988-1994)

Isabel Arredondo

Translated by Mark Schafer, Jim Heinrich, Elissa Rashkin, and

Isabel Arredondo



To Gwen Kirkpatrick, who encouraged me to write this book.



## **TABLE OF CONTENT**

<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	1
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Film Production and The State in Mexico</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<i>Juan José Bremer: “Cultural policy should not provide answers”</i> .....	25
<i>Ignacio Durán: “The challenge was to steal attention from the soaps”</i> .....	33
<i>Alfredo Joskowicz: “The Film School Graduates”</i> .....	41
<i>Busi Cortés: “Free Lunch”</i> .....	51
<b>2. Guita Schyfter</b> .....	<b>61</b>
<i>“I would get so panicked . . . I had to take sedatives”</i> .....	66
<b>3. Busi Cortés</b> .....	<b>82</b>
<i>“We each must overcome something left us by our grandmother”</i> .....	87
<b>4. Marisa Sistach</b> .....	<b>118</b>
<i>“Not to have characters on the screen with whom women can identify is a real shortcoming”</i> .....	124
<b>5. María Novaro</b> .....	<b>137</b>
<i>“Master of Her Own Life”</i> .....	143
<b>6. Dana Rotberg</b> .....	<b>190</b>
<i>“I Don’t Judge Malena”</i> .....	195
<b>7. Eva López-Sánchez</b> .....	<b>218</b>

<i>“There are things I write just for myself”</i> .....	222
<b>Epilogue</b> .....	<b>248</b>
<b>List of Terms and Abbreviations</b> .....	<b>256</b>
<b>Filmography</b> .....	<b>260</b>
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	<b>268</b>



## Acknowledgements

This book would not have been completed without the help of many many people. I am grateful to Juan José Bremer, Busi Cortés, Ignacio Durán, Alfredo Joskowicz, Eva López-Sánchez, María Novaro, Dana Rotberg, and Guita Schyfter, who supported the project from the first time I arrived at their door, and all the other times that followed! They gave generously of their time, their intellectual and emotional assistance, and extremely valuable information.

I would like to acknowledge the financial assistance provided by Plattsburgh State University through “Sponsored Research,” a specialized research center; their help allowed me to work on this book with students Dorothee Racette, Lola Gascón, Mercedes Hidalgo, Sandra García, and Tricia Stewart who transcribed and corrected the interviews. UUP, the faculty union at Plattsburgh State University, paid for my trip to New York City to interview Dana Rotberg and also awarded me the Drescher Fellowship to work on the manuscript, which was published in Spanish by Iberoamericana and the Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes in 2001.

I am grateful to the Center for Research and Teaching on Women at McGill University, and especially to the Center’s director during 2000-2001, Shree Mulay, for having provided me with a place to grow intellectually and work comfortably during my sabbatical, as well as afterwards while pursuing my MA in film studies at Concordia University. I want to thank Roberto Ernesto Antillón Mena for obtaining a recording of Busi Cortés's presentation at the 1997 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association in Guadalajara. A very special thanks goes to my colleague and friend Fernando Gaona, with whom I discussed for hours my ideas for this book. I also wish to thank Erin Mitchell, who helped with revisions, Margarita de la Vega, who commented on the first drafts in English, and Jim Heinrich and Mark Schafer, who worked with me as a team to do the initial translation, with Schafer fine-tuning the translation.

In rethinking the introduction, I was inspired by the approach that Rosanna Maule uses in her course on pioneer women filmmakers; I saw this approach at work at the conference on Women and the Silent Screen organized by Maule and Katie Russel at Concordia University in 2004, which I attended with a Winkel grant from Plattsburgh State University.

My heartfelt thanks go to Elissa Rashkin, who played a crucial role that went beyond that of translator on the final version of the manuscript. Her extensive knowledge of Mexico and Mexican culture brought out the nuances in the translation and made the interviews intimate and alive; her meticulous editing has improved the text enormously. However, it is as a colleague and one of the leading scholars of contemporary Mexican women's filmmaking that I appreciated Rashkin the most. Our discussions helped me to reflect on the reasons why I had chosen to approach the Mexican filmmakers from the perspective of state cinema.

The help of my family has been indispensable during the different stages of the manuscript. Thanks to Doug Yu who over the years has cared for our children while I was interviewing filmmakers and working on the manuscript. Thanks also to my children, Javier and Isabel Yu, who traveled with me in my long stays in Mexico and Canada. To each of you my warmest thanks for helping me write "In Our Own Image."

# Introduction

---

In 1980, filmmaker Marisa Sistach said, “I believe that it is up to women to invent a new language for our field, nourished by the common experiences of our individual histories. Woman’s word should be inscribed in our culture. . . . It is a matter of reappropriating our image and, in this way, to seek our identity.”<sup>1</sup>

Sistach’s statement, especially the phrase in Spanish palabra de mujer, “woman’s word,” suggests to me a subversive appropriation of the respect that is normally given to the word of God in the Bible. Sistach urges women to create a specifically female perspective and inscribe it into culture. In this book, I take up Sistach’s proposal as my own, constructing a history of Mexican women filmmakers in their own words.

I began my study of Mexican filmmakers in 1994, after completing a research project on contemporary Cuban filmmakers.<sup>2</sup> I was drawn to study Mexican filmmakers because of the high number of films they had produced (María Novaro, for instance, had already directed three

---

<sup>1</sup> Lucrecia Martín and Cecilia Pérez-Grovas, “En tierras de machos: Encuesta a las estudiantes de cine” 34.

feature films), and my perspective was comparative. Why, I wondered, had capable women directors in Cuba not been able to direct feature films, while their Mexican counterparts had? In other words, what were the differences between the state-supported cinemas of Cuba and Mexico in terms of providing opportunities for women? My question required that I investigate the work of filmmakers making feature films within a state setting, and was primarily institutional. Assuming that many women wanted to direct feature films but only some were able to do so, I wanted to know what institution or institutions had helped them.

Most of the interviews included in *In Our Own Image* took place between January 1995 and November 1998.<sup>3</sup> The interviews are held together by a number of common threads, the first of which is the aim of documenting the academic and professional lives of their subjects. Preliminary research made me think that film schools, which did not exist to any significant extent in Cuba, had played a crucial role. I wanted to check my hypothesis with the filmmakers themselves, and for that reason the interviews often address the role played by film schools. The interviews, in my view, confirmed my hypothesis. While most of the teachers and administrators were male, and the curriculum did not emphasize or particularly include gender issues, the film schools nevertheless provided a democratic structure in which women felt it was their right to make films (whereas the same was not true in the Cuban case). Later, as the interview with Eva López-Sánchez shows, women like Busi Cortés joined the film school faculty, and female students such as López-Sánchez felt more represented.

Since 1989-1994 marks the period in which women as a group entered the industry, I was interested in the specific strategies they used to overcome a male-dominated workspace. The

---

<sup>2</sup> Isabel Arredondo, "From Transparent to Translucid: Cuban Filmmakers in 1990."

interviews show that while all the filmmakers operated within the same political, economic and ideological context, the ways in which they entered the industry differed considerably. For example, Rotberg worked with union crews in the traditional manner, while Cortés developed mixed crews combining students and union members; at the other extreme, Novaro created a production cooperative for *Lola* in order to be able to work with fellow CUEC graduates. Some of the filmmakers, though not all, incorporated family members into the production process, particularly in writing their scripts.

Questions about motherhood, in the personal lives of the filmmakers as well as in their works, are another thread that connects the interviews. After having interviewed pioneer director Matilde Landeta for a separate project,<sup>4</sup> and as my research progressed, I was intrigued by the different views pioneer and contemporary filmmakers held on the subject of motherhood. Specifically, I wondered if there was any relation between the ways they had to live their professional lives and their attitudes toward motherhood. At the Encuentro de Mujeres Cineastas y Videoastas Latinas in 1990, pioneer filmmaker Marcela Fernández Violante said: “A woman who has been trained professionally, both inside and outside the university, has to show that she can do everything and that her family comes second, because first one is an artist and then comes the rest.”<sup>5</sup> At the same event, the younger directors offered a counterpoint to Fernández Violante’s strict separation of private and public roles; Novaro joyfully explained the strategies she had developed in order to bring her four-year-old daughter Lucero to the set of *Danzón*,<sup>6</sup> and

---

<sup>3</sup> The interviews with Juan José Bremer and Ignacio Durán took place later, and are published here for the first time.

<sup>4</sup> Isabel Arredondo, “ ‘Tenía bríos y, aún vieja, los sigo teniendo’: Reflexiones y entrevista a Matilde Landeta.”

<sup>5</sup> Fernández Violante in Iglesias and Fregoso 34.

<sup>6</sup> Novaro in Iglesias and Fregoso 260.

Marisa Sistach talked about weaving the birth and childhood of her son Valdiri into her student and professional life.<sup>7</sup> Had Fernández Violante been forced to put motherhood second because of the difficulty of being a professional filmmaker in the 1970s? Were the contemporary directors more prone to include motherhood as part of their identities because being a professional filmmaker in the 1990s was easier or more common? These questions were some of the starting points for the discussions that make up this oral history.

My interviews with the five filmmakers included in this book need to be seen in the context of the marked increase in interest in and understanding of women's filmmaking in Mexico that began during the 1980s and evolved throughout the 1990s. This evolution took place on two fronts: first, a series of meetings in which the work of contemporary filmmakers was discussed by critics, scholars, and the filmmakers themselves, and second, written histories published during this period.

As early as 1987, critics and filmmakers from Mexico, Latin America and the Caribbean gathered in Mexico City for a roundtable discussion that was called "Cocina de Imágenes" (Image Kitchen), organized by documentary filmmaker Angeles Necochea.<sup>8</sup> Four years later, another encounter between critics and filmmakers took place in Tijuana: the Encuentro de Mujeres Cineastas y Videoastas Latinas (Gathering of Latina Women Filmmakers and Videomakers), part of a series entitled Mexico-U. S. Cruzando Fronteras (Crossing Borders).<sup>9</sup> This 1990 meeting was aimed at creating a politically committed front to combat the

---

<sup>7</sup> Sistach in Iglesias and Fregoso 267-268.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Torres refers to the Cocina de Imágenes as the first meeting in which filmmakers and critics came together to discuss their work (Iglesias and Fregoso 76).

<sup>9</sup> The proceedings of the Encuentro, including round table discussions and audience interventions, were published in *Miradas de mujer: Encuentro de mujeres videoastas y cineastas chicanas y mexicanas*, edited by Norma Iglesias and Rosalinda Fregoso.

marginalization of women working in film and video. The sessions were organized around the notion of woman's cinema: "Woman's Film," "Woman's Film Today," "Popular Culture and Woman's Film."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps intended to build a stronger movement, the session titles referred to films made by *woman* in the singular, thereby stressing the idea that women share a similar experience. In the discussions that ensued, some participants argued that the female experience had its own aesthetic or way of seeing events from a feminine perspective.<sup>11</sup>

At that time, scholarship and criticism of Mexican cinema emphasized auteur narrative films made in 35mm. The organizers of the Tijuana Encuentro tried to democratize the field by also including video makers. Matilde Landeta supported their inclusion, arguing that "the only thing that we should consider is that we are all women who produce images."<sup>12</sup> The Encuentro also included sessions on directors such as María Elena de Velasco (La India María), who had worked in popular genres, but whose work had not been given much attention by critics or academics.

In the years following the Tijuana Encuentro, new perspectives on women's film and videomaking began to emerge. This evolution in thought was clearly revealed at an event that took place twelve years later, the Encuentro de Mujeres y Cine en América Latina held in Guadalajara in 2002.<sup>13</sup> The two meetings shared the goal of building unity among women

---

<sup>10</sup> In Spanish, "Cine de mujer," "El cine de mujer hoy," "Cultura popular y cine de mujer."

<sup>11</sup> Carlos Monsiváis and Mágina Millán debated the dangers (Monsiváis) and possibilities (Millán) of using the notion of a feminine aesthetic (Iglesias and Fregoso 192-193).

<sup>12</sup> Landeta in Iglesias and Fregoso 31.

<sup>13</sup> The proceedings of this encuentro were published in *Mujeres y cine en América Latina*, edited by Patricia Torres San Martín.

filmmakers and democratizing the study of their work; in 1990, however, the emphasis was on unity, while in 2002 the emphasis was on diversity.<sup>14</sup>

By 2002, the notions of “woman’s film” and the possibility of a feminine aesthetic had lost ground as theoretical concepts.<sup>15</sup> Parallel to changes taking place in North American feminism, and possibly related to the establishment of feminism as a theoretical framework within academia, the emphasis in Guadalajara was on acknowledging diversity among women. In her welcoming speech, for example, organizer Patricia Torres explained that the Encuentro was planned around the idea of inclusion and plurality of positions, and clarified that films made by women were not to be equated with feminist films.<sup>16</sup> The goal of inclusion was achieved through the idea of common practice; by organizing the sessions around documentary, fiction and experimental cinema, the Encuentro gathered women who shared similar practices, such as making documentaries. The Encuentro also took the push towards democratization in a different direction by focusing not only on directors, but also on women involved in other areas of media production, such as screenwriters and producers.

Another area that developed alongside (and sometimes within)<sup>17</sup> the *encuentros* was the study of contemporary filmmakers and the recovery of the work of “pioneer” filmmakers active

---

<sup>14</sup> There were other meetings during these years. At the 1997 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association in Guadalajara, for example, I organized a two-part panel entitled “Aproximaciones teóricas a la construcción de la imagen en el cine mexicano del último decenio” in which Cortés presented the paper included in chapter 1 of the present book.

<sup>15</sup> Historian Julia Tuñón asked the audience on several occasions to elaborate on what constituted a feminine aesthetic, but the audience did not respond. I interpret the silence as a lack of interest on the part of the audience, and I relate the loss of importance to the fact that by 2002 the making of films by women was understood as a diverse rather than unified practice, and thus the concept was no longer useful. (Tuñón, “De la crónica al poema,” in Torres, *Mujeres* 47).

<sup>16</sup> Torres, *Mujeres* 11-12.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Patricia Vega presented a list of silent and pioneer filmmakers at Tijuana. Vega, “El cine de mujer hoy,” in Iglesias and Fregoso 92-102.



during the silent and classical periods. In 1989, a review of María Novaro's *Lola* was entitled "The Fourth Female Director Is Born."<sup>18</sup> This title shows that in the national imaginary of 1989, many of Mexico's early women filmmakers were still unknown. Three years later in Tijuana, however, Novaro was recognized as director number twelve;<sup>19</sup> filmmakers from the silent and early sound period such as Mimi Derba, Candida Beltrán, Adela Sequeyro and Eva Limiñana were now included in a history of women's filmmaking in Mexico that went back to 1917.

Research on pioneer women filmmakers began with the recognition of filmmakers who had remained a part of the film community. In 1988, the UNAM and the Mexican film community paid homage to the work of Matilde Landeta.<sup>20</sup> In the 1990s, research was expanded to include filmmakers who were dead or no longer active, and whose work was incomplete or lost, such as Adela Sequeyro.

As awareness of women's filmmaking (both past and present) increased, film critics and scholars began to write histories of women filmmakers that covered a period of 70 years. These studies have much in common, insofar as they tend to focus on auteur cinema,<sup>21</sup> to use Mexico as

---

<sup>18</sup> Enrique Feliciano, "Surge la 4ª directora de películas."

<sup>19</sup> In Patricia Vega's 1990 list. Vega, "El cine de mujer hoy." Iglesias and Fregoso 97.

<sup>20</sup> During the classical period Landeta directed *Lola Casanova* (1948), *La negra Angustias* (1949) and *Trotacalles* (1951). Forty years later, she directed *Nocturno a Rosario* (1991). See Millán for more details on Landeta's homage (99).

<sup>21</sup> The majority of the histories focus on auteur directors who worked on 35mm narrative film, leaving out videomakers and commercial filmmakers such as Iselda Vega and María Elena de Velasco. An example of this tendency is Patricia Vega's list of Mexican women filmmakers, which mentions Vega and Velasco as "Atypical Cases" ("El cine de mujer hoy." Iglesias and Fregoso 95). Jorge Ayala Blanco, whose essay on "La mirada femenina" dedicates as much space to popular as to auteur filmmakers, is an exception. His interest, however, is to study the division between what he sees as extreme popular and elite forms of cinema in Mexico.

a frame to situate the group of women filmmakers,<sup>22</sup> and to see contemporary filmmakers as part of a long tradition of women filmmakers in Mexico.<sup>23</sup> The histories, however, differ in certain respects, notably in the importance they give to and the way they understand the 1970s student film collective Cine-Mujer.

Feminist histories, such as Elissa Rashkin's *Women Filmmakers in Mexico* and Joanne Hershfield and David Maciel's "Women and Gender Representation in the Contemporary Cinema of Mexico," tend to focus on the ideological contributions of films and give equal importance to production in 16mm and 35mm. Rashkin, for example, divides the history of women filmmakers in Mexico into three periods: Trespassers (before 1960), student and feminist film (1961-1980), and revisions (1980 through the late 1990s). She highlights the importance of the feminist films of the 1960s-1980s by dedicating a chapter to their discussion. Other scholars also view Cine-Mujer as the foundation of women's filmmaking in Mexico. Hershfield and Maciel underline the importance of the collective's twofold legacy: "to introduce and raise the consciousness of feminism and women's issues; and to pressure for greater opportunities for women in the film industry."<sup>24</sup> These feminist histories establish a tight link between the work done by Cine-Mujer and the work of the generation of contemporary filmmakers. For Patricia Torres, for example, contemporary directors inherit the "apertura ideológica" (ideological opening) brought about by Cine-Mujer.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Diane Sippl's study of María Novaro is an exception. Sippl studies Novaro as part of a transnational aesthetic, the Eighties New Wave (40). There are also some studies that situate the Mexican directors within a Latin American frame, such as Trelles Plazaola's *Cine y mujer en América Latina*.

<sup>23</sup> With the exception of Ayala Blanco's chapter, which deals only with contemporary cinema.

<sup>24</sup> Hershfield and Maciel 253.

<sup>25</sup> Torres, "La investigación sobre el cine de mujeres en México" 43.

Other histories, however, focus primarily on production in 35mm, looking at the different conditions under which women have worked in the film industry. The text by Busi Cortés included in this book (chapter 1), for example, is organized around the strategies used by women to break into a male-dominated film industry. These histories also downplay the importance of Cine-Mujer; Vega, for example, sees Cine-Mujer's 16mm documentaries as a "parenthesis" in film history,<sup>26</sup> while in *Derivas de un cine femenino* Margara Millan relates the making of feminist cinema to the cultural and political atmosphere of Mexico from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s.<sup>27</sup> For Millan, 1986 marks the turning point at which collectively-made films with clearly political feminist views addressing social conditions give way to more subjective films, which for her reflect "a feminine experience."<sup>28</sup>

The present book, while informed by these histories, addresses somewhat different concerns. I have sought to show how Mexican cultural policy in general, and state support for cinema in particular, has indirectly encouraged women's production of films in 35mm in several ways. First, the state considers it to be its responsibility to provide an arena for the discussion of Mexican identity; from the 1970s on, film is seen as a viable vehicle for such discussion. State policy affects the participation of women in the industry in a second way, by providing women with training and easier access to technology in film schools. Finally, due in part to the incorporation of women in the media and to the international recognition of the work of Mexican women filmmakers, in the 1990s gender becomes a category of analysis to represent the nation. The government through IMCINE provides opportunities for the production of feature films to women filmmakers, who are seen as creators of national identity from a feminine perspective.

---

<sup>26</sup> Vega, "El cine de mujer hoy." Iglesias and Fregoso 93-94.

<sup>27</sup> Millan 111-123.

In order to better contextualize the interviews included in this oral history, I will now outline a brief history of Mexican cultural policy, of the philosophy that supports such cultural policy, and of the manifestation of such cultural policy in state cinema. I understand “culture” to be the group of processes that elaborate, reproduce and transform the meaning of social structures,<sup>29</sup> and “cultural policy” to be the philosophy and measures through which the state implements a certain notion of culture. Arts administrator Juan José Bremer has stated that what gives a nation its collective sense is not so much the country’s collective memory, but rather its consciousness of shared cultural values; in other words, citizens get a sense of being part of the nation because they share certain symbols that are recognized as culture.<sup>30</sup> These symbols, in a state populism model such as Mexico’s, are considered to come from the people; the role of the state is to facilitate the symbolic process.<sup>31</sup> The state populism model, which is considered to date back to the Mexican Revolution, and its proponents see phenomena such as the mural movement of the 1920s and 1930s as examples of the way in which the state facilitates the production of art that recreates the nation.<sup>32</sup> Although film (“born” with the Mexican Revolution) already existed when state populism became Mexico’s cultural policy, it was not generally seen

---

<sup>28</sup> Millán 123.

<sup>29</sup> I follow Nestor García Canclini, for whom culture is “el conjunto de procesos donde se elabora la significación de las estructuras sociales, se la reproduce y transforma mediante operaciones simbólicas” (25).

<sup>30</sup> See interview with Bremer in chapter 1.

<sup>31</sup> See chapter 1. For a detailed description of the state system that emphasizes its pitfalls, see Maciel, “Cinema and the State in Contemporary Mexico” 193-197.

<sup>32</sup> For more details, see the interview with Bremer in chapter 1. It has to be noted, however, that current scholarship on muralism is questioning the unity of purpose that this explanation implies by showing that often muralists and their state sponsors did not share aims and ideologies.

as an art. At first, the state's main role in relation to film was that of a regulator, whose mission was to censor offensive representations of the nation. This regulating mission can be traced institutionally; until 1989, cinema was under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior, and thus directly under the control of the government. In the 1960s, however, film entered the intellectual and academic worlds. In 1961, intellectuals formed the group "Nuevo Cine"<sup>33</sup> and published a film journal of the same name. In 1963, film criticism began to be taught at Mexico City's first film school, the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (CUEC), part of Mexico City's national university, the UNAM. In 1969, Emilio García Riera began his monumental *Historia documental del cine* (Documentary History of Film), aimed at documenting every Mexican film ever made. During this period, as the symbolic value of film was increasingly recognized, cinema was incorporated into state cultural policy.

State-supported film production is often defined in terms of "cine de calidad," a term that can be literally translated as "quality cinema." The word "quality," however, is not used so much to refer to a high degree of artistic content (which, being based on taste, is subject to individual appreciation) but to suggest craftsmanship. In general, the makers of quality films are more concerned with telling a compelling story in artistic fashion than with making a profit as quickly as possible. Traditional private producers, on the other hand, generally make low-budget, low-quality films, often called "churros," 'donuts.' In the "churro" type of production, private producers invest low amounts of money in films of low technical and artistic quality. Their business, however, is profitable. They have a considerable audience, which attends their films in

---

<sup>33</sup> Integrated among others by Emilio García Riera, José de la Colina, Salvador Elizondo, Carlos Monsiváis and Rafael Corkidi.

part because of difficulties reading the subtitles of North American films.<sup>34</sup> While these private productions make up most of Mexico's film output, "churros" are rarely of interest to film critics and scholars, and few women filmmakers have been involved in their production. Instead, filmmaking by women has been closely linked to the state film sector.

It is important to note that different governments can take different approaches to cultural policy, and may favor either state involvement in cinema or private production; this peculiarity explains why the history of film in Mexico is studied by *sexenio*, or six-year presidential term. During the *sexenio* of Luis Echeverría (1970-1976), the state subsidized most production and took almost complete financial responsibility for films, which had secure distribution and exhibition through the nationalized state circuit.<sup>35</sup> The Echeverría administration also looked to ensure the production of national films by expanding film education. In 1975, the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica was created to train filmmakers who would participate in state-produced films, and the CUEC expanded its curriculum to include production.

During the next two *sexenios* (1976-1988), the state's interest in film production declined. Most production reverted to the private sector; moreover, strict union rules kept film school graduates from entering the industry. However, the cultural project of Mexican cinema

---

<sup>34</sup> Until 1994, the law required foreign films to be subtitled, not dubbed, for theatrical release.

<sup>35</sup> The government bought an important studio (Estudios America) and created three production houses (Conacine, Conacite I and Conacite II). Several distribution companies were completely or partially nationalized: the international distribution house Películas Mexicanas and Azteca Films, which specialized in distributing in the United States, were completely nationalized, while the government became an important partner of Películas Nacionales. The state tried to buy Películas Nacionales outright, but eventually settled for 10% of the company. The state also nationalized exhibition by buying Compañía Operadora de Teatros, a company that owned half of the country's movie theaters.

was continued in public television during the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, gender began to come to the fore as an important cultural category, and women as media producers began to enter the debate. The public television series *De la vida de las mujeres* (On Women's Lives), produced by the Unidad de Televisión Educativa y Cultural, was crucial in this respect; the series focused on women's life experiences, including birth control, sexual relations, abortion, widowhood, and retirement, and most of its directors were women. It is not coincidental that Busi Cortés and Marisa Sistach were in charge of directing programs for *De la vida de las mujeres*, or that women filmmakers were considered the most appropriate choice to make programs that dealt with female experience. By the 1980s, women were trained professionals, and played an important role in representing the nation from a feminine perspective.

In November of 1987, at the end of the *sexenio* of President Miguel De la Madrid, the creation of a private institution to finance film production was the first of the big changes that would bring life back to the state film sector. The Fondo de Fomento a la Calidad Cinematográfica (FFCC) allowed filmmakers to borrow seed money, and acted as a co-producer to make quality films.<sup>37</sup> Access to seed money was coupled with easier labor conditions. Given the difficulties of the film industry, specifically in the area of the production, film unions were now willing to negotiate with IMCINE and gradually allowed non-union directors to direct films.

---

<sup>36</sup> I would like to thank Nestor García Canclini for the conversation we had at the conference of the Privatization of Culture Project (New York University, 1998), in which he stressed the important part that Bremer, UTEC and Durán had played in maintaining a cultural policy in which the state played an active role in the arts.

<sup>37</sup> The quality cinema of the late 1980s, however, differed in audience and budget from that of Echeverría's *sexenio*. The FFCC did not support experimental filmmaking for small audiences, but was interested in reaching a wide and diverse public. Also, while the Echeverría administration had invested considerable amounts of money in its film productions, the FFCC only supported films whose budget was equivalent to that of a "churro."

The other important institution during the late 1980s was the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE). IMCINE was created in 1983, but did not play a very important role until five years later. At first, IMCINE was run by the Dirección General de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía (RTC), which in turn belonged to the Department of the Interior. Since the RTC was also responsible for censorship, many film professionals felt that this structure was unnecessarily restrictive. In December 1988, at the very beginning of the *sexenio* of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), IMCINE was moved to the Department of Public Education.<sup>38</sup> The Salinas administration created an arts council, the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA), within the education department, and put IMCINE under its auspices. The change, long sought by the film community, symbolically represented a new emphasis on the cultural mission of state cinema, different from that of industrial production. Ignacio Durán, whom many consider key to the renewal of Mexican filmmaking, was chosen as director of IMCINE.<sup>39</sup>

Salinas' *sexenio* was characterized by its focus on production of quality films. In contrast to Echeverría's *sexenio*, however, this was accomplished through privatization, not nationalization. In 1991, the distributor Películas Nacionales went bankrupt and was liquidated, and the theater chain COTSA followed a similar path. The state's role in film production during

---

<sup>38</sup> After IMCINE was moved, RTC remained in charge of the laws regulating the commercialization and public exhibition of films, including rentals and sales.

<sup>39</sup> For Rashkin, "The proactive policies of IMCINE under Ignacio Durán had replaced the torpor of the 1980s with a vibrant cinema" (215). Maciel describes Durán as an able administrator, although he criticizes the legal reform and liquidation of COTSA that were carried out under Durán's administration. According to Maciel, "The state justifications were that the private sector would be more efficient in management and the sale would produce important revenues." In practice, however, "The profits from the sale of COTSA, like the great majority of the other state-owned companies, benefited only the elites and not the sectors intended" ("Cinema and the State in Contemporary Mexico" 215-216).



Salinas' *sexenio* has been described as that of a broker who shares financial responsibility with other investors or partners.<sup>40</sup> IMCINE established co-productions in which the government provided only half of the total cost of production, the rest being shouldered by co-producers. Favored by the *sexenio*'s economical stability, the emphasis on production resulted in a high number of state-sponsored films.

The Salinas *sexenio* saw the emergence of many young directors, among them the women interviewed in this oral history. With production costs rising, producers sought to secure their investments by choosing graduates trained in new technologies over experienced union directors. In the early 1990s, Mexico became known for its women filmmakers; representatives of international film festivals came to the Muestra de Cine Mexicano in Guadalajara with the specific mission of selecting films made by women. A look at more than seven hundred film reviews published in Mexico City's newspapers during the first half of the decade shows that the films of the directors included in this book were viewed with national pride, and were key in discussing and elaborating on Mexico's changing social structures.

During this period, Mexican newspapers carefully followed the trail of films directed by women as they appeared in film festivals and won awards. The films that received the most attention were *Danzón* and *Angel de fuego*, both of which were selected for the Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes International Film Festival (in 1991 and 1992 respectively). *Danzón* was the first Mexican film in twenty years to go to Cannes, a fact reflected in the tone of pride that

---

<sup>40</sup> According to Rashkin, who cites Pérez-Turrent's description of state policy during Salinas' *sexenio*, the state's "policy was not so much outright sponsorship as brokering of partnerships between a range of private investors and governmental agencies" (13).

dominates the reviews; for an AFP reporter in *La Afición*, for example, “Danzón, from Mexico, Saves the Honor of Latin Cinema at Cannes.”<sup>41</sup>

To better illustrate the ways in which films engaged in a dialogue and re-signified Mexican society, I have chosen to analyze the reviews published about María Novaro’s *Lola* (1989). Novaro’s first feature is not her most acclaimed, but certainly her most debated. During 1989-1991, the cultural sections of Mexico City’s newspapers published seventy-two reviews of *Lola*, a high number of reviews by any standards.<sup>42</sup> These reviews, most of which quote or refer to Novaro’s words in press conferences and interviews, show that Novaro was able to initiate a public debate on motherhood and to propose a national identity attuned to the values of the 1990s. As Novaro self-critically reflected on the responses of the critics over a period of four years, the dialogue between director and critics evolved.

In 1989, *Lola* produced mixed reactions. *Lola* was released at Mexico City’s twenty-second Muestra Internacional de Cine, a showcase of international and selected Mexican films, and Novaro was invited to discuss her film. During the Muestra, newspapers in Mexico City published 14 reviews, whose judgments were somewhat divided along gender lines. From the ten

---

<sup>41</sup> “*Danzón*, de Mexico, salva el honor del cine latino en Cannes.”

<sup>42</sup> Highbrow newspapers, such as *La Jornada*, *unomasuno* and *El Nacional*, published the highest number of reviews, followed by the middlebrow newspapers *Excelsior*, *El Universal*, *Novedades* and *El Sol de Mexico*. Lowbrow newspapers like *Ovaciones*, *La Prensa*, and *El Heraldo de México* published the smallest number of reviews.

male critics, five liked the film,<sup>43</sup> while the other five did not.<sup>44</sup> Of the four women who reviewed the film, three of them liked *Lola*,<sup>45</sup> while one did not.<sup>46</sup>

Novaro influenced public opinion by establishing a dialogue with film critics. Most reviews allude to Novaro's interviews and offer responses to her ideas. In November of 1989, Novaro presented *Lola* as a healthy revision of the stereotypical way in which mothers had been represented in classical Mexican cinema. She argued that when the film begins, Lola is in a situation not very different from that of many other abandoned and guilty mothers of the 1940s melodramas. For Novaro, the difference between *Lola* and classical melodramas hinged upon the way in which Lola reacted when her partner left on a yearlong tour. Reporter Carolina Velázquez quoted Novaro saying that, while mothers in classical melodrama cry and then heroically overcome the abandonment, Lola slows down and becomes almost immobile.

Critics responded to Novaro's challenge to classical stereotypes differently. Positive reviews came from critics who liked contemporary portrayals of mothers.<sup>47</sup> Johnson Celorio, for example, commented "The saintly mother of Mexican cinema is portrayed in *Lola* as a real being, with all her problems and *raison d'être*." Novaro's portrayal of motherhood also rang true for Ezequiel Barriga Chávez, who saw in Lola a lower class mother who had to survive a

---

<sup>43</sup> Arturo Rodríguez Pineda, "El snobismo de la Muestra Internacional de Cine"; Juan Píxel, "*Lola* (México)"; Rodrigo Johnson Celorio, "María Novaro demuestra con *Lola* la calidad"; Miguel Barbachano Ponce, "Reflexiones sobre nueve películas"; Ezequiel Barriga Chávez, "Lola." See Works Cited for complete references.

<sup>44</sup> Jorge Ayala Blanco, "María Novaro y la dificultad de ser a la deriva"; Jairo Calixto Albarrán, "Lola (mas no la trailer)"; Eduardo Marín Conde, "*Lola*"; Moisés Viñas, "Lola"; José Felipe Coria, "Lola."

<sup>45</sup> Patricia Vega, "Lola"; Carolina Velázquez, "La idea de la película *Lola* es mostrar los lados oscuros de la maternidad, indica su directora María Novaro"; Susana Cato, "Y el vituperio de los críticos 'Lola' y 'Goitia' entre el elogio."

<sup>46</sup> Sara Murúa, "Lola, la reivindicación femenina en filme mexicano."

relationship full of problems. Some women in the audience, Susana Cato reported, felt relieved by the film's demystification of motherhood.

Negative criticism came from reviewers who missed the heroism of melodramatic mothers. Moisés Viñas, for example, argued that he preferred the "reality of melodrama," because melodramatic mothers, even if they did not stop crying, at least thought, whereas Lola had lost her capacity to do so.<sup>48</sup> Critics also attacked Lola on moral grounds, arguing that when left with her daughter, she became depressed and "irresponsible" rather than selflessly "maternal." Tomás Pérez Turrent, for example, described Lola as somebody "attempting to elude her role as a mother."<sup>49</sup> In a similar tone, Viñas contended that "Lola suffers from her husband's abandonment and she collapses. She then wrongs her young daughter without even making a minimal effort to alleviate her pain."<sup>50</sup> Passing moral judgments on Lola was not exclusively male. Sara Murúa, who saw motherhood and self-realization as mutually exclusive, contended that Lola unethically chose self-realization, which Murúa equated with "enjoying herself." Moreover, according to Susana Cato, part of the female audience worried about the repercussions of Lola's lack of morality on an international level; they were afraid that viewers abroad would think that all Mexican women were like Lola. Other critics, such as Jorge Ayala Blanco, were more careful about taking a moral stand, but nevertheless expressed similar opinions. Bothered by Lola's inability to fight, Ayala Blanco maintained that Lola, whom he described as a "being adrift," did not know who she was or what she wanted.

---

<sup>47</sup> These included Vega, "Lola"; Velásquez; Johnson Celorio; Murúa; Celín, "Lola"; and Yehudit Mam, "La semana en la muestra."

<sup>48</sup> In 1991, Viñas made this comment retrospectively, explaining his 1989 reaction. Viñas, "Lola."

<sup>49</sup> Pérez Turrent, "'Lola': Retrato femenino de una estudiante del CUEC."

<sup>50</sup> Viñas, "Lola."

Days after *Lola* won the Mexican equivalent of four Oscars in the Ariel competition of July 1990, a review in the newspaper *El Sol de México* reported that critics had unanimously praised *Lola*.<sup>51</sup> Although the reviewer exaggerates, negative reviews became scarce after 1990. Moisés Viñas' 1991 review for *El Universal* summarizes the changing views of the critics: "When the film was shown at the Muestra [1989], it sparked angry comments; now [February of 1991] it has received a rushed and almost unanimous benign acceptance on the part of the film critics."<sup>52</sup> As Viñas suggests, the heated debate had calmed down; negative reviews saying that *Lola* was for troubled mothers still existed, but they became rare.<sup>53</sup>

Novaro responded to the comments the critics had made in 1989 in later interviews. Reacting to criticisms about Lola's apathy, Novaro explained that losing her partner strongly affected Lola's emotions. Novaro's ongoing debate with the critics helped her to elaborate on her own views. In 1990, a review by Patricia Vega entitled "The Film *Lola*, a Thesis on Depression" quotes an interview with Novaro in which the director explains that *Lola* is "an emotional response that narrates the flow and cycle of a depression, with details hardly perceptible."<sup>54</sup> As a result of Novaro's explanations, 1990 reviewers present *Lola* as a film about a depressed (rather than "irresponsible") mother and explain the film's slow rhythm and non-classical dramaturgy (previously seen as a flaw) as a strategy to represent depression.

In *Lola*, Novaro also questioned Mexican politics. *Lola* is set in a post-1985 earthquake Mexico City, amid broken buildings and graffiti alluding to the government's reluctance to restore the city. Novaro explained her choice of location by saying that she wanted to show

---

<sup>51</sup> Luís Ángel Martínez Diez, "María Novaro y el buen cine mexicano."

<sup>52</sup> Viñas, "Lola."

<sup>53</sup> For a 1991 argument about troubled mothers, see Carlos Bonfil's "Lola."

<sup>54</sup> Vega, "El filme *Lola* una propuesta emocional ante la depresión."

“parts of Mexico City that, as a defense, we do not want to look at.”<sup>55</sup> Several reviewers considered that Novaro used “visual irony”; Mam gives as an example the scene in which the camera shows a wall slogan painted by the government that reads: “Mexico: still standing” and then pans to a building with a huge crack, showing that Mexico is *barely* standing.<sup>56</sup> Other reviewers, however, rejected the representation of the city in ruins, arguing that it was a Manichean portrayal of Mexico City.<sup>57</sup>

The reviews of *Lola* show that the film became a vehicle through which views on motherhood and government politics were discussed. Reviews also show that *Lola* established a dialogue between the filmmaker and the film critics that served both. The response of the critics to *Lola* allowed Novaro to reformulate and strengthen her arguments, which in turn helped the critics to modify their views. Lola’s and Novaro’s contributions are not exceptional; rather, they are representative of the contributions made by women filmmakers during 1988-1994. As the interviews in this book show, Busi Cortés’s films bring in a critical way of looking at generational differences; Dana Rotberg’s films question the ethics of representation; those of Guita Schyfter provide a cross-cultural perspective; and Eva López-Sánchez’s films bring private ethical issues to the forefront. If we consider culture as the group of processes that elaborate, reproduce and transform the meaning of social structures, the work of these filmmakers have not only democratized the symbolic field, but also addressed and transformed Mexican culture.

---

<sup>55</sup> Velázquez 83.

<sup>56</sup> Mam 6.

<sup>57</sup> Albarrán 4.

# Film Production and The State in Mexico

---

This chapter contains three interviews that provide a context in which to historically situate the Mexican women filmmakers of the 1990s. The first interview, with Juan José Bremer, describes the relationship between the state and cultural production—a relationship that has been central to the development of women’s filmmaking. The second, with Ignacio Durán, focuses on particular institutions and their roles in supporting and fostering film production such as that of the women featured in this book. The third, with Alfredo Joskowicz, addresses the important role of university-level film education. Finally, a conference presentation given in 1997 by director Busi Cortés is included in order to link this overall institutional context to the particular strategies used by women to make films in 35mm. Cortés’s text, based on her own experiences as a film student and director, reviews strategies used by women in the past and contrasts them with the strategies used by her generation.

While sometimes overlooked by film scholars intent on studying the work of individual directors, state institutions and their policies are key factors that have shaped Mexican cinema.

Mexican cultural policy has been defined by Néstor García Canclini as “estatismo populista” or state populism, a cultural policy in which the state is responsible for giving cohesion to a national identity that comes from “el pueblo,” or the masses.<sup>58</sup> My interview with Bremer illustrates the philosophy of *estatismo populista* in Mexico. As Bremer explains, beginning with the Mexican Revolution, the state has prioritized public education, including the education of artists and their audiences. Mexico’s cultural policy as Bremer interprets it is based on the idea that national identity is not fixed. While rooted in the past, it has to be constantly reworked in the present. As García Canclini writes, “The practice and control of national identity do not derive mechanically from the past, but rather from the present cohesion as the state represents it.”<sup>59</sup>

The development of particular institutions dedicated to film production, such as the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE) and the film schools discussed by Joskowitz and Cortés, indicate the increasing importance of film in the production of national identity. At the same time, these institutions have enabled the production of critical images by women: most of the filmmakers interviewed in later chapters attended public film schools, several of them produced their first work for the Unidad de Televisión Educativa y Cultural (UTECE), and all of them directed at least one film that was produced or co-produced by IMCINE. It is clear that without the state-supported film sector, film production by women, if indeed it existed at all, would have taken a very different form.

Besides the overarching influence of the state, the interviews also underscore the importance of two institutions that have played a significant role in women’s film production:

---

<sup>58</sup> Néstor García Canclini, “Políticas culturales y crisis socio-económica” 35.



film unions and film schools. Filmmakers have often viewed the film unions as a sexist institution and a barrier to entering the industry; María Novaro, for instance, has expressed the belief that union workers are underpaid, and that in many instances their sexism has made it hard to work with them: “Studios and unions have been crushing us [women] down for a while. This structure has had to ease up, opening and letting a new generation of filmmakers in, some of which were women.”<sup>60</sup> Here these perceptions are put into historical perspective: Joskowicz remembers the 1970s as a time in which film school graduates were excluded from the commercial circuit due to the unions’ intransigence, while Durán describes negotiations in the late 1980s that finally allowed graduates to direct commercial films. Finally, Cortés touches on her apprehension toward directing large union crews—an apprehension that needs to be seen in relation to her own school-based production strategies.

While unions, from the point of view of contemporary women filmmakers, represent an obstacle, the film schools have stood for a means to enter the industry. The schools, however, were not created in order to give women access to the film industry; rather, women have been able to use the schools to their advantage. Following Bremer’s discussion of the state’s

---

59 García Canclini also sees the creation of national identity in Mexico as the coming together of past and present. He writes: “El ejercicio y el control de la identidad nacional no se derivan mecánicamente del pasado sino de la cohesión presente tal y como el Estado la presenta” (35).

<sup>60</sup> Iglesias and Fregoso

<sup>27</sup>. Pioneer directors such as Matilde Landeta and Marcela Fernández Violante, however, belonged to and were proud of being part of the unions. At the Encuentro in Tijuana, Fernández Violante responded to Novaro’s attack by addressing union workers’ frustration; they might have been waiting for 50 or 60 years to be directors, she explained, when the job is given to a film school graduate who has not waited for his or her turn (32). Fernández Violante complained that contemporary filmmakers had not joined the union, and invited them to join in and fight sexism from within (33). The younger filmmakers, however, did not follow Fernández Violante’s advice, and militancy in the union remained one of their differences.

philosophy regarding arts education, Joskowitz describes the way in which that philosophy was manifested in the creation of film schools. Cortés then gives a more personal perspective on the schools: as safe spaces where women could learn to make films, and as institutions that support and prepare their graduates to enter the industry.

## **Juan José Bremer: “Cultural policy should not provide answers”**

Juan José Bremer was director of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA) from 1980 to 1985 and Undersecretary of Culture<sup>61</sup> from 1982 to 1985. In this interview, he discusses cultural policy in Mexico, analyzing the specificity of the Mexican model. According to Bremer, since the Mexican Revolution, the state has considered arts education to be one of its obligations as a nation. It must be emphasized that for Bremer, the task of educating the nation is double: not only does it imply the education of the artist, but also the education of the public.

This is an excerpt from a longer interview conducted in June 2002 in Washington DC.

### **What is the significance of the Mexican Revolution for Mexico?**

Like all profound historical processes, the Mexican Revolution had a general philosophy. It was not only a movement leading to the taking of power; rather, it proposed a different vision of life. A change, even, in the vision of history –of the past, present, and future– that was expressed in an educational policy and a cultural policy. The classic model of the Mexican Revolution was that of the 1920s, in which educators, social workers and activists participated, and which was headed by José Vasconcelos. When Vasconcelos headed the Secretaría de Educación, he brought to fruition a series of ideas and projects that were already there in the Mexican Revolution’s precursors. It was a very important model that contained three fundamental areas: a revision of Mexico’s historical past, a better appreciation of Mexico’s

indigenous past, and a reevaluation of those social and popular aspects that come together in culture and cultural creation, not only as settings but also as ingredients of creation. Moreover, the Revolution solidified the idea that art also has a mission. Taking up the old religious concept, art was invested with a mission of evangelization, catechization, and popularization; in other words, the diffusion of a new idea of the world. You can see this idea of art's mission in José Vasconcelos's great effort to promote muralism: he wanted a kind of painting that would serve to enlighten the public about its historical legacy, its social struggles and its contemporary reality. The great muralists collaborated in this project, and the Escuela Mexicana de Pintura<sup>62</sup> was founded. Along with muralism, there was also the novel of the Mexican Revolution, the role of the teacher associated with a mission of literacy and social education, which went along with the mass editions [of classic works], the literacy campaigns, and the creation of the Instituto de Antropología e Historia (INAH). With the impetus given to archeological work, which consisted of the exploration of Mexico's prehispanic tradition, a Mexico that had lain underground was incorporated into the collective consciousness.

The Mexican Revolution introduced a very important change with respect to the previous political culture, the culture of the Porfiriato.<sup>63</sup> One of the key points of rupture was that, as happens during processes of cultural colonization, in this period there was an over-valuation of everything foreign, along with contempt for everything national. The Mexican Revolution in its creative phase brought about an inversion so that the Mexican would get to know what came from within; Mexicans were educated to get to know themselves. The majority of intellectuals of

---

<sup>61</sup> The Subsecretaría de Cultura, or Ministry of Culture, was later replaced by CONACULTA.

<sup>62</sup> The Mexican School of Painting is the name given in Mexico to the art movement founded in the 1920s whose primary focus was muralism.

the time, independent of their distinct ideological positions, agreed in recognizing that the Revolution had taught them what their country was. Thus, it can be said that the Mexican Revolution was a profound revolution, because it had an impact on the educational climate and because it gave rise to a cultural policy. This cultural policy gave the country a healthy pride in its own personality, enabling it to reconcile its two components, the indigenous and the European. I mention the antecedent of the Mexican Revolution because it was a colossal step forward in Mexico; not only did it define state policies, but also operated in forming the definition of our cultural identity.

This idea that I mentioned before, that a tradition preceded us but that at the same time Mexico was beginning a new journey, can be seen in the work of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes and in the Subsecretaría de Cultura. We tried to balance the work of preserving our patrimony, of transmitting historical consciousness, with the promotion of the new. It was one of the investments in the future that we wanted to make, like the readings for young people, the contests for artistic creation and renovation for youth, the painting salons and the systems for stimulating creation for young people at an intermediate level, and the creation of cultural content for television with the Unidad de Televisión Educativa y Cultural, to use culture and win over new audiences. It was about putting culture at the service of society, using the scale and penetration of the mass media. We fought for something that is one of the tasks still pending in Mexico; we still need to use the media in the service of cultural creation. Mexico's central task is not going to end well if the media don't work for it and communicate with it.

**Can you speak more concretely about the modern cultural policy that emerged from that foundational period? What are the tasks of the government?**

---

<sup>63</sup> The period from 1876 to 1911, presided over by President Porfirio Díaz.

In cultural policy there are many tasks to be carried out, but six of these are fundamental, and must be emphasized equally. On the one hand, there is the preservation of cultural and historical patrimony. Although we might welcome private patronage, this is a fundamental task of public responsibility. The second task is the transmission of historical heritage from generation to generation, which is connected to educational efforts. The third task is the support of artistic creation; this involves the artistic education of children and youth in the school curriculum, and later the professional training of young artists. The central core of the educational system is attentive to the creative talent of the future artist, as well as the love of art in what will be, in the future, the public. Afterwards, in the professional education of artists, there are two paths: that of the teacher and that of the artist. These paths might coincide; there are many artists who are also art teachers. This task involves stimulation of creativity and imagination, not only of the creative power of the artist but also the capacity to appreciate and enjoy art and to live life with an artistic dimension, which is what gives education its essential humanistic content. The fourth task, the formation of readers, although integrated into education, I separate somewhat, taking into account the general impact that the audiovisual media have in confronting the social conscience of our times. In an era in which reading faces serious obstacles to maintaining itself as a strong social custom, the generation of the reading habit, connected to a national system of libraries and editions that are accessible to the public at reasonable prices, is a fundamental task of cultural policy in the postmodern state in which the audiovisual media occupy such an important place. The fifth function is the stimulation of cultural institutions. Museums of history, the fine arts, and archeology, literature, orchestras, theater companies require special attention, at the national as well as regional levels. The sixth task is the system of stimuli and awards related to creation. The corollary of a cultural policy is to keep alive the

flame of cultural renovation, and this is done in two ways: the recognition of cultural discovery and the intermediary support of emerging artists through a system of prizes and awards.

It is in the 1960s that young people in Mexico begin to participate in cultural creation, an accomplishment that was consolidated in the 1970s and 1980s. This is what makes contemporary Mexico particularly attractive. Our modern societies face the great challenge of maintaining a balance between knowledge of tradition, which has been the central trunk of their historical continuity, and the exploration of the new. There is more than one way to become modern, and each people has the right to explore its own route in order to have a dynamic and profound relationship with its own tradition, with its historical conscience. Otherwise, humanity would be evolving towards uniformity, towards a loss of the distinct varieties of the human condition. On basic issues, cultural policy should not provide answers; it should open the fan of options so that society can find its responses. A cultural policy should end there, where creation begins.

### **What is the logic behind saying that culture is a responsibility of government?**

The state's job is to provide education: we recognize in our constitution the right to education as a fundamental right. In Article 3 [of the Constitution] education is characterized as an open education, not a dogmatic education. Education and culture are intertwined. In the basic social contract of the birth of the nation, there is the obligation to transmit education and the obligation to transmit the historical legacy, as a point of continuity for the nation. At bottom, the spirit of the nation is not its collective memory, but rather the awareness of its cultural values, its own values.









## **Ignacio Durán: “The challenge was to steal attention from the soaps”**

From 1973 to 1975, Ignacio Durán directed film and TV for the public television channels 11 and 13. Between 1983 and 1985 he served as general director of the Unidad de Televisión Educativa y Cultural, which belonged to the Secretaría de Educación Pública. From 1988 through 1994, Durán was the director of the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, during which time he established an advisory board to oversee the selection of scripts, and emphasized the need for co-productions. During a period of marked privatization, especially in the areas of distribution and exhibition, Durán was able to make state film production viable and productive.

In this interview Durán talks about cultural policy as it relates to film. Durán believes that the state is responsible for providing the means through which citizens can discuss important national issues, and that such discussion requires artistic and ideological freedom.<sup>64</sup> This interview took place May 23, 2001, in Washington DC.

### **What were the objectives of the Unidad de Televisión Educativa y Cultural?**

In the UTEC we had the goal of creating a basic video collection of cultural programs. Until then, there had been attempts within some public agencies in Mexico, like Channel 13, to create culturally-oriented video collections, but there was no library or video archive that dealt with cultural themes. The objective was to gather a minimum amount of material that could be used by the public channels. We made approximately 2,000 half-hour programs, which were

organized in series; each series contained 52 to 104 programs. The series *México plural* featured programs about Mexico's ethnic groups, the Opatas, Pimas, Seris, Mixtecos and Yaquis. We covered their way of life, being very respectful with the community, and making sure that it was the community members who told their story, almost with anthropological criteria. The challenge was to make it attractive to a viewer whose attention we had to steal from the soaps. We also made *Grandes maestros del arte popular* (Great Masters of Popular Art), a series in which we included all the artisans of Mexico who work in glass, clay, paper, metal. In another series called *Los nuestros* (Ours), Hugo Hiriart and Guita Schyfter did a great interview with Rufino Tamayo. The series *Los que hicieron nuestro cine* (Those Who Made Our Cinema), also made during my administration, looked at the history of Mexican cinema from its initial stages until the beginning of the 1990s. Later, Alejandro Pelayo, through an IMCINE competition, continued the series using the title *Los que hacen nuestro cine*. Thanks to this effort the spectator now has access to an impressive series that begins with the Lumière brothers arriving in Mexico and ends with *Amores perros* (Love Is a Bitch, 2000). We also made another series called *Los barrios* (The Neighborhoods), which featured the neighborhoods of Mexico City: Tepito, La Roma, La Condesa, La Doctores, Polanco, Coyoacán, Xochimilco, etc. The series *Los libros tienen la palabra* (Books Have the Word) was about Mexican writers, from the nineteenth as well as the twentieth century, and in some of the programs the writers played themselves.<sup>65</sup> Then we did another series called *De la vida de las mujeres* (On Women's Lives), where all of the women

---

<sup>64</sup> For more on Ignacio Durán's tenure at IMCINE, see David Maciel, "Cinema and the State in Contemporary Mexico" (*Mexico's Cinema* 214-220).

<sup>65</sup> Director Marisa Sistach worked on a 1985 episode of this series entitled "Gilberto Owen, el recuerdo olvidado" ("The Forgotten Memory"). This program appears as an autobiographical detail in Sistach's film *Los pasos de Ana*, in which the protagonist, a film school graduate, works as assistant director on a similar television program.

who would later make films worked: Busi Cortés, Olga Cáceres, Chelo Garrido, Marisa Sistach and Dora Guerra<sup>66</sup>.

**Which channels showed these series?**

Channels 11 and 13. They were on at a good time, at eight at night. Those programs were shown and have been widely distributed, and are now in all the libraries of Mexico. The ILCE [Instituto Latinoamericano de la Comunicación Educativa]<sup>67</sup> uses them also, both in the channels that ILCE runs, and in its donations of videos.

**Since many of the women who directed feature films during your tenure as director of IMCINE trained, so to speak, at UTEC, do you see similarities between the goals of UTEC and the goals of Mexican cinema during your administration?**

Yes, there are some similarities, although the IMCINE period was different and had different objectives. The most important thing is that the women who worked in UTEC acquired there their first tools: to have the programs ready on time . . . I'm not talking so much about sensibility, about talent, which they already had, but rather about the tools that they need to have in terms of production and editing.

**What was the state's goal in the UTEC period and in the IMCINE period?**

In the UTEC period the state had to come up with enough material to fill the airtime on channel 11 and channel 13, drawing on those people who worked in film and television. In the case of IMCINE, when I took over as director, it was in a serious crisis; in fact, IMCINE had

---

<sup>66</sup> See chapter 3.

<sup>67</sup> ILCE was created in Mexico City in 1956 as an organization to improve education through the use of technology and audiovisual media. In 1978, ILCE became an international organization when 12 other Latin American countries joined.

been through a terrible period and belonged to the RTC [Dirección General de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía] and to the Secretaría de Gobernación [Secretary of the Interior]. Getting IMCINE to become part of the Secretaría de Educación Pública was a long struggle that was won in that *sexenio*.

**This happened in December of 1988, right? IMCINE moved to the Secretaría de Educación at the beginning of the *sexenio*, when Salinas took office?**

Yes. In fact, a group of people involved in the cinema got together at [cinematographer] Gabriel Figueroa's house with President Carlos Salinas. At the meeting were [actors and directors] Alejandro Pelayo, Pedro Armendáriz, Felipe Cazals, Arturo Ripstein, Silvia Pinal, Ignacio López-Tarso, Jorge Fons, José "El Perrito" Estrada, Julián Pastor. . . The idea was to present the filmmakers' problems to the president. It became very clear to those present and to the president that the directors opposed IMCINE's being in Gobernación.

**Why?**

The Secretaría de Gobernación had practiced censorship and political control of cinema ever since the cinema had been under its jurisdiction; moreover, the cinema had much more affinity with cultural issues. The filmmakers did not want to belong to the same agency that carried out censorship. For this reason the film community took very seriously this request that I made at the beginning of the *sexenio*, when I was invited to become director of IMCINE.

**Did IMCINE have a cultural goal?**

The state certainly has to have a goal to accomplish, but as to the form it takes, how it is carried out, that should be the responsibility of the filmmakers. Looking back on that era, I believe that the projects really came from the filmmakers. Let me mention some examples.

Nicolás Echeverría, who had been a director closely linked to cultural themes, who had made documentaries for INAH and had made documentaries for the government in the time of Echeverría, was the first to propose a film like *Cabeza de Vaca* (1990). The film was not the result of a meeting between Nico Echeverría and Nacho Durán where they said: “Let’s make cultural cinema”; rather, Nico Echeverría already had that idea. His project had been rejected during the previous *sexenio* and the first thing I did, knowing that Nico is very talented, was give him the opportunity to get to work. Something similar happened with Juan de la Riva, the director of *Vidas errantes* (Errant Lives, 1984). The script of *Pueblo de madera* (Village of Wood, 1989) arrived at my desk as the continuation of *Vidas errantes*, and in it De la Riva continued the project begun in his first film. If we analyze it without taking into account these antecedents, *Pueblo de madera* could be linked to the cultural cinema, no? But in this case it was Juanito’s inspiration and desire to continue with his trajectory. In fact, Juanito is now finishing the third film of this trilogy, called *El gavián de la sierra* (The Mountain Sparrowhawk, 2002). Pepe Buil made a film called *Leyenda de una máscara* (Legend of a Mask, 1989) that could also be considered cultural cinema. *Leyenda de una máscara* is a link, a meditation on wrestling films, on Santo. . . Another example of cultural cinema during my *sexenio* in which it was the directors who took the initiative was *Como agua para chocolate* (Like Water for Chocolate, 1991). That Laura Esquivel’s book was made into a film, well, that was one of the things that Alfonso Arau did, but it wasn’t a determined plan on my part.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> The best-selling novel *Como agua para chocolate* (1989) was written by Laura Esquivel. The film adaptation was directed by Alfonso Arau.

**I don't think you understood my question. I wasn't suggesting that you imposed a certain notion of cinema on the directors, but rather that your administration as director of IMCINE was important for the creation of what have been called "quality films" (*cine de calidad*). I would like to ask you about the labor conditions that made it possible to create this type of cinema. The Federal Labor Law says that feature films that are to be shown commercially must be made by members of one of the two unions. What changes occurred at the end of the 1980s, with respect to feature film production, that affected the film school graduates?**

First I have to mention that there are two unions: the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica (STPC) and the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Cinematográfica (STIC). The STIC had given filmmakers a lot of opportunities; it is a less rigorous union than the STPC. The film school graduates—the women directors, the young directors—began to talk to the STIC and many of their films were made with workers from the STIC. Once agreements with the STIC became frequent, the STPC began to make more concessions, and by 1989 it allowed graduates to enter the directors' section. This opening is explained by the fact that at the end of the 1980s, all of the unions, from the directors to the workers, had suffered a terrible shakeup. Because of the labor crisis, when I entered IMCINE I found that the terrain was much more fertile for negotiation, to persuade, to link things, to make connections. It was a question of survival! The law hadn't changed, it still required a quota of Mexican workers, but the unions and the directors' sections had opened up a lot. I had many discussions, above all with the section of directors and adapters, and they said: "Yes! It has to be opened."

**What happened with films like *Los pasos de Ana* (*Ana's Steps*, 1989) that were made outside the union, when they were introduced into the commercial film circuit?**

A release fee was paid to the union, to the STIC.



**This release fee was for the film, or for the director?**

For the film. That is to say, the film was made with workers who weren't from the union, or who probably were, but didn't charge through the union, so the fee was paid. This hasn't changed. By the end of my administration [1994], everyone was already working with the unions. There were still a few cooperatives, although it was no longer necessary to have them.

**What was the role of the non-traditional private producer who was making quality cinema and had goals similar to those of IMCINE?**

Most of those producers were film directors themselves who became producers in order to make their films. One example is Alfredo Joskowicz, who had to form a company and become a producer in order to make *Playa Azul* (1991). Some producers had a certain amount of success, but I think that it was still a transitional stage. The only consistent producer who brought in resources and never co-produced with IMCINE, due in part to a question of professional ethics, was a very cultivated producer: Manuel Barbachano Ponce. Manuel Barbachano made *Frida* (1984) with Paul Leduc and *La tarea* (Homework, 1990) with Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, among others.

**But Barbachano had his own distributor, didn't he?**

Sometimes they distributed through us, through IMCINE, but they also had their own distribution company. Jorge Sánchez is another producer. The figure of the producer who wants to make important films and who nevertheless becomes a good participant with the state doesn't appear until 2000 or 2001. This didn't happen during my administration; mine was the beginning, the seed. Production houses like Altavista, like Resonancia with Fernando Cámara, like Argos, didn't exist then. Three or four production houses have emerged in Mexico that are

independent of the state and are made up of young people who are involved in the business, who want to make a profit, but who support high-quality projects like *Amores perros*.

## **Alfredo Joskowicz: “The Film School Graduates”**

Filmmaker Alfredo Joskowicz was among the first students to graduate from Mexico's first film school, the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (CUEC) at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). After a year of graduate studies in Belgium, he served as the CUEC's academic secretary from 1971 to 1976. From 1977 to 1982, Joskowicz was director of the newly created Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica (CCC). In 1989 he returned to the CUEC as its director. At the time of writing he is the director of IMCINE.

In the following interview, Joskowicz discusses the two film schools and the role they have played in the film industry in Mexico.

**I have been told by some filmmakers that there is little difference between the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos and the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica. Is that true?**

Of course not, if you take my word for it. I continue to teach at both schools because I believe the only way cinema can have an identity is through the creation of highly trained teams with the ability to strengthen the identity of their own filmmaking. Mexican cinema is not going to change by decree or simply with additional resources. One must continue to defend the identity of one's own cinema.

**And what is that cinema's identity?**

Well, that is a film critic's question. I can tell you that Mexico's cinema is one of the most important in Latin America. There are three important ones: Mexico, Argentina, and Venezuela. Cuba was at one time, but then it declined. For me, cinema is a combination of art

and industry. You have to talk about the number of movies. The person who talks about cinema only as art or only as an industry doesn't understand it in its totality. The analysis I always make has to do with the number of movies produced each year. Within that number, one must differentiate between what the state-financed sector produces and what is produced by the private sector. One also must look at what proportion of these films really has a possibility of achieving a certain level of artistic quality. The number of movies matters. Between 1980 and 1990, Mexico produced an average of 90 feature films annually. That is a lot of movies! The trick was they were extremely cheap--\$100,000 each.

### **How can you make movies for \$100,000?**

By reducing shooting time to an average of two and a half weeks. There is a chronological history of Mexican cinema up here (in the CUEC) that lists the names of all the films made. When you look at this list you realize that critics analyze only one or two percent of all the films produced, so the phenomenon isn't understood in its totality. The infrastructure that produced *películas de miseria* [low-budget, low-quality movies] had an almost monopolistic system of exhibition, which is why it lasted so many years. If you produce 90 feature films a year, where the hell are you going to show them? The exhibition company, Compañía Operadora de Teatros (COTSA), which was founded in 1947 as a private corporation, lasted until it was nationalized during Echeverría's presidency. Operadora de Teatros owned 525 movie theaters throughout the country. Now there are about 1,400, but for decades there were more than 2,500. That meant one-fourth of the market and a virtual monopoly on film exhibition because they had the best houses in the country. Those \$100,000 movies went through a private distributor called Películas Nacionales, a wholesale operation, and that wholesaler distributed the films to Operadora de Teatros. It was a smooth-running system!

Of the 90 feature films made each year, you could throw 70 or 75 of them in the garbage. What happened was that they made money, hard cash, and the chain was successful. These \$100,000 films, characterized by low artistic quality and few narrative demands, were made for a practically illiterate audience that attended those 525 theaters. That was a specific market, because people who are functionally illiterate get tired of reading subtitles. The rest of the theaters would show foreign or North American films with subtitles, but functionally illiterate Mexicans, who comprise an important sector, didn't go to those movies.

In 1991, Películas Nacionales went bankrupt due to internal fraud, and with the neoliberal politics of the [Salinas] government, the business was shut down. Between 1991 and 1994, the situation changed. Production declined to a third of what it had been: from 91 to 32 feature films. The traditional producers were confused and didn't know what to do. The average was 32 feature-length movies, and of these, about 10 were co-productions with the state (IMCINE) and 20 to 22 were privately financed. Most of those movies, which were made by Televisine, didn't depend on the commercial exhibition circuit because they would be shown on television. In 1992, the cost of a movie went up to around \$400,000 in the private sector and the average for a state movie started at \$600,000 to \$700,000. The government was again investing heavily in co-productions and gave the industry a boost, making some 50 movies through direct investments during the last *sexenio*. Obviously, if there are \$600,000 or \$700,000 movies, that's where the film school graduates are going to gain ground because they're trained in the new technologies. Before this shift we're looking at, movies were still being made using the old traditional methods from the 1940s: with the vertical moviola, re-recording, etc. There was a technological change--nonlinear editing, computers--which the technicians who had been insulated in the union for thirty years didn't know how to use. The film school graduates were weak in narrative skills--

because one can't improvise overnight--but they did have craftsmanship, up-to-the-minute skills, and a new way of thinking that was not the old, commercial, bottom-line thinking that had sustained the entire Mexican film industry.

### **How did the film schools come about?**

The origin of the schools is quite important. Between 1943 and 1945, there was one school associated with the industry, the Academia Cinematográfica de México, but it only existed for two years.<sup>69</sup> It didn't last long because there was a split in the union and a dispute that prevented people in the academy from having access to the industry. It closed and there wasn't another film school in Mexico until 1963, when the CUEC opened, started by people who belonged to the university film clubs. The name is significant. It was called the University Center for Film Studies because, originally, it was designed to study the phenomenon of cinema and not to make films. People who were analyzing movies started it, members of the film clubs. The CUEC developed with its back turned to the industry because it was created within the UNAM, with the idea that cinema was, to some extent, a form of artistic expression. That's where it began. Later, obviously, those of us who belonged to the first student generations soon wanted to make movies. We began making them with 16mm or 8mm film, with minimal infrastructure and a lot of romanticism.

---

<sup>69</sup> This school came into being within section 2 of the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Cinematográfica (STIC) to give workers in the industry a way to improve their practical knowledge. In 1943, classes were for those aspiring to be actors and writers; in 1945, they were extended to all of the technical fields of cinema.

**What was your relationship with this school, the CUEC?**

I studied here and was academic secretary of the CUEC from 1971 to 1976. I became its director in March of 1989, and in 1990, I consolidated the degree program from five years to four. What I did was redesign the program and create a core course. Previously, practice and not systematized academics was a priority and, obviously, the program consumed many more resources. Students had six months of classes and six months of filming--the whole school, all at once. What my administration did was to put things in order.

The school arose as one in which comprehensive teaching was the byword. It was for the training of "complete filmmakers"; that is to say, people who could do everything, without specialization. The Mexican industrial unions were closed for 25 years, from 1945 until sometime in the 1970s. You could enter at the bottom, as a janitor, but the upper levels were closed. Some of the professors we had here did have connections with the industry, but they were not many. So when we studied here, we never expected to go into the industry; we had the romantic idea of making "auteur cinema," also called "independent cinema."

The famous independent cinema lasted from 1970 until 1975 or 1976. There was a limit to the romanticism of auteur cinema because each movie you produced would ruin you. Since you couldn't enter the commercial film industry, how were you going to recoup your money? What happens when you have your own money to risk but no guarantee that you'll be able to recover a single cent? There goes your romanticism. The other option is to enter the industrial circuit--where you will recoup the money--by negotiating either with private producers or the state. When you finished a movie, if it was interesting, the state might buy the rights or you could pay a transfer fee to the union and enter the industry's system. Entering the commercial circuit wasn't easy because you hadn't fulfilled the industry's requirement of using union

workers. You can make shorts or videos independently, but not 35mm feature films. I produced a feature film that was outside the cinematic norm: I made *El cambio* (The Change, 1971), the first feature-length film in color [at the CUEC]. After the movie was finished, there were negotiations with the union and authorizations were given. The copyright for *El cambio*, however, belonged to the UNAM. Since the university was a nonprofit institution, the film could not be sold and consequently, did not recover its investment. This was a path that didn't lead far. You can break from the norm but if you want commercial exhibition, you have to pay, you have to return to the norm.

### **How did the CCC come about?**

Conceptually speaking, the CUEC and the CCC have very distinct origins and, initially, two different forms of training. The emergence of the CCC in September of 1975 took place within the context of the nationalization of the industry during the Echeverría sexenio. Practically everything was nationalized except for Películas Nacionales, the distribution company I mentioned before. They nationalized the studios, nationalized and bought Operadora de Teatros, created distributors, and finally created the Centro de Capacitación. Its name is significant: “training” (*capacitación*) is not the same as “studying.” Rather, it was a training center to form crews that would enter directly into the state industry. The CUEC taught students, the CCC trained professionals. As you can see, the origin of the two schools is different, because the CCC came out of the Estudios Churubusco as part of the nationalization of the film industry.

The CCC was founded just over a year before the end of the Echeverría *sexenio* and it belonged to the Banco Nacional Cinematográfico, which was part of the Ministry of Finance. At the beginning of 1979, Margarita López Portillo liquidated the bank and we became part of the Dirección General de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía, headed by López Portillo herself.



That was a disaster. That's where the problems began, because Margarita López Portillo wanted to close down the school. She said, very freely, that there weren't enough movies produced in Mexico to justify the school. If there were already 135 directors on the bench in the directing department, why did we need any more?

I was director of the CCC from 1977 to 1982. At the change of *sexenios*, Carlos Velo, the school's first director and founder, left, and they called me in. When I got there, since I had had a university education, I opened it up to all of the other specialties. Because originally, in order to avoid conflict with the unions, the CCC only trained people in three fields: directing, scriptwriting, and producing. These were the fields in which there were no problems with the union, which was stricter with regard to the technical and manual fields: photography, editing, sound, etc. The CCC was about to be closed, but since Margarita López Portillo couldn't throw out the students, it came down to her preventing me from allowing new students to enter. Margarita López Portillo hoped that, by attrition, the CCC would close, but I was able to keep that from happening. Later, I managed to shore it up so that at least it would survive and grow.

**What type of work do most students who finish their studies at the CUEC or the CCC get?**

How are technological changes affecting the world of the moving image? The medium--whether it's a film negative, magnetic recording, or CD-ROM--does not matter. What matters is that the world of possibilities for work is far wider than it was two generations ago. Every day there are more television channels, more satellites, etc., and one-fourth of their programming is made up of movies. This expanding market is monopolized by the Americans throughout the world. But there are many possibilities for work, many more than for the three previous generations, when there was only the film negative and a very narrow passageway. Of course, everyone aspires to direct feature films, but since it represents a responsibility of hundreds of

thousands of dollars, it's not given to just any new graduate. You can't make a mistake there. It doesn't depend just on talent, it depends on the level of responsibility and skill that you demonstrate, and your personal ability to obtain financing.

### **Do people making movies have to hire union workers?**

The unions used to be very strong; they held out until the 1990s. Now they are much more flexible. If the film school graduates want to join the union now, they have to struggle, but they can get in. You pay your membership fee and your dues, and you'll get in. There is no country in the world where students can be union members because a union is an organization of professionals. There is a very clear difference: one mustn't lose sight of the fact that to make industry films means making films according to the norms of the country. There is the Film Industry Law, the Federal Labor Law, and the General Law of Trading Companies, of corporations. Which is to say, you have to follow regulations because you are going to engage in commercial activities. Non-industry cinema doesn't follow any of these rules, but neither does it have a presence on commercial screens.

### **How many people take the entrance exam and how many actually enter the CUEC?**

I'll give you a recent figure. Since 1995, the school has accepted 20 new students a year. In 1996, however, due to the economic crisis, we were only able to accept 15 students. In the last few years the average number of applicants has been between 185 and 200.

### **What relation is there between the UNAM and the CUEC?**

It is part of the university. The CUEC is not called a department; it is a center that offers extension courses. After 32 years, we still don't confer degrees, we only give certificates of study because we are outside the central system. That is the result of a series of academic

irregularities within the school, problems that have existed since its inception. The other film school, the CCC, doesn't confer degrees either, just certificates of study, a list of classes. Both schools operate at the bachelor's degree level.



## **Busi Cortés: “Free Lunch”**

Director Busi Cortés entered the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica in 1977. In this presentation made at the 1997 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association in Guadalajara, Mexico, Cortés spoke about the crucial role played by the film schools in the education of Mexican women filmmakers.

We were just three women in my class (1977-1981), and, really, the three of us were good producers of our own films and those of all our classmates. I believe that the fact of being women was key in the way in which we thought about production. Since there was no money in the school, the informal education we received in our families helped a great deal. Our mode of production was different because it took into account the affective side of things, an element that comes from our particular experience. When you are at home, you have to see not only practical aspects of everyday life, like grocery shopping and administration, but also the affective aspects, for example, your relationship with your children. You can't give more or less attention to any one child because if you do there will be friction. The same thing happens with a film production; in order to create a family environment for a production, it is less important to pay attention to where the money comes from than to look at how it is distributed. Caring about distribution, yes, is more typical of women than of men.

The most crucial element of our upbringing that affected production was that feminine way of being involved in everything. That quality helped us to get resources in the most unusual ways; we got money for our films the same way that we prepare everything that is necessary for the “production” of a home. Making movies was like getting a “free lunch” for your children; you had to get everything for free: workers, materials, wardrobe, actors, etc. This method of production worked because the schools backed us in the production. The Centro de Capacitación

Cinematográfica, because it was a school, wasn't authorized to produce commercial pictures, but it could intervene through the *opera prima* program. Basically, the *opera prima* consisted of a director making his or her first feature and the school participating as co-producer, not as sole producer. Each filmmaker had to obtain additional support wherever possible: from private producers, from other universities, from wherever. The school supplied equipment and all the discounts it got, such as discounts on Kodak film and on cameras, and also provided student workers.

In my case, students experienced the "free lunch" concept when they worked with me on the first *opera prima* made, which was *El secreto de Romelia*. All of a sudden, the living room where we had planned to film didn't work out, and we had to go to the corner to ask the neighbor to lend us hers. Besides the Fondo de Fomento a la Calidad Cinematográfica, for *El secreto de Romelia* I had to obtain support from unusual sources: the government of Tlaxcala and the Universidad de Guadalajara. And not only from institutions--I also looked for collaborators among the people involved: actors, technicians and even the teachers. Since it was the CCC's first feature film, they charged us less. For example, what Pedro Armendáriz charged was ridiculous and, in addition, he didn't set any conditions. He was a great collaborator on the movie. The *opera prima* is a scheme that works; I believe that the seventh *opera prima* has already been made at the CCC.

I have spoken about the concrete case of the *opera prima*, and now I believe it necessary to look at the general panorama from which this mode of production arose. I would like to speak some about Mexico City's two film schools, as well as the changes that the system of film production has undergone over the years. The CCC, where I studied and taught, and the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos are projects that complement each other, although at

first there were differences. To begin with, at the CCC when Marisa [Sistach] and I studied--no longer when Eva [López-Sánchez] studied--, incoming students had to be older than 22 and, preferably, to have some other academic or professional experience in any field related to cinema. You could have been anything from a technician to a photographer, or have worked with actors in the theater. At the CUEC, on the other hand, there were no age or background requirements; actually, kids could enter the CUEC as high school students.

It is true that, at first, there was a difference, let's say, of origin. The CCC was born as a government school. From the start, we were accused of being protected by the government; they said that we were "gobiernistas." The CUEC, on the other hand, was the revolutionary school. At first, this difference in origin was connected to a difference of genre. CUEC students, since they were "revolutionaries" and didn't have resources to make movies, made mostly documentaries with social and political content. In contrast, since we were "gobiernistas," it was said that we were making another type of movie more oriented towards fiction. In reality, this labeling came about at a point when the school was going to be closed. Since they were going to close the CCC, the first generation had to graduate, and in order to do that, everyone had to complete their films because they needed something to show for what they had done. The majority made short fiction films, and from there it was established that our school was more about fiction than documentaries. Nevertheless, with the years it has come to be more or less equal.

The different initial inclinations lost importance because there was an event that united the two schools. When the CCC had been in existence barely three years, Margarita López Portillo decided to close the school, our school, in order to save money, because she said, "Why should we have two film schools if one will do?" At that moment an unusual thing occurred:

students at the CUEC and in Political Science and Social Science at the UNAM, who were very conscious of what was happening, organized a huge demonstration to support us, so that they wouldn't close the school. They thought that two schools were very few in order to meet the demand of all the people that wanted to study film.

After this act of solidarity from the CUEC there hasn't been so much rivalry between the schools. I would say that, rather, they are two projects that complement each other, two sister schools. Anyway, now there are no academic prerequisites or age limits for entrance. The difference in genre has also changed radically, because now both schools make both documentaries and fiction. Before, the first year at the CCC was a general course in film language and the second year was sort of to reinforce the first. In the third year, we studied fiction, made our thesis and that was it. When Eduardo Maldonado entered as director of the CCC after Alfredo Joskowicz, the plan of studies was changed. A year was added that was dedicated to documentary film. This was fundamental in the development of the CCC's curriculum.

Another thing that the CCC was criticized for was that formally its films were very pretty, but supposedly had no content. In contrast, those of the CUEC were said to have an important social content, even if they were made with outdated material and without lights. Independently of what the CUEC has or hasn't done, it has been a challenge for the CCC to overcome this formal aspect of its films in order to truly find a content that could move people. The documentary part, promoted first by Eduardo Maldonado and afterwards by Juan Paco Urrusti, has given a lot of force to the school. In fact, now the strongest point of the CCC is documentary. The first result of Eduardo Maldonado's workshop was a movie by Dana Rotberg about Elvira Luz Cruz, a woman who killed her children. Dana made an excellent movie; it was



a truly moving documentary. Among the more recent results of the CCC's documentary workshop, Juan Carlos Rulfo's *El abuelo Cheno* (Grandfather Cheno, 1994) is an outstanding example.

I'm going to backtrack a few years and present a panorama of the huge changes that the film industry was undergoing at that time, in order to explain how the graduates, with their training, came into this system. Since my colleagues are not here today, I'm going to speak a little about all of them.

The heyday of Mexican cinema known as the Golden Age was due to a very specific production and distribution structure. Latin American distributors and exhibitors would ask American producers for the films they needed; the latter, because the United States was at war, would hand over these projects to Mexican producers. Matilde Landeta could make movies because she offered the films to Latin American distributors and exhibitors, and they paid in advance. Although Matilde didn't have academic training (because it didn't exist), the fact that she spoke English allowed her to break into a film career. The Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica, the film union, was closed to women working in anything other than make-up or wardrobe; but they permitted Matilde to be a *script*, which is something like an assistant to the director, because she spoke English. At the end of the 1940s many of the producers as well as the capital invested in Mexican cinema came from the United States; they hired Matilde because she spoke English. Matilde took advantage of that era's mode of production and, with the help of her brother [actor Eduardo Landeta], she was able to make her films. This mode of production, however, disappeared when the war was over.

After the Second World War, the United States returned to its country with its capital, and business in Mexico ended right away. Also coinciding with these developments, the Banco

Nacional Cinematográfico was founded [in 1942], and the state became the director of this type of business. Over time, with the state's intervention, private movie producers lost their freedom of commerce, and the Golden Age scheme of production ended.

With support for private producers gone, the state ended up almost monopolizing film production. That doesn't mean that there was no commercial cinema; because there was an entire state film industry propping them up, movies were made that had a public. In the 1970s, during the *sexenio* of Luis Echeverría, new directors who had studied in film schools flocked to commercial cinema: Paul Leduc, who had studied in France; Sergio Olhovich, who studied in Moscow; Juan Manuel Torres in the school in Prague, and the graduates of the CUEC: Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, Jorge Fons, Marcela Fernández Violante, and Alfredo Joskowicz. Marcela Fernández Violante was the first female director to graduate from the film school. She worked during a state cinema era, when filmmakers were given all the money necessary to make their movies. It is to Marcela's credit that she was able to make pictures along with directors like Felipe Cazals, Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, Arturo Ripstein and Jorge Fons. It was a truly difficult generation because they boasted of being "machos" and they even said that they gave Marcela the projects that they didn't want--which is not true, because Marcela knew how to make those projects hers. Her *opera prima*, *De todos modos Juan te llamas (Whatever You Do, It's No Good, 1975)*, about the era of the Cristero revolution, is really a very good movie that was important in its time. I believe that there, yes, the academic education was fundamental.

A lot of money was spent on cinema during the Echeverría presidency, but then things changed; suddenly, there wasn't any money left. In order to solve this problem, a new production formula arose, one which I see as very much related to the one we learned in the schools. In the 1990s, the "free lunch" mode of production helped our generation of filmmakers

to make movies because IMCINE didn't finance more than 50 percent of a given production. Since the state no longer provided all the money, directors were forced to look for their resources in other places: not only from the government, but also from the private sector, from businesses, from universities. An important means of financing was the Fondo de Fomento a la Calidad Cinematográfica (FFCC), established in 1986; it was made up of two representatives of the state and seven from the unions, and also included private producers. After making a film, you paid the co-producers (IMCINE or FFCC) according to how much money you had recovered from sales.

Moreover, in the 1990s we directors became our own producers; we had to have a production house that would invest capital or labor. We created Producciones Romelia,<sup>70</sup> which contributed the script and direction. We included that labor as part of the budget, calculating it as equivalent to 15 percent of the cost of the movie. Another part of our work was paid from what the FFCC or IMCINE loaned us, but we refused to collect all our salary from that money because we preferred that it go first to the movie rather than to us.

The production houses that worked during 1988-1994 fought to hold down costs; they tried to present an alternative to the private production system, which in Mexico is very corrupt. Let's say, for example, that the private producers said that their movie cost 100; well, they made the movie for 40 and kept 60. The result was that the private producers made very bad movies, because from the script on up, they spent very little. We, in contrast, didn't inflate the budget; we said: "If the movie costs 40, it costs 40. It doesn't cost 100." And not only that, instead of keeping part of the film's budget for ourselves, we contributed money to make it. We paid to

---

<sup>70</sup> Producciones Romelia was founded in February 1991. Busi Cortés was the director, Gina Terán was the executive producer, and Carmen Cortés and Alicia Molina were partners.

make the movie and we were careful that it was in accordance with what it really cost. That was the great contribution of the 1990s to the film industry, that people actually made movies for love of movies, not to get rich. In addition, there was another difference: while the private producers made the movies like enchiladas, one after another, after another, after another, we made one movie every six years. So, obviously, we weren't doing it with a desire for profit.

An aspect of the Echeverría era that was maintained in the 1990s was that there were mechanisms to ensure not only production but also exhibition and distribution. As a result, for example, I had a larger crowd for the debut of *Serpientes y escaleras* in just one showing than in all the showings of my short films from the time I began making them. It was fantastic to know that each week a Mexican movie was being presented. Another thing, when we film school graduates began to develop a new system of production, Matilde Landeta, who had not made a film in forty years, and Marcela Fernández Violante, who had also stopped filming for almost six years, began filming again.

The generation of contemporary women directors is composed of graduates from both schools. Dana Rotberg, Marisa Sistach, Eva López and I studied in the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica, while María Novaro and Marcela Fernández Violante are from the CUEC. In the case of María and Beatriz Novaro, they each have a different education. Beatriz's education was more literary than cinematographic; she only took one year-long screenwriting course at the CCC. María, however, has made a complete career of the cinema. In the case of Guita Schyfter, I'm not familiar with her education. I know that she has a strong background in documentary and in educational television. She began her career in the 1970s in educational television and made documentaries afterward. Her documentary *Xochimilco* received awards in various sectors.

Eva López was a very brilliant pupil at the CCC whom I admired very much. She comes from a generation whose members have all become film professionals, whether as cinematographers, directors, producers, etc. When Eva's generation was studying, a project was organized by the schools and the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes. It had to do with making half-hour fiction films about love stories in Mexico City, and was called *Encuentros y desencuentros en la ciudad de México*. All the proposals were in competition and Eva presented a script that was accepted by the school authorities but not by the CONACULTA representatives. What impressed me most was that even though it was not approved, Eva made it. She didn't say: "OK, since they didn't accept it I won't make it." No, she made it and she finished it. Eva is a real fighter. Later on, she made her thesis at CCC, *Objetos perdidos*, which allowed her to compete for the Oscar and later gave her the opportunity to make her first full-length film, *Dama de noche*. This feature was not well received by the critics and, as happens to all of us, it brought her a lot of disappointment.

In the case of Marisa Sistach, she and I have many things in common: we have worked together, we are friends and we have two children of the same age who have been in the same schools. Marisa, however, was educated in the Liceo Franco-Mexicano elementary and secondary schools and her parents are Catalonians and, from that point of view, she has an education very different from mine--my parents are from Guanajuato, from a very religious and conservative family. Marisa always had very strong social concerns that showed in the content of her movies. Her thesis at the CCC was *Y si platicamos de agosto*, a love story between two adolescents set in 1968. Afterwards, she made an important medium-length film that was called *Conozco a las tres*, very representative of this social restlessness that Marisa has always had. Recently she made *Anoche soñé contigo*, which is a story of adolescents, made in a completely

different style, because it is not a personal movie. Pepe Buil wrote the script, adapting the idea from Alfonso Reyes. Since it was a movie financed by a private producer, it had to comply with certain very specific rules dictated by the producer in order to make a movie as an investment.

As for myself, I have always linked my professional work to my academic work, above all, in relation to my movies. Short and full-length films have always been part of my academic projects, both when I was a student and later as a teacher. My education in the CCC and the Universidad Iberoamericana, where I studied communications, has been fundamental in my development. I would like to end by repeating that in my case, as in those of my women colleagues, without the film schools we wouldn't have been able to do much. The experience that the film schools gave us has been fundamental in enabling us to break into the film industry.

## 2. Guita Schyfter

---

Guita Schyfter studied psychology before her interest in educational media production brought her into contact with the world of images. After working in educational television, she filmed historical documentaries and later moved into feature films. Throughout her career, Schyfter has been interested in cultural differences. In most of her scripts, Schyfter has worked with playwright Hugo Hiriart, who is also Schyfter's husband.

Guita Schyfter was born in San José, Costa Rica, in 1947, and went to Mexico in 1965 to study psychology at the UNAM. She graduated with a degree in Social Psychology in 1969. Schyfter intended to take the entrance exam for the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica as soon as it opened, however, she changed her mind and in 1975, left for England with a scholarship from the British Council to study audiovisual media at the Open Institute of Educational Technology. She liked the production of educational programs, one of the classes offered, so much that she decided to continue her studies in this field. In 1977, she obtained another scholarship from the British Council to study television production at the BBC.

Schyfter's initial involvement in child psychology led her to discover her enthusiasm for media production; gradually she moved from educating children to educating adults and from making educational television to making video documentaries on historical and artistic topics. On her return to Mexico, Schyfter began working in television: first in Channel 4's *Telesecundaria* program, and then making audiovisual programs for the National Archive. Between 1983 and 1984, she worked for the Unidad de Televisión Educativa y Cultural (UTECE), where many film school graduates worked making high-quality television series. Marisa Sistach and Busi Cortés, who were among the first women graduates, also worked for the UTECE.

At the same time that she was developing as a documentarian, Schyfter was also producing works for the theater. She served as producer for a number of plays by Hugo Hiriart, among them *Minotastas y su familia* (Minotastas and His Family, 1980), *Simulacros* (Simulacra, 1983), *Intimidad* (Intimacy, 1984) and *Tablero de la pasión de juguete* (Playing Board for Toy Passion, 1991). In this role Schyfter learned to manage funds, choose costumes, and work with actors. In 1986, she applied this knowledge and made *Los caminos de Greene* (Greene's Roads), a dramatized documentary made with professional actors that signaled her entrance into fiction. *Los caminos de Greene* questions the prejudices of British writer Graham Greene during his 1938 visit to Mexico. The film begins with a dramatization of Greene's disagreeable encounter with a dentist, then introduces a priest, one of the characters in Green's novel *The Power and the Glory*. The priest returns to Tabasco during the Cristero war<sup>71</sup> and is captured by anti-Catholic government forces. To produce this film, Schyfter sought funding from state and private institutions. She received money from the Ministry of Agriculture and from the state of Tabasco



and in addition, was able to borrow horses and soldiers from the federal army, trucks from the Dairy Union, and shrimp boats from the Lorente Torruco company.

Schyfter's documentary work culminated with *Xochimilco: Historia de un paisaje* (Xochimilco: History of a Landscape, 1990). This documentary, made in 16mm and then transferred to 35mm, describes the history and ecology of the area of Xochimilco. The region, located 30 kilometers from Mexico City, is characterized by an agricultural practice based on *chinampas*, small islands of fertile land linked by canals. *Xochimilco* returns to the times before the conquest, when this region fed the great city of Tenochtitlan, and traces the changes that came with the conquest. It also explores the role Xochimilco played during the nineteenth century and the Mexican revolution. Xochimilco received an Ariel for Best Medium-Length Documentary in 1990.

In 1985, inspired by reading Isaac Bashevis Singer, Schyfter decided to make a movie reflecting her Jewish origins. Although she had long had the idea of speaking about her experience as a Jew in a predominantly Catholic culture, she did not want to do it in autobiographical form. In 1991, with the experience she had acquired in theater and documentary production, Schyfter made her first 35mm film, *Novia que te vea* (Bride to Be), adapted from the novel by the Mexican Sephardic Jew Rosa Nissán. In the adaptation, the experience of Rifke (an Ashkenazi Jew like Schyfter herself) was added to that of Oshi, the Sephardic character in Nissán's novel. Through Rifke, Schyfter deals with the theme of Jewish socialism; and through Oshi, with the theme of cultural and familial expectations regarding marriage. *Novia que te vea* reconstructs the life of three Jewish generations: in the 1940s, Oshi's

---

<sup>71</sup> The Cristero War of 1926-1929 resulted from President Plutarco Elías Calles's attempts to curb the power of the Catholic church through extreme legal measures, which were in turn

grandparents arrive in Mexico from Turkey; in the 1960s, we observe the lives of Oshi's and Rifkes's families, as well as the young women's own experiences. The movie ends in the 1980s with the two friends meeting once again.

Taking advantage of state support for cinema during the *sexenio* of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-94), Schyfter was able to make *Novia que te vea* with funding from IMCINE, the FFCC, Arte Nuevo (Schyfter's production company), and independent investors. *Novia que te vea* cost nearly \$1,000,000 and was finished in February 1993, although it wasn't shown commercially until more than a year later. It won numerous awards: the Audience Choice Award at the Muestra de Cine Mexicano in Guadalajara (1993); the Audience Choice Award in the Chicago Latino Film Festival (1993); second prize in the Mexico City category at the sixth FECIMEX competition (1993); three Heraldos, for Best Script (Rosa Nissán and Hugo Hiriart), Best Photography (Toni Khun) and Best Actress (Angélica Aragón) (1994); and five Ariels: Best First Film (Schyfter), Best Original Screenplay (Hiriart), Best Costumes (María Estela Fernández), Best Supporting Actress (Angélica Aragón) and Best Sound (Salvador de la Fuente) (1994). The film also received the Special Critics Award at the Women and Film festival in Mar de Plata, Argentina (1994).

In her second full-length fiction film, *Sucesos distantes* (Distant Events, 1995), entomologist Arturo Fabre becomes obsessed with uncovering the past of his wife, the Russian actress Irene Gorenko. Fabre discovers a letter in Russian that contains a photograph of Irene with another man and begins to get jealous. His jealousy grows when Fabre receives a visit from Viktor Fet, who claims to be Irene's second husband. Fet tells Fabre that he has come to warn Irene that her first husband is looking for her. Because of these intrigues, Arturo begins to

---

resisted by Catholic militants. The conflict was settled through negotiation in 1929.

distrust Irene, but is unable to discuss the topic openly. Although *Sucesos distantes* was finished in September 1994, it was not shown commercially until April 1996, after its premiere at the Muestra de Guadalajara in 1995.

## **“I would get so panicked . . . I had to take sedatives”**

**One of the qualities that gives unity to your movies is the presence of characters from different cultures who observe one another. Can you explain this to me?**

I am sensitive to cultural differences because in Costa Rica, where I was born, I didn't belong to the majority culture but to a small Jewish community. I always had the feeling of being an outsider. When I left Costa Rica in 1965 and came to study in Mexico, it seemed almost paradise. Here there were Jews, Lebanese, exiled Spaniards, indigenous communities, Chinese . . . In the 1970s, many exiled Latin Americans arrived, fleeing from the political repression in Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Guatemala. I felt that here people rejected everyone they considered a foreigner, yet at the same time, everybody could live without problems. The jokes made about people were milder because people made fun of the way everyone talked, not just the accent of the Jews, which I suffered from growing up in Costa Rica. When I arrived in Mexico I felt, though it might seem strange, part of a group: the foreigners. I have always thought that this country is a paradise for foreigners, no matter how much it is criticized. English writers have not written about any other country as much as they have about Mexico, and the reality continues to be as it always has been: “Mexico is a magnet for foreigners.” Once you come here, it's extremely difficult to leave. I myself became a Mexican citizen in 1973.

**Let's talk a little about your career as a director. Is it difficult for a woman to dream of making a movie?**

I don't know how it was for other women, but for me it was certainly difficult to achieve. In the 1970s, I went to a film festival in which they showed a movie by Agnes Varda. What I remember is my surprise when I saw that a woman made it. I said to myself: "Hell, women can make movies too." I think my surprise was due to the fact that I was, or am, slow in realizing many things. That's how I've been since adolescence: I wanted to study medicine to become a psychiatrist. I loved [Scottish writer] Archibald Joseph Cronin's novels about doctors, *The Keys of the Kingdom*, *The Citadel*, which I fantasized about. I had also read Freud and was interested in the interpretation of dreams. However, I was intimidated by the fact that to be a psychiatrist one first had to study medicine and then go through training to do therapy. That's why, next to my dream and my fantasy, was my fear. I believed that my aspirations were too high so I put limits on my own dreams. I think this lack of confidence in myself was due in large part to my education as a woman. I had very few models to follow in Costa Rica; as far as I can remember, there was only one woman doctor. The result was that I limited myself to studying educational psychology, which seemed to me perfectly doable.

**After studying psychology, what did you do?**

In 1974, I got it into my head to study cinema at the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica, but I didn't even go as far as to take the entrance exam. I became discouraged when a friend at the UNAM, where I was working, reminded me that I had to take care of a small child and couldn't work in the mornings. In 1975, I received a scholarship from the British Council and went to England, to the Open Institute of Educational Technology. Since they

wanted to start an open university here in Mexico, they sent me to a sort of training course in the area of audiovisual media so I could learn the workings of this type of university. During this training I spent three months in each of the different areas. One of these was production of educational programs for television. They placed me with Carol Haslam, the television producer. And it was lucky for me. I remember she was producing a program on Cuba and the assembly of the documentary, adding the music, the editing, etc. fascinated me. So one day I said to her, "I would love to learn to do what you do!" and she responded, "Why don't you study?" To which I answered, "I can't because I have a young daughter." But Haslam told me: "I do too and not only that, I'm going to have another. I'm pregnant." Then, luckily for me, she added: "If you want, I'll speak right now to my husband, who is the director of the course on educational program production at the British Council." I went to see him and filled out my application for the course.

At that moment my life took a complete turn. First, I freed myself from an academic world that wasn't for me, but also, I found what truly excited me: filmmaking. I was 30 years old when the British Council offered me another scholarship to continue with a television production course at the BBC. Back in Mexico, I worked in educational television. At first, between 1979 and 1980, I directed three weekly shows on artistic and health education for the *Telesecundaria* program, which was broadcast on channel 4 and aimed at middle school students. Later, in 1980 and 1981, I made 20 audiovisuals on the history of Mexico for the National Archive whose headquarters were in the old Lecumberri prison. These were documentaries based on photos of documents held in the Archive. I really enjoyed doing this work. Later, between 1983 and 1984, I made documentaries for a television series called *Los*

*nuestros*, broadcast on channel 11, the cultural channel, and produced by the UTEC, which belonged to the Department of Public Education.

### **When did you begin to do fiction?**

I made my first dramatized documentary in 1986, *Los caminos de Greene*, about the visit of the English writer Graham Greene to Mexico. People often asked me if I was interested in doing fiction and I always answered no, that what I wanted to make were documentaries. And it's true that I really liked making documentaries, but I think that, again, I was scared to take the risk. *Los caminos de Greene* marked the transition between doing documentaries and making a fiction movie. I remember that, I would get so panicked when directing actors, I had to take sedatives for my nerves.

### **How did you overcome the panic?**

By doing it. I did it without really realizing what was involved. You have to take risks and you take more risks when you don't completely know what is involved. Without realizing it, I found myself filming this docudrama in the jungle of Tabasco. My initiation came on the first day of filming when the camera broke. We were filming a scene in which a ship had to pass by the place where the river met the sea. The actors, who were on the ship, began to get seasick and nauseous from waiting so long and some sailors passing by had to go rescue them. But the producer, Leonor Álvarez, told me: "When everything falls apart on the first day of filming, it's a sign of good luck, and everything is going to go well afterwards. Every director knows that." So I calmed down. I was figuring things out as I went along, since there was no longer any way to run away. Nevertheless, the feeling of fear when I had to work with some of the actors, especially the most experienced ones, never left me. I was terrified to imagine that they might

say: “And this bogus amateur, who has never made a thing, what does she know?” Everything I do, I do slowly. It’s not like I say, “Now I’m going to make a movie.” No. I spent five or six years thinking about my first movie. And at first, I didn’t even tell anyone I wanted to make it.

**You told me in an earlier interview that *Los caminos de Greene* continues to be your favorite work. Why?**

What I meant is that I feel a special affection for that movie. I do have a lot of affection for it for several reasons. It was the first time I had worked with professional film actors: María Rojo, Alejandro Parodi, Humberto Enríquez, and a very young Daniel Giménez Cacho, who was performing on film for the first time. In addition, it was the first time I’d attempted to do fiction and, on top of that, I also liked the theme. While I was studying in England, I read a story by Somerset Maugham called “The Hairless Mexican” and I thought: “It’s incredible that Somerset had the ability to notice certain cultural traits of Mexicans, others of the English, and was able to juxtapose them.” Maugham’s way of looking at other cultures has always interested me. All of my works, in some way, reproduce this dynamic: that of one culture’s view of another.

When Greene visited Mexico in 1938, he saw it through his Anglo-Saxon culture. First in the travel account entitled *Another Mexico*<sup>72</sup> and then in the novel *The Power and the Glory*. You know, his view is extremely interesting to analyze. Greene was very Catholic and arrived in Mexico shortly after the Cristero war of the late 1920s. This civil war was the result of the so-called “religious conflict,” which pitted the clergy against the revolutionary Mexican government. Greene travels to the state of Tabasco, which was the only one where the churches were still closed and services suspended. Religion and alcohol were prohibited because the



governor, [Tomás] Garrido Canabal, considered them to be the two greatest evils of society. The rest of the country had already stopped the persecution of the Catholics somewhat. The fact is that the persecution that he sees becomes transformed in the novel, because for Greene, who comes from a Protestant culture, being Catholic is associated with the idea of belonging to a minority. Instead of noticing what the role of the church in Mexico had been, the only thing he sees is the discrimination. That is to say, he uses his personal experience to interpret “the other.” He is unable to realize that in a country that has been predominantly Catholic, although the Catholics are persecuted, they are not being discriminated against for theological reasons. He doesn’t understand that what he is seeing is a war against ecclesiastical power and its interference in politics. He doesn’t recognize the participation of the church in state matters and its alliance with the politically and economically dominant classes. It escapes him that many Mexicans express a certain rejection towards the church as an institution, toward the priests, the fathers, although they themselves may be very strict Catholics. I think he was unable to see this. At any rate, his novel is extraordinary and interesting because it shows how he saw the religious problem in Mexico.

**So, do you think that no view exists that doesn’t carry cultural baggage?**

Right, the objective view does not exist. You come from your already constructed culture with cultural baggage that causes you to interpret what you see. That is why, when you go to other places, the customs seem strange to you. If you go to China, everything will seem

---

<sup>72</sup> The US title of Greene’s 1939 book; the name of Shyfter’s film alludes to the British title, *Lawless Roads*.

extremely strange to you. If you didn't have that cultural baggage, you'd arrive in China and nothing would stand out as different.

**Let's talk about your first feature film, *Novia que te vea*. Do you think your life experience is more like the struggle of the Sephardic Jew Oshinica Mataraso or of the Ashkenazi Jew Rifke Groman, your two female protagonists?**

Actually, during my adolescence I had the concerns of both of them. There are many aspects of Oshi that are mine: I also grew up in an environment where it was expected that I would marry and marry well. The title of the film comes from this matrimonial expectation: "Novia que te vea" ("May you be a bride") is a kind of blessing given to children, the wish that some day they might marry. From childhood, I was also raised with this expectation, although I rebelled against many things, among others, the idea of "marrying well." But the issue of marriage isn't easily resolved. Rather, a memory remains, a wound is left from not having done what was expected of you as a woman. And, in some part of you, there is a feeling of failure. It is true, however, that Oshi comes from the Sephardic branch, which is more conservative and places more emphasis on marriage. One must understand her situation in all its complexity: Oshi's big problem is that she wants to be an artist, she wants to develop an independent identity as a woman. However, if she fulfills her dream of being an independent woman, she will not accomplish the ideals her family has instilled in her because of her gender. Seen this way, Oshi's problem is a separate issue from her coming from a Jewish background or a Spanish or Mexican background. What happens to her could happen to any woman from that era.

Rifke, the other protagonist, exemplifies a different problematic. On the one hand, she wants to be part of the dominant culture, but at the same time, to maintain her Jewish roots. This isn't easy, and it causes her many problems. As a girl, I had the same desires: I wanted to get

Christmas presents like the other children, to put up a tree and have a Nativity scene. It was similar in the case of my sister. In Costa Rica there are many Catholic nuns of all denominations, with different habits. My sister wanted to be a nun, and she would shut herself in the bathroom to pray to Our Lady of the Angels, the patron of Costa Rica, whom she drew on the floor. As adolescents, we faced the issue of political commitment, which is another aspect of the same theme because politics is another form of belonging to something. Rifke and I happened to live through the 1960s and the 1970s, which were very ideologized. However, though both of us wanted to “belong,” our commitment was of different intensity. Rifke, far more committed than I, was concerned about where to act on her political views: in Mexico or in Israel? That wasn’t my problem. I didn’t become a militant in any party, although I was a sympathizer of the student movement of ‘68 in Mexico and ran thousands of copies on a mimeograph machine. My commitment didn’t extend far beyond that, and this also had its consequences: guilt and shame.

**Let’s talk about your second film, *Sucesos distantes*, where a mature married couple is forced to question the limits of their intimacy. The importance of psychology in the movie interests me. Why does Arturo Fabre have to go to therapy?**

Because he is an unhappy man. That is a very funny question because I went and asked my psychoanalyst to play the small role of the psychoanalyst in the movie, and she asked me, “And your character, why is he undergoing therapy? I need to know why he’s going to therapy.” I answered: “It doesn’t matter specifically why he’s going to therapy. You go to therapy in search of peace.” I imagine he is a scientist with a very ordered life who is afraid to externalize his feelings. Arturo Fabre, like most of the scientists I know, investigates a series of problems in a very controlled fashion in his laboratory. From the laboratory, he goes to his house where he and his wife live a fairly harmonious family life. She, the Russian actress Irene Gorenko, also

maintains a certain control over things. When the movie begins, she is rehearsing for a play that is about to debut, and we can suppose she is happy. The pieces of her life fit together more or less, except one. There is one part of Irene's past that Arturo does not have access to. It is a hole, a void, and Irene refuses to fill it: she doesn't want to talk about that. Arturo starts to get very nervous; he grows obsessed with finding out about his wife's life in Russia before he met her. Here, he enters into very slippery territory because his wife's past is an area he can't control. It's not a scientific experiment under his control. And he suffers.

**I'd like to talk a bit more about the relationship between Arturo and Irene. What, in your words, is their relationship like?**

It's a good relationship. When they met, they were no longer particularly young, and both had faith in the relationship and a desire to move forward. It is a marriage that works well because both have a certain success in their respective careers and because both need the limits their work imposes on them. Arturo doesn't manage his feelings easily; he is like many of the scientists I know, for whom great passions or great sadness drive them nuts. Crazy. They prefer not to have emotional explosions and live their lives according to certain schedules, certain rhythms, a certain order. Their difficulty in dealing with feelings and the routine by which they live is projected in their way of resolving problems. For example, Fabre attempts to understand or control his wife the same way he manages the variables in his laboratory. And I believe that Gorenko needs this order too, although for other reasons. In a routine situation where the expected things occur, she can forget. And she wants and needs to forget.

**Right at the beginning of the film, Irene starts to have nightmares. Can you tell me why?**

Irene has always had nightmares and the movie begins with one of them. Arturo says: “Everything started when Irene began crying again. She had stopped crying, but she began crying again.” I believe she had nightmares periodically and periodically she cried, and Arturo never paid much attention. Arturo was aware of it happening but he never stopped to consider what was happening to Irene. Often, when someone cries and is asked, “What’s wrong?” the response is “I don’t feel well, I’ll get over it, it’s nothing.” Irene probably said something similar to him the other times. In a marriage, one realizes that sometimes it’s better not to ask too many questions. It’s difficult to deal with other people’s feelings. When you’re with a friend or someone else and he or she tells you something very painful, what can you do about it? That’s frightening. So, all right, some people, like Fabre, don’t ask too many questions. It’s interesting to note also that the apparent disinterest of Arturo suits Irene: she doesn’t want him to ask her too many questions.

Nevertheless, one day, years after getting married, something happens, there’s a spark, a detonator. Who knows what sets it off. It coincides, at that precise moment, with Arturo’s finding a photo and a letter in Russian that have been sent to his wife. He thinks to himself, “The reason must be here.” The photograph, in which Irene is very close to another man in what appears to be a play, probably doesn’t mean anything. Nevertheless, Arturo, scientist that he is, is always looking for motivations; he believes there is cause and effect in everything and that everything can be explained. And, since he can’t understand Irene’s behavior, he says to himself: “Ah! The truth that I’m looking for might be in this photo and letter.”

Arturo’s misunderstanding in *Sucesos distantes* is an excuse to talk about how we try to understand and judge others. Arturo believes he knows Irene, but at that moment he discovers something new about her, and that new knowledge puts into question who the other person is.

Arturo feels that Irene is no longer the same and that he doesn't know this new person. This theme is discussed in the movie itself through the story of Melusina. Arturo's mother, who has Alzheimer's, tells a medieval tale in which the desire to know the intimacies of another has terrible consequences. Melusina agrees to marry a duke, but with one condition: that he respects her desire to leave one day a week without asking her where she goes. The duke accepts the request and the couple lives happily. But, one day he decides to find out where Melusina goes when she is not at home. He follows her at a distance and when she enters a forest, he discovers that she dives into a river and is transformed into a dragon. He is horrified and at that moment, is discovered by Melusina, now in dragon form. And, of course, when she realizes that the duke broke his promise and followed her, Melusina leaves forever. I wanted to show in the movie how we are transformed by the new information we receive, and also to suggest an answer to the problem. I agree with Isaac Bashevis Singer, who is a guru to me. He says, "Don't try to understand people. Human motivations have no explanations. Why does someone act this way today and some other way tomorrow? Who knows? There's no way to know. People are inexplicable."

**How is the moral of the medieval tale applied to Arturo and Irene? Is their relationship also ruined because Arturo wants to find out what Irene's motivations are?**

Somewhat, yes. When you have a relationship with someone, that person can decide what part of him- or herself to give to that relationship. Often, we can't accept receiving only a small piece; we want more, we want the whole person, to penetrate their most hidden intimacy. The conflict arises when the other person doesn't want to show more. Arturo can't accept that Irene won't give him more than a small piece of her past. But neither does he dare to understand her or ask her anything. So he becomes obsessed and thinks, "She's hiding something, maybe

another man.” And there’s where jealousy comes into the picture. It possesses him to the point where he can’t live or work as before. The relationship becomes a game of intrigue: first, the appearance of the mysterious Viktor Fet, who claims to be Irene’s second husband. This type of intrigue is very common in the life of couples, I think, although perhaps in the case of Arturo it’s exaggerated. Well, the plot of the movie goes on from there. I’d better not tell how it ends.

**Before we finish, I’d like to know who produced your movies and how. Let’s talk about *Novia que te vea* first.**

In *Novia que te vea*, the producers were the Fondo de Fomento a la Calidad Cinematográfica, IMCINE, and Arte Nuevo, my production company. The FFCC provides “soft” credit, which is to say, they offer loans at low interest rates. In addition, the loans are capital grants, investments made without the expectation of recovering the money. If your film makes money, you pay back the loans; if it doesn’t, you don’t. If you recoup the investment through box office sales, points are returned to the producer, who, in this case, is me.

**Excuse me, Guita, what are “points”?**

Movies are divided into 100 points, and each point has a certain value. Depending on how much money is put down, each person owns a certain number of points. For example, if I have 40 percent of the movie’s points, and the movie earns 100 pesos, I keep 40 pesos. Or I, in turn, can sell my 40 points to a third person, to obtain funds for production or to use the money however I want.

**Now I understand. So what was the percentage of participation of each of the producers of *Novia que te vea*?**

Before the film was sold, the FFCC had 19 percent of its points. Later, after I paid off my loan from the FFCC, IMCINE had 60 percent and Arte Nuevo had 40 percent.

**And on your second feature?**

Actually, I don't know the exact percentage of each producer in *Sucesos distantes*. The producers were IMCINE, the Universidad de Guadalajara, Producciones Arte Nuevo, the Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (FONCA) and the Cooperativa Conexión. The latter was composed of the crew: the grips, electricians, and props people had formed a cooperative. They worked on the production for reduced pay in exchange for points in the movie. The film cost \$800,000, but I'm not sure because even though I raised the money, I didn't distribute it. The distribution of money in a production is something I don't handle. Through my production company, Arte Nuevo, I hired Laura Imperiale to manage the money. She was what in Mexico is called the executive producer. She distributed the money and decided where it would go for the production. Imperiale kept the books with IMCINE and I, with total confidence, left it entirely up to her: she was the expert.

**Could you describe for me what your experience was with the technicians in both pictures?**

The filming of *Novia que te vea* was difficult. In the first place, it was the first time I worked with a filmmaking team: union workers, decorators, make-up artists . . . In addition, between starring roles, main and bit parts, I had to direct some 58 actors. And I imagine that, to some degree, since it was my *opera prima*, I didn't feel confident that I could carry out this job. There was also a lot of tension and quarrels between the different people in charge of the various areas of shooting. The picture turned out well because, in spite of everything, the team was made up of very professional and top notch people: Toni Kuhn, photography; Teresa Pecannis,



art direction; Tita Lombardo, executive production; Salvador de la Fuente, sound; etc. They managed to keep internal quarrels from interfering with their work. To work on editing with Carlos Bolado and on music with Joaquín Gutiérrez Heras was a delight, especially after that very tense filming. As a friend of mine said, “What happened in *Novia* was the price of initiation.”

*Sucesos distantes* had the best staff I’ve worked with. They were completely professional: they had all read the script, they always maintained a spirit of cooperation, etc. It was wonderful working with them. The filming proceeded without tensions and was fun; we really enjoyed the work. I don’t know if it was due to it being my second film or to the production team; this time, they worked well together. I was happy to work with Angélica Aragón and Emilio Echeverría again, and with Fernando Balzarretti for the first time, an actor whom I admired a lot for his work in theater and cinema. Sadly, he recently passed away. There was also a group of first-class actors who made special appearances: Abraham Stavans, Marta Verduzco, Claudette Maille, Jesús Ochoa, Mario Iván Martínez, and Lucía Balzarretti.

**Thank you, Guita. It has been a pleasure speaking with you.**





# 3. Busi Cortés

---

Luz Eugenia Cortés Rocha, better known as Busi Cortés, is interested in making both educational television programs and feature-length fiction films. She combines aesthetic concerns with a commitment to help film school graduates gain access to the movie industry. Many of Cortés's films--three shorts, a medium-length film and two features--are adaptations of literary texts. In her movies, Cortés makes use of melodrama to reach a wide public, exploring in depth the emotional conflicts that her characters experience.

Cortés was born in Mexico City in 1950. She studied Communications at the Universidad Iberoamericana where she had her first contact with film and television production. In 1977, two years after the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica opened, Cortés began to study cinema. During her third year at the CCC, she made the black-and-white film *Las Buenromero* (The Buenromero Sisters), basing the screenplay on Julio Cortázar's short story "Circe." Within the walls of the old country home in which the story unfolds live three sisters: Refugio, Josefina, and Matilde. This enclosed space has its own logic: The Buenromero women pay homage to their father by killing the lovers that come to visit them. *Las Buenromero* won

second prize at the Festival Nacional de Documental y Cortometraje in Villahermosa, Mexico (1987).

The following year, Cortés made the short movie *Un frágil retorno* (A Fragile Return, 1980) in which Elia, who suffers from heart problems, is awaiting the return of her husband Luis. She is in his office, putting his library in order, and has set a beautiful table for a romantic dinner. But instead of her husband, her sister Silvia arrives and tells her that Luis has died in an airplane crash. Elia asks to be left alone and, after she has cried, decides to share the ill-fated dinner with Silvia. While the sisters are eating, Luis, who was on a different plane, arrives. As soon as she sees him Elia has a heart attack and dies. *Un frágil retorno* was shown during the film series *Con un toque femenino* (“A Woman’s Touch”) at the Andrea Palma auditorium in Mexico City in 1992.

In 1981, Cortés finished her studies and made *Hotel Villa Goerne* as her thesis film. This medium-length film presents women as creators of history. In the provincial hotel Villa Goerne live Fernanda and three aunts: Mina Márquez, Argénida, and the ghost of Aunt Eduviges. Eligio, an aspiring writer, comes to lodge at the hotel. Eligio tries to appropriate the story of the four women and present it as his own work, but he fails. He becomes a scribe who writes down the story they dictate to him about family ghosts. *Hotel Villa Goerne* was shown at the Lille Film Festival (1982), at the International Film Week in Mannheim (1983), at the Festival of Films by Women in Montreal (1985), and in the *Con un toque femenino* series in 1992.

In Mexico, entrance into the film industry has traditionally been controlled by the industry’s unions; as a result, in the 1980s, few of the early film school graduates were able to make feature-length commercial films. In the seven years that followed her graduation, Cortés worked, among other places, at the government-funded Unidad de Televisión Educativa (UTECE),

one of the few places that allowed filmmakers a degree of artistic freedom. There Cortés was an assistant to Alfredo Joskowicz and Felipe Cazals on the series *Historia de la educación* (The History of Education). Between 1983 and 1984, she worked with Marisa Sistach, Olga Cáceres, and Consuelo Garrido in the UTEC series *De la vida de las mujeres*, where, in experimental fashion, they followed the lives of diverse female characters. During these years, Cortés also taught at the CCC and the Universidad Iberoamericana, where she was the coordinator of film studies. In 1984 she combined teaching with film production to make the short movie *El lugar del corazón* (The Heart's Place, 1984), co-produced by the CCC and the Universidad Iberoamericana and based on a story by Juan Tovar. In this film, three high school students, Neli, Cecilia and Aurora, are unhappy with the way they are treated by their history teacher, Guillermo Espalda. The students decide to take revenge and, using witchcraft, stick pins in a male figurine. Their game turns out to have drastic consequences: when they stick pins in the doll's legs, the teacher becomes an invalid; when they stick pins in "the heart's place," he dies. *El lugar del corazón* was shown at the International Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana (1986) and in the *Con un toque femenino* series (1992). It also won honorable mention at the second Festival de Televisión Universitaria de América Latina in Lima (1983).

In the late 1980s, state support for cinema increased, providing a stimulus that would enable Cortés to enter the industry. She played a fundamental role in introducing the *opera prima* system, a system in which first works are produced by the CCC in collaboration with the film unions, thus allowing film school graduates to gain access to the movie industry. Cortés's *El secreto de Romelia* (Romelia's Secret, 1989) was the first film produced under this system. In its production, Section 49 of the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica (STIC) worked with students from the CCC, making it possible for an industry feature film to be

made within the film school structure. Initially, Cortés received a loan from the Fondo de Fomento a la Calidad Cinematográfica (FFCC), while the CCC contributed student labor and passed on the discounts it received on equipment and supplies. Joining the CCC as producers were the Universidad de Guadalajara's Centro de Investigación y Enseñanza Cinematográfica (CIEC), CONACITE II, and the government of Tlaxcala, the state where the movie was filmed. Cortés filmed *El secreto de Romelia* on an extremely tight budget of \$150,000, which was immediately recovered. Cortés considered that the success of the first *opera prima* made by the CCC was due to the collaborative nature of that effort.

*El secreto de Romelia*, based on Rosario Castellanos's novella *El viudo Román* (The Widower Román), compares three generations' approaches to love. Romelia marries Don Carlos in 1938, but Don Carlos sends her back to her parents' house, accusing her of not being a virgin. After this dishonor, Romelia leaves her provincial village and does not return until after the death of Don Carlos. Once the doctor passes away, Romelia returns to the house where she was born, accompanied by her daughter Dolores, and her three grandchildren, Aurelia, Romelia, and María. There, Doña Romelia shares part of her past with Dolores, revealing that she had kept the sheets from her wedding night all these years as proof of her virginity. Dolores, a divorced woman whose values are far different than those of her mother, doesn't understand Romelia's actions and doesn't feel that her mother owes her any explanation. Meanwhile the three grandchildren, who steal and read Don Carlos's diary, share their opinions about their grandparents' past.

*El secreto de Romelia* was a great success, and was shown in more than 24 international festivals. It won three Ariels: for Best Opera Prima (Busi Cortés), Best Score (José Amozurrutia), and Best Actress (Dolores Beristáin) (1989); three Diosas de Plata: for Best Opera Prima (Cortés), Best Photography (Francisco Bojórquez), and Best Screenplay (Cortés) (1989); a

Heraldo for Best Actor (Pedro Armendáriz) (1989); ACE awards for Best Latin American Film and Best Actress (Dolores Beristáin) from the Asociación de Cronistas de Espectáculos in New York (1990); and a Pitirre at the San Juan Film Festival in Puerto Rico, for Best Opera Prima (1990).

In 1992, Cortés finished her second feature film, *Serpientes y escaleras* (Snakes and Ladders), once again employing an innovative financing strategy. *Serpientes y escaleras* was a state production in which the director also participated. The three major producers were IMCINE, which put in 50 percent, the FFCC, which put in 30 percent, and Producciones Romelia, Cortés's production company, which put in 15 percent. In the name of her students at the Universidad Iberoamericana, Cortés raised funds from private companies in exchange for advertising. Coca-Cola, Juegos Birjan (which makes the game "Serpientes y Escaleras"), Indetel, Alcatel, and Sanborn's signed on as co-producers.

The name "Serpientes y escaleras" comes from a parlor game played by the upper classes in the 1950s. The movie was inspired by *Arráncame la vida*, the novel by Ángeles Mastretta. In her novel, Mastretta recounts the life of a corrupt politician from his wife's point of view. Cortés also narrates the life of an unscrupulous politician named Gregorio; however, instead of taking the point of view of the politician's wife Adelaida, she uses that of his daughter Valentina and her friend Rebeca. Friendship is a strong theme in *Serpientes y escaleras*; when Rebeca becomes pregnant by Gregorio, Valentina is able to forgive her. The film was shown at the Muestra de Cine Mexicano in Guadalajara (1992), at the Cineteca Nacional in September 1993, and in international festivals such as the Seattle Film Festival (1993) and the Los Angeles International Film Festival (1994).



**“We each must overcome something left us by our  
grandmother”**

**Busi, what are the important elements of your movies and how do they relate to your personal life?**

In my formative years, the decisive elements were certain atmospheres, my practical feminism, playing in groups, my documentary spirit, the paradox of class, and my taste for acting, movies, and literature.

The first thing I discovered in film school were atmospheres. Where did these atmospheres come from? I was born on June 28, 1950. My parents and grandparents were from Guanajuato and I spent many vacations in Guanajuato at my great-grandparents' house. Ever since, those atmospheres have been in my blood. The 16 years I spent at the Azcapotzalco refinery--my father is an engineer--were also decisive because it was at the refinery that I learned to play with other people. Since it was a neighborhood in the outskirts of Azcapotzalco, we had to learn to play together, people of all ages, male and female. Later came the stage I call “practical feminism.” I am the fifth of seven siblings, with three older brothers who are, you know, very intelligent, very important. I grew up learning that women were the ones who had to make the beds, wash the dishes, and attend to the men, and so, by necessity, one had to become a feminist. I only found out many years later that I was being a feminist--in a practical sense, of course, not a theoretical one.

Although I only studied for two years in the Colegio Francés de San Cosme, which was in the Casona de Santa María, its atmosphere left its mark on me as well. The school was a

Porfirian-style mansion dating from the beginning of the century. It was marvelous! Then the Colegio Francés moved to the Pedregal and I had to commute from Azcapotzalco to the Pedregal. That was when another important stage in my training as a filmmaker occurred: my documentary spirit arose from observing the newly opened *periférico*.<sup>73</sup> In the morning, my brothers, who drove to the university, dropped me off at school. On the way back, I had to take three buses to get home. Crossing the city every day led me to experience what I've called "the paradox of social class" and helped to create my documentary spirit.

My best high school experience was being in the theater group at the Centro Universitario México (CUM). The director of that theater group was Germán Dehesa, who is a very nice and very sharp Mexican writer. The experience in CUM made me decide to study communications at the Universidad Iberoamericana. I entered the degree program because I was looking to continue the games I'd played at the refinery, on the one hand, and with the theater group, on the other. I majored in film and journalism and the teachers who influenced me the most were Luis de Tavira, a theater director, and Javier Peñaloza, who was a poet and editorial writer for the newspaper *Excelsior* and the magazine *Proceso*.

When I studied communications, I realized that I wasn't interested in television or advertising, but rather, in cinema and literature. So, I joined a literature workshop with Humberto Bátis, in which poets such as Alberto Blanco and Luis Cortés Bargalló participated along with other writers such as Guillermo Sheridan. In the workshop, I began to see something that would become clearer later on: my search for language was not rooted in the word, but rather, in the image. However, I only realized that with time. Once I had graduated with a major in communications, while I was working at the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología

---

<sup>73</sup> A major thoroughfare. The inner artery that loops around Mexico City.

(CONACyT) writing blurbs on educational journalism, I thought about doing a masters in Latin American literature at the UNAM. But the CONACyT gave me a scholarship to teach a two-month course in Quito, so I never studied literature. In Ecuador, I made a video with various Latin Americans about endemic goiter. I was horrified, first of all, to have ended up on a television crew, because I couldn't stand television, and second of all, to have to produce something on endemic goiter. This was the era of Allende,<sup>74</sup> the passion of the 1970s, and I thought to myself, "All right, if I go to Latin America, it's to accomplish something important, not to be dealing with goiters." However, the documentary turned into a very interesting social experience and changed the whole framework of my thinking. Since it wasn't a scientific type of documentary, I was able to learn about a marginalized part of the country. Goiter is an endemic disease that exists in the poor regions of Ecuador where drinking water comes from ice and has a very low iodine content. Making this documentary really was a great social experience.

Life led me down some unusual roads. I went into film because I wanted to devote myself to being a screenwriter, but I ended up directing. What I liked most about cinema was writing; the atmosphere of the movie business horrified me. Just walking through Estudios Churubusco and seeing how many extras were standing there waiting to ask for work felt awful. "Why am I studying cinema if the medium depresses me and Mexican movies depress me even more?" I wondered. Although, in general, I didn't like the movie-making environment, I kept making films because being in the CCC was something else altogether. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that my problem was that I was trying to become a screenwriter. I discovered it in school in a very funny way. At the CCC, the first ones to direct were those who finished their

---

<sup>74</sup> Dr. Salvador Allende, a Marxist reformer, was president of Chile from 1970 to 1973, and died during the right-wing coup led by General Augusto Pinochet on September 11, 1973.

screenplays first. Since Olga Cáceres, Gustavo Montiel, and I had studied communication, we had a greater facility for writing screenplays and we ended up being the first to direct our own films. That's how I began to enjoy directing.

One of the things I remember most clearly from my days as a student is that I always saw cinema as something I would not be able to do--even when I was in the CCC and had already made some short films. I remember that once I was picked to be in an event called *Cocina de Imágenes*, in which several other colleagues also participated: María Novaro, Maricarmen de Lara, and other female directors. María Novaro astonished me when she said that she would love to make 35mm films for movie theaters and with the unions. My mouth hung open in surprise and I said, "Look at her. Boy, is she brave!" At that time, we were making 16mm films for the film clubs and I said, "How will we ever make big movies, movies like the Americans and the Europeans make? Impossible." The Spanish master Víctor Erice helped me, with his movies *El espíritu de la colmena* (The Spirit of the Beehive, 1973) and *El sur* (The South, 1983), to see that I could also make movies like the ones María Novaro wanted to make--in 35mm, huge ones, with the unions. In addition, Eduardo Maldonado (as a documentary filmmaker), Ludwik Margules (for everything regarding directing actors), Juan Tovar, and Alfredo Joskowicz were definitive teachers for me. Being a teacher also influenced me a great deal. I kept on learning during the ten years I taught at the CCC, at the Centro Universitario de Teatro in the UNAM, and at the Universidad Iberoamericana. In fact, I learned more as a teacher than as a student. In addition, since I worked at the same time in all three schools, I could compare the students of the theater school with those of the film school or the school of communication.

**Tell me about your first films at school.**

I don't understand why I was so misogynist toward the men in my films at the CCC. I don't know if you've seen a sequence shot called *Un frágil retorno*, which was filmed at the CCC. It was the movie that had the most academic success. This short film narrates the story of a young woman who comes to tell her older sister that her husband has just died in a plane crash. But, since the older sister is suffering from a heart condition, the younger sister must try to break the news to her as delicately as possible so she won't die from the shock. You can tell they are in his office because the older sister has organized a welcome reception. In the office, there's a monologue in which the older sister begins to tell everything about her husband that aggravates her and how she rejects him. However, despite the fact that she rejects him and the things about him that bother her, she wants to have a child with him. After this long confession, the younger sister doesn't dare tell her of the death of her husband. Finally, she tells her and the older sister withstands the shock. But at that moment the husband arrives, because he wasn't on that plane but on another one. Then the older sister does indeed die, for she had already accepted that he was gone. The conclusion is that the shock of his appearance is greater than that of his disappearance.

*El lugar del corazón*, which was a story by Kate Chopin, not my own, is also a misogynist story. When I did it, I was already a teacher, not a student, but in that film they also kill the [male] teacher. As you can see, they're all little misogynist stories.

**Well, I wouldn't call them misogynist. Let's just say that men disappear. But perhaps the men need to disappear for women to have that centrality.**

Yes, and in some way, that theme was taken up again in *El secreto de Romelia*: Romelia kills the widower Román before he dies, she buries him long before.

**And *Las Buenromero*?**

This black-and-white 16mm short was made in 1979 and was very risky. In school we did exercises that had a lot of flaws in photography and sound; for that reason, they were works that couldn't be shown to an audience. However, in the case of *Las Buenromero*, an answer print was made--that is, a print where the images and sound are synchronized--because the school was going to be closed. Since the school had no money, I paid for the negative to be cut myself, because I wanted to have something I could show. Besides, since it was a work with a certain level of quality, I thought that it could be useful to someone.

**Is *Las Buenromero* hostile toward men as well?**

Yes, in this short film the men also disappear. I'll outline the plot for you: there are three sisters who live in a big house from the nineteenth century where time doesn't seem to pass. Nevertheless, despite the timeless atmosphere, it is clear--because of the cars, because they go to the movies to see the second part of *The Godfather*--that it is taking place in the present.

The plot was a sort of homage to the short story "Circe" by Cortázar, which is about a woman who kills her suitors with chocolate. In *Las Buenromero*, three women seduce and get rid of their men as an act of love. They kill the men in honor of their father, who, although dead, is a live presence that inhabits the living room and to which sacrifices must be made. He is the real lover. Each of the sisters is responsible for killing a man. The oldest, Refugio, a beanpole of a woman, seduces the candidate of the Partido Auténtico de la Revolución Mexicana. Matilde, the second sister, is melancholy and does nothing but embroider and cry. She cries

because she is the only one who isn't a *señorita*, an unmarried woman. She's a widow, although she was never in a loving relationship because her marriage was a contractual one, signed in her absence. Matilde seduces the lame sexton, whom she chases all around the house. Josefina, the youngest, although she rebels at first, accepts the pact in the end and kills the painter. For me, the important thing was that the men they sacrifice are a politician, someone affiliated with the church, and a painter.

**Are the sisters accomplices to what happens in the house?**

Yes, the sisters are accomplices. They go out, leaving the one whose turn it is alone. They never talk about what has happened because they all know already; it's a mutual understanding that's quite well understood. They simply say to one another, "Now it's your turn."

**Is this complicity the same that Adelaida and Gregorio share in *Serpientes y escaleras*?**

No, it is a different complicity. The complicity Adelaida shares with Gregorio is completely conventional. It is a complicity that existed in Mexican society, that still exists to this day, and that can even be found in other societies. In contrast, the complicity that exists between the Buenromero sisters is absolutely transgressive. I am trying to remember *Hotel Villa Goerne*. You see, in that film, complicity exists between the two women married to the two brothers, although it is much more refined than in *Las Buenromero*. Mina Márquez is in love with the writer Eligio, but Argénida, the wife of the other brother, has an affair with him. Nevertheless, since Argénida knows that Mina Márquez loves him, she tells her, "All right, I'm leaving him to you because I know you love him, because I see it in the cards." The niece, Fernanda, senses this complicity between her aunts, she guesses it. That's why, at the end, she

makes paper boats out of the writer's novel and throws them into the water. In doing so, she expresses the revenge of the adults in concrete form.

**One of the things that surprised me the most about *Hotel Villa Goerne* is that a man would be the writer. Is it the man who narrates the story?**

No, the man doesn't narrate the story. The story is actually told by the women. This point is very clear to me: the only thing the writer does is compile the story. That is to say, he's not a writer but a scribe: he puts on paper the story the women dictate to him. They, in contrast, are creating the story the whole time. That's why it is a movie in all ways told by the women. The movie begins with Argénida reading a deck of cards, telling a bit of what's going to happen, the story. Just then, still at the beginning, Argénida receives Eligio and takes him through the hotel, giving him information. Fernanda takes him on another tour during which she tells him the history of the hotel with many anecdotes. Afterwards, a series of episodes occur in which they dictate to him the story he is to write. For example, when Eligio is sick and hears the footsteps of Aunt Eduviges, a family member transformed into a ghost on the roof, he asks Argénida about the noises. Argénida gives him a very unclear explanation from which Eligio is unable to learn much at all about this mystery. Nor does he gain access to another mystery: when he hears Mina Márquez singing, he goes looking for her and she, like Argénida, makes up a story but doesn't explain what is going on. Which is to say, they are the ones who tell the story, he simply writes it down. Because he has no talent, he doesn't invent anything, he spends his time wasting sheets of paper.

**How did you end up doing *El secreto de Romelia*?**



This project has a long story behind it. First, I worked on parts of it in *De la vida de las mujeres*, then I planned to do a miniseries based on the novel *Balún Canán*, which wasn't made. I took the project to Beatriz Paredes, but she told me, "*Balún Canán* is something very local to Chiapas. Why don't you do another story by Rosario Castellanos?" I knew the works of Rosario Castellanos very well, so I thought of the short novel, *El viudo Román*, from which *El secreto* eventually emerged.

**What was it about Rosario Castellanos's novel that drew your attention? What made you say, "I want to work on this"?**

Let me tell you the story from the beginning. A group of filmmakers, Marisa Sistach, Olga Cáceres, Consuelo Garrido, Dora Guerra, and I, formed a group in the Unidad de Televisión Educativa y Cultural and made a television series called *De la vida de las mujeres*. It was a delightful series for which we made thirty half-hour programs. We covered all possible genres: comedy, farce, tragedy, melodrama, etc. The subjects were related to women's life experiences--sexual relations, birth control, abortion, widowhood, retirement, etc.<sup>75</sup>

To make this series was quite a challenge because in Mexico in 1984 and 1985, hardly anything was shot on location. The only things being produced were soap operas, news programs, and comedy shows, all of which were shot in television studios. During the *sexenio* of José López Portillo (1976-82), a similar series had been made called *Historias de maestros* (Stories of Teachers) and *Historias de niños y niñas* (Stories of Boys and Girls) with Arte y Difusión, a private production company that made cultural and fictional television programs related to educational topics. When planning *De la vida de las mujeres*, we proposed making an

entertainment series directed at the female audience that wouldn't necessarily be didactic or treat subjects directly related to education. Having recently completed our film studies, we wanted to make short films like the ones we had learned to make in school. Later our idea was copied somewhat and they made a series called *Mujer: Casos de la vida real* (Woman: Real-Life Cases).

### **What happened after *De la vida de las mujeres*?**

When that project ended because of political changes in the UTEC, we set about adapting Rosario Castellanos's *Balún Canán* for television. There were three screenwriters: Alicia Molina adapted the first part, Pepe Buil, the second, and Carmen Cortés,<sup>76</sup> the third. I like the works of Castellanos very much because they attempt to puzzle out women's feminine sensibility. The title she gave one of her works, *El eterno femenino* (The Eternal Feminine), is really a constant in her writing. I specifically wanted to make *Balún Canán* into a miniseries for Channel 13 because the existing adaptation was quite bad.

### **What do you mean by "miniseries"?**

A miniseries is a short television drama in a few episodes. It resembles the kind of series like *The Fugitive* or *Dallas* in which the same characters reappear. On the other hand, the miniseries differs from a series in that there is continuity between episodes of the miniseries that doesn't exist in the series. Imevisión--which was the state-run television channel--bought the screenplays from us, but when we presented them with the budget to produce it, they balked.

---

<sup>75</sup> For this series, Busi Cortés directed three programs and wrote two scripts (see filmography for titles).

<sup>76</sup> Busi Cortés's sister.

They were used to studio television budgets and weren't yet doing co-productions. Our miniseries was a period piece to be shot on various locations, whereas the series that had been made for television had all been made in studios in Mexico City. Besides that, it was easier to find actors for a 26 or 52-episode series than to find them for a seven-episode miniseries. When you contract an actor for a series of 52 episodes, you "package" the work, because even though he'll be paid quite little for each episode, he's going to earn very good money. In contrast, if the actor is only appearing in seven episodes, he's going to charge more.

**What was the *Balún Canán* miniseries going to be like?**

It was going to be a total period production, like many of the Spanish or English series of that time, set in Chiapas. It would last seven hours, as we had planned on making seven episodes of 55-plus minutes apiece. The fact is, no TV channel has done miniseries, not even Televisa. Weekly series have been made, but not miniseries.

**How did you get from the miniseries idea to *El secreto de Romelia*?**

The possibility of producing the movie arose even before the actual screenplay was written. The Fondo de Fomento a la Calidad Cinematográfica was created as an emergency measure at the worst moment of the crisis in national film production, as far as state-sponsored and quality cinema go. The FFCC was looking for new projects that, with very economical forms of production, could raise the level of quality in cinema. They were very anxious not to make experimental films: they wanted movies they could show in commercial theaters, and not just in the film clubs.

I had intended to do that project in 16mm, but when I presented it to the FFCC, they told me, "Yes, you are going to do it, but in 35mm and according to the rules of 35mm." They also

demanded that I use experienced actors. Although I preferred to work completely with university actors, they asked me to use actors of some renown, like Pedro Armendáriz and Diana Bracho. I agreed because I had worked before with Pedro and Diana and for me, friendship counts for a lot, you know?

The FFCC was concerned with the directors' experience in making high-quality cinema, and their only condition was that they had to have institutional support to make the film. I had the support of the CCC, of course, and I got the support of the government of Tlaxcala, where we filmed the movie. I had the opportunity to approach Beatriz Paredes Rangel, the governor of Tlaxcala, who had set out to help women in all areas. She had done a lot for rural women, for women workers, and she was also interested in supporting the work of women artists. I remember, for example, a very interesting show with the dancer Pilar Medina that was put on in a small bullring in Tlaxcala.

I spoke with Beatriz Paredes and told her that I wanted to direct an adaptation of *Balún Canán*, whose script Carmen and Alicia had worked on. I respected the rights of Marisa Sistach regarding the part written by Pepe Buil. Paredes answered that she couldn't help me with this project because *Balún Canán* had to be filmed in Chiapas, and not in Tlaxcala. But she said that if I had another proposal involving Rosario Castellanos that she would be very pleased to help me. It occurred to me to suggest *El viudo Román*, a short novel by Castellanos we had read while preparing for the miniseries for Channel 13.

### **Why did you choose that novel by Castellanos?**

When I read *El viudo Román*, its structure really grabbed my attention because it's not linear. The story is narrated in leaps and you only realize what the secret is at the end; the

widower Román guards the secret of his revenge his whole life long. The adaptation of the novel was an act of improvisation; when I presented it to the FFCC in November, it was nothing more than a project. The synopsis only developed the part in the past; there was a long flashback that began and ended in the present. In December, I began work on the script in the workshop at the CCC. The coordinator of the workshop, Marco Julio Linares, told me that making a period movie seemed outdated to him. I wasn't convinced myself by the thought of merely illustrating the novel. From the start, then, I had the idea that a daughter had been born from this one night of love between Romelia and Román, and she, in turn had three more daughters. For a while, I considered starting from the point of Romelia's death, so her daughter and granddaughters could discover her secret. Yet as I worked on the screenplay I ended up preferring that all three generations face the secret. In the end, I was very respectful of Rosario Castellanos regarding the part that takes place in the past, but not the one that takes place in the present.

I didn't find adapting the novel difficult, because I was riding on the inertia of the UTEC, where we had complete liberty in how we handled our stories--although we had a coordinator who reviewed the screenplays. When I wrote the screenplay for *El secreto de Romelia*, I continued to play freely, just as we had played in the series. In addition, my experience at the UTEC also helped me create the characters of *El secreto de Romelia*. For example, Doña Romelia greatly resembles the character in "La mujer de Nicolás"--she is the same age, has the same fantasies and everything, although the stories are totally unrelated. Furthermore, Doña Romelia is a synthesis of other characters, including the seamstress of Aguascalientes from another program called "Amor de radio." I also handled Aurelia, Romelia, and María, the three curious girls--busybodies--in *El secreto de Romelia*, in the same way I did the girls in the program "Las rumberitas."

With the script fairly well sketched out, I went to the beach, where I worked another week on it. Unfortunately, upon returning to Mexico City, someone smashed our car window and robbed us of everything we were carrying, including the notebook in which I had written the screenplay. In a flash, I lost everything I had worked on since December and had to write it all over again.

You can imagine that when I presented the now-completed screenplay to the FFCC in June of 1988 and they approved it, the screenplay had neither rhyme nor reason; it was unintelligible because the association of ideas was completely free. The people at the FFCC told me that the memories at least had to be chronological, so one could follow them easily. This combination of events explain why, although I had already done the casting, the wardrobe tests, and had photographs taken of the actors, I still didn't have an ending for the screenplay. The ending was only sketched out; we developed it as we read the script and it was finished only one week before shooting began. I started filming in August.

Apart from the setbacks, the script itself was complicated because it had flashbacks of memories, flashbacks within flashbacks, and dreams. To make it even more complicated, there was more than one person dreaming. It wasn't just Romelia's dreams, but also those of the girl. For example, Aurelia's dream is part of the present. She dreams that someone, apparently Elena, is dead, and is riding on a horse with the widower Román. I've always been unable to let go of dreams and memories. I've even used them in television programs that had different structures and more linear language. Of course, in television, it would quickly turn into something ridiculous and unwieldy, even in terms of the language.

**You say in an interview with Luis Trelles that Rosario Castellanos is very hard on Romelia.<sup>77</sup> Could you expand on that opinion?**

In *El viudo Román*, Rosario Castellanos is very hard on Romelia, but she pardons the widower. In the scene at the church, in which Romelia thinks she has beaten everyone and won the best man in the town, Castellanos does not forgive her. The fact that the novel is told through the eyes of the widower also points in this direction because it causes the reader to identify with Don Carlos. Although, it must also be said in Castellanos's favor that the story is also seen through the eyes of the priest. He is quite scandalized by the strength of the widower Roman's vengeance. Unlike Castellanos, I wanted to make peace with Romelia. That's why I suggest seeing the secret from her point of view.

**You have mentioned that you like Castellanos because you are interested in the subject of women. Could you tell me more concretely how you tried to develop this theme in your first feature film?**

In *El secreto de Romelia*, I tried to make people conscious of what it means to be a woman and who you are as a woman, and I believe that the movie succeeds in conveying that consciousness. I remember the first showing of the film for the FFCC advisory board--all of them men--as one of the most powerful experiences of my life. The projection room grew silent and Marco Julio Linares, who was part of that production because he was the director of Estudios Churubusco, wept as he embraced me. I feel that it succeeded in touching people and

---

<sup>77</sup> Cortés says, "I believe that it is my own personal issue because Rosario Castellanos is extremely hard on these women and implacable with Romelia; she doesn't pardon her" (Trelles Plazaola 3).

that it raised the consciousness of many women. In that way, the women of today understand a little more than their grandmothers or their mothers did.

To gain an awareness of what it means to be a woman, we must consider not only who we are right now, but also who we are given all we've inherited from the generation that came before us. Women like Dolores, Romelia's daughter's entire generation, have overcome many things that the women of the previous generation had not overcome. Nevertheless, we can't forget that we must understand our mothers and grandmothers if we are to understand ourselves. Not by freeing ourselves from a partner whom we feel oppressed by, as Dolores does, can we say that we have grown to be ourselves as women. We have to find our own identity as women, and to do that, we each must overcome something left us by our grandmother.

***El secreto de Romelia*, is told from memory, from the way Romelia remembers what happened. Why didn't you use this perspective in *Serpientes y escaleras*?**

Perhaps my own inertia might have led me to use that structure, but the creation of the screenplay for *Serpientes y escaleras* was very different. For one thing, I was working with two other screenwriters for the first time: it was a story that belonged to all three of us, not just to me. For another thing, we were trying to write an original story. In the case of *El lugar del corazón* or *El secreto de Romelia*, it was easier because it was an adaptation, however freely done, but an adaptation. In contrast, in the case of *Serpientes y escaleras*, we were authors of the script, not adapters. From the start, the most enjoyable and pleasant part of the project was to work with the other two screenwriters and to come to understand each other so well. Nevertheless, at the same time, it also meant that the idea was not just mine alone and because of that, I had to be very respectful of the ideas of my co-writers.



When we took this script to the FFCC, which was the first source of support we turned to, they rejected it and gave us no reason why. Then I thought a lot to myself whether it wouldn't be a good strategy to use a flashback. I even made a version in which I inserted childhood scenes, but the other writers disagreed.

**And do you remember why your co-writers didn't agree with introducing a large flashback?**

I think it wasn't because of the story itself, but to defend what was already written. In fact, a friend who read the script suggested to me, since I had been able to switch times so well, that I use that structure. However, all I had to do was that a suggestion had been made to do it that way and the other women went on the defense. It's also true that I preferred using a linear structure so that the film would reach a broader audience and have a greater distribution than *El secreto de Romelia* did. One of the criticisms made about my first film was that the average audience couldn't follow it. Now there is an audience accustomed to watching Mexican or European films, that knows how to read films differently, but in 1988 middle-class and working-class viewers were used to watching North American movies with very simple structures. For that reason also, from the beginning, we wanted it to be a linear story.

It was very difficult to defend the screenplay for *Serpientes y escaleras*. The first time they rejected our script, I was all ready to give up on the project, but Carmen and Alicia wanted to keep on fighting. I was very respectful and left it in their hands. In the end, although we didn't put in a flashback, we did end up changing the story we'd come up with. In the original screenplay there was a candidate of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) who had a reporter killed in order to remain governor of the state--Gregorio stayed as governor and had Raúl Solórzano killed because of what he had written in the paper. I can assure you that we were

telling the story of a thousand candidates of the PRI, because such cases have occurred a thousand times over in Mexico. Nevertheless, when Alfredo Acevedo read the screenplay, he told us that he didn't find it very positive that the governor—although it was never said that he was a member of the PRI—wasn't punished. Acevedo, who was a congressional representative and one of the members of the FFCC, made this comment to us thinking not about possible political censorship on the part of the government, but rather about private producers who might think there was no point in investing in a movie that was going stay “in the can.” According to him, producers might think that in the end, they would find a way to keep the movie from being shown.

When we changed the screenplay, the film lost dramatic force. No matter how convinced we were that the important part was the story of the friendship between the two girlfriends and not the political story, the ending did not make as much sense as it did in the initial script. It was hard to explain why Valentina would forgive Rebeca for having become pregnant by her father. If Gregorio [Valentina's father] had killed Raúl [Rebeca's boyfriend], it was absolutely justifiable for Valentina to forgive her friend. Without Raúl's murder, it was more difficult to justify her act of forgiveness. It's hard to forgive your best friend when she's pregnant by your own father!

### **Were further changes made to the screenplay?**

While we were filming, the assistant director was killed in a van accident. It was very hard because we had to film when I knew that Jenny Kuri had died and, almost without exaggerating, I can tell you that I wanted to chuck the whole movie. But, of course, we couldn't. Unfortunately, the accident also affected the movie's screenplay. Until the accident, the work

schedule had gone well, but after Jenny's death I wanted to finish quickly and we took out a lot of scenes. By pure chance, the scene in which Rebeca tells Valentina that the baby is Gregorio's, was filmed the day of the accident. From the accident on, I worked more on editing the movie in order to get to this scene. Obviously, finishing early caused the movie to suffer a good deal. For example, the confrontation between Adelaida [Valentina's mother] and Rebeca is missing. We had also thought about repeating Adelaida's climactic scene in which she confronts Gregorio. I wasn't pleased with the couple's meeting because it was done hastily. It was filmed in alternating takes, shot-reverse shot, in a medium close-up, and with no dramatic impact. It's a pity because Adelaida was a very interesting character but, given the circumstances, I was unable to take advantage of all she had to offer.

**Do you think that Rebeca has greater freedom than Valentina in *Serpientes y escaleras*?**

The two characters are different. The names already give you an idea about the psychological traits of each character: Rebeca is rebellious and Valentina is valiant. Although it might appear that Valentina is going to take fewer risks, when push comes to shove, she's the one who makes the more courageous decision. That difference is in part due to the fact that they live in families with different structures. You don't see it much in the movie, but Valentina has a lot of familial protection. You know that she has three brothers, which makes her the only woman and her father's favorite. Gregorio has a very familiar father's role. Even today, in many cities and provinces of the republic, women can only leave their parents' home dressed in white. As if he were endorsing a check, the father will say, "Here is my daughter; I've done my duty up to this point. I give her to you, her husband. Now you are responsible for her."

Rebeca lacks this familial protection. Her father's absence is what distinguishes her from Valentina; otherwise, they share many characteristics. Despite having spent their childhood together, when, after a period of separation, the two friends meet again as teenagers, it is evident that Rebeca has been affected by the death of her father, Romualdo. After Romualdo's disappearance, Rebeca discovers that he had another family and that her mother had to use her wits to keep going and defend what was hers. Consequently, as an adolescent, Rebeca becomes a pioneer in women's liberation.

### **What did you do after *Serpientes y escaleras*?**

In 1995, I again took up the project that I had always wanted to do: the adaptation of *Balún Canán*. The situation described by Castellanos as seen through the eyes of a family in 1994. Obviously, the theme is somewhat related to the whole Zapatista movement of 1994. We called the project *Subiendo el río está el paraíso* (Paradise Lies Upriver) and the same group of screenwriters participated: Alicia Molina, my sister Carmen, and myself.

It was a project that was, for all intents and purposes, already approved in 1996. In October, some Canadian producers were to come and see what was needed to sign the agreement. Jorge Alberto Lozoya, IMCINE's previous director, had spoken with them by phone and had sent them a letter of commitment. However, a month before, in September, a new director of IMCINE took over and the project was cancelled. When I presented the project to IMCINE's new director, Diego López, on October 2, he told me that I had to wait and present the project in accordance with the new rules of the game that were being instituted. The only thing IMCINE did was to have its assistant director of production send a paragraph to the

Canadians telling them that the project had been postponed until further notice. Of course, the Canadians were quite baffled. Imagine if they had shown up in October!

The new rules of the game came out in January of 1997. Under this new system, I had to get a producer to present the project, and that was quite difficult. The same thing happened to Marisa Sistach with *El año del eclipse* (The Year of the Eclipse), a period film about the eclipse at the beginning of the century. Marisa already had the support of France and the Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes here in Mexico. Her project had already been approved during Lozoya's directorship, but she had to present it again under Diego López's system. When she presented the project again, they told her to rework the script. In cases like this, you say, "Well no, I can't do that." Right?

Also, what has happened to me with *Subiendo el río está el paraíso* is that I'm very happy with what I am doing right now. Three months ago, I finished the first stage of the series I'm making, which allowed me to choose between trying to present *Subiendo el río* again to IMCINE or continuing with the series. I decided to continue with the series because I really feel that I'm doing something very useful and very important for a lot of people; something that is really needed.

### **What are you doing now?**

It's a series for people with handicaps called *Retos y respuestas* (Challenges and Responses), on Channel 22. In Mexico we have an enormous backlog; the push to integrate disabled people into society began barely two years ago. Just as I feel it was important that I made *El secreto de Romelia* with the CCC in 1988, and *Serpientes y escaleras* as another of the so-called "New Mexican Cinema" films, I feel that this series is most important right now. Ever

since I made *El secreto de Romelia*, I knew that what I wanted was to move people. With *Retos y respuestas*, I feel that I am not only moving people emotionally, but that I am moving forward myself, and I am truly very happy.

**We've already spoken about your works individually. I would like to discuss elements that appear in a number of your movies, for example, melodrama. Do you believe it is a genre that must be modified, thrown out, or used as it is?**

The most difficult thing is to acknowledge that you are going to make a melodrama, since the genre has been totally devalued because of the soap operas. My sister, for example, will never accept that *Serpientes y escaleras* is a melodrama, and I don't think Alicia would either. I, on the other hand, would accept it because I was trying to make a movie that would bring me into closer contact with moviegoers. On the one hand, my objective as a filmmaker, besides raising consciousness, is to move people emotionally. On the other, I consider working with melodrama important, because in every country there is relationship between film language and dramatic language, and we Mexicans are melodramatic. In fact, if you sit down and watch movies like *Principio y fin* or *El callejón de los milagros* they are profoundly melodramatic—well, in the case of *El callejón de los milagros*, there are also tragicomic elements. Even in the comedies of Cantinflas, Tin Tan, or La India María, there is always a melodramatic moment and many times, the comedy is sustained by the melodrama. When all is said and done, melodrama is what dominates the biggest box office hits like *Como agua para chocolate*. *Los olvidados* is also an excellent melodrama, and then there's the work of [Arturo] Ripstein. Working in the genre has led Jorge Fons to perfect it, from his short film *Caridad*, through *Los albañiles*, up to

*Rojo amanecer*. Fons utilizes a more modern language; not in the way he handles the cameras, but in the way he works with feelings and emotions.<sup>78</sup>

**Are there other aspects of melodrama that you like?**

I am also struck by the fact that not only women, but children as well, stay up till one in the morning to watch soap operas. They're "hooked"--they want to know what's going to happen. That is what I, as a writer, want to achieve: to be able to maintain a narrative that leaves you with that itch, that leaves you wondering what's going to happen, even though you don't care. When I go to see my parents and they're watching a soap opera, I get hooked, even though it might be dreadful, even though the set is horrible, even though you don't believe the actors at all, even though you are hearing the prompter the whole time. That's why soap operas sell. I had the same feeling of wanting to know what was going to happen--whether you're interested or not--when I first read *El viudo Román*. That's why, when I went to see Governor Beatriz Paredes, I remembered *El viudo Román* perfectly, although three years had passed. The same thing happened to me when I was doing the adaptation of *El secreto de Romelia*: I couldn't get it out of my head. I would be on the road driving and suddenly . . . It was like an obsession. It didn't happen to me with *Serpientes y escaleras*, but it did happen to me again with *Subiendo el río está el paraíso*. It's like an obsession, trying to get hooked.

**What do you think about the melodramas of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema and soap operas? Are they alike or are they different?**

---

<sup>78</sup> The films Cortés refers to here are: *The Beginning and the End*, directed by Arturo Ripstein (1993); *El callejón de los milagros* by Jorge Fons, released abroad as *Midaq Alley* (1995); Alfonso Arau's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1991); Luis Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* (released

The melodrama of the soap operas is an even more simplistic reduction of the melodrama of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. Soap operas today, in 1995, use the same melodrama that was used 50 years ago. This once was valid, but not now. Also, the melodramas of the Golden Age could rely on the sensitivity of many professionals. The cinematographers, screenwriters, directors, and actors did sensitive work. Even though the actors lacked any significant method, they were at the service of a director. Nowadays, however, there is no artistic interest on the part of the camera operators or the director, they only want to get things done fast. Even worse, in many soap operas there's no scene director; there is just someone reviewing dialogues, and the editor doesn't do much either.

**Yes, but you don't use melodrama that way. How do you work with it in your movies?**

We try to create more complex characters. The language of melodrama must be renewed and made richer, because in Mexico it is a genre that has been cheapened. That is also what Rosario Castellanos does a little in *Balún Canán*, which is profoundly melodramatic. I attempt to do the same as Castellanos in *Subiendo el río está el paraíso*. I'm not trying to simplistically reject Zoraira, the mother, but to understand her. The psychological studies done of Rosario Castellanos have helped me understand Zoraira quite a bit.

**How would you describe the melodrama in *El secreto de Romelia* and *Serpientes y escaleras*?**

Since my days as a student, since my work at UTEC, I feel I have always had the subtlety of feelings as my goal. In *El secreto de Romelia*, I sacrificed some subtlety in the expression of

---

abroad as *The Young and the Damned*, (1950); and *Charity* (1972), *The Bricklayers* (1976) and *Red Dawn* (1989), all by Jorge Fons.



emotions in order to reach more people. But even though, In the case of *El secreto de Romelia*, I simplified the emotions, I don't think I end up using obvious melodramatic devices in the style of the soap operas or North American movies. The use of flashbacks and shifts in narrative levels keep the reduction of subtlety from weakening the movie.

In contrast, the problem with *Serpientes y escaleras* was that, because of poor handling of Gregorio's character, the movie became too obvious. I had written a much more subtle character, but the actor who played the role, Héctor Bonilla, came up with a very different idea of the character and I couldn't control him. As a matter of fact, the main criticism I've gotten is that it resembles a soap opera, and that hurts. I wasn't trying to come up with some macho son of a bitch, but a character that truly loved his wife. That's how politicians are: they love their families but that doesn't stop them from being sons of bitches or crushing whomever they have to in order to get what they want. I was looking for Gregorio Cisneros to be a more complex character, not just the bad guy of the movie. Gregorio was a character we knew perfectly well because he was inspired by our uncle, who was a candidate for the office of governor. In the true case on which we based the story, the girl's father killed our uncle. It was a really interesting case because although our uncle was very refined and adored his wife and children, he was still a womanizer.

In Mexico, cases like Gregorio's are common. Adultery is even forgiven socially--that is, as long as you are faithful to your wife. In *Serpientes y escaleras*, there's a point in the script where Rebeca tells Valentina, "What are you worrying about? Why are you so jealous? It doesn't matter if your father has chapels so long as your mother is the cathedral." That is a very common saying in Mexico. The goal was to portray a complex character who could be a seducer and love his family. Our challenge with Gregorio Cisneros and Adelaida was not to portray the

self-sacrificing Mexican woman once again, but to try to give her more consciousness, so we came up with a different ending. In any movie from the 1950s, Adelaida would have given her husband a helping hand. Instead, we made Adelaida come to the aid of her daughter, Valentina.

**To continue with a broader analysis and with the subject of mothers, could you tell me how you present the mother-daughter relationship in your movies?**

As far as mothers go, I have five different types. Ernestina [Romelia's mother], Romelia [Dolores's mother], Dolores [the mother of the three girls], Adelaida [Valentina's mother], and Imelda [Rebeca's mother]. Some are portraits taken from real life; with Doña Romelia, I am remembering my own mother, and with Dolores, my sister and her children. They are both portraits taken from real life. In contrast, in the case of Romelia's mother, I respected Rosario Castellanos: Doña Ernestina resembles the mother in *Balún Canán* who loves her son and as soon as he dies, she dies. Of all the mothers in the two films the one I like best as a character is Adelaida, Valentina's mother.

**And Rebeca's mother?**

Imelda, Rebeca's mom, is a character I love and know very well because both sides of my family come from the world of provincial Guanajuato. Having lived in the provinces means that I am intimately familiar with this type of elegant, refined widow who has to prostitute herself in a sophisticated manner—she's not a streetwalker—in order to keep going and not lose her position. Often, a very young woman marries an older man and is an accomplice to her husband, who has a second family. Though she is rejected and poorly understood, this character is very complex, for she combines bravery with hypocrisy.

**And what do you think of the relationships the daughters have with their mothers?**

Those relationships are all different. I have two sisters, one older and one younger, and the three of us have had very different relationships with my mother. Being the oldest means you are responsible for your younger brothers and sisters, especially in a large family. My youngest sister was the favorite; my mother pampered her. In my case, since I was the fifth and then was followed by two boys, I was very independent and had almost no relationship with my mother. Our relationship began when I got married and had children. Then, while I was working, I left the children with her. I left the children with her because she was an excellent grandmother who told them stories and taught them to paint. And my children loved it too; they had a fantastic time with their grandmother.

**You mentioned earlier that you have better relationships with actresses than with actors, could you expand on this?**

I feel that I communicate more with actresses than actors. Among other reasons, because I'm thinking of them as I write the screenplays. I don't finish the script and then look for the actress. I start writing my screenplays with specific actresses in mind. When I wrote *El secreto de Romelia*, the first actress I thought of was Dolores Beristáin, the one who plays the older Romelia. I had seen her act in a performance directed by Ludwik Margules—my teacher for the direction of actors—in *Uncle Vanya* by Chekhov. I loved the work of all the actors in that play, but I was most impressed with her because, although she didn't have a leading role, you really got a sense of the richness of her character. I wrote the screenplay thinking of Beristáin in the role of the older Romelia, so she was the first actress I approached. The most difficult experience of *El secreto de Romelia* was when she refused to participate in the film. Later, she explained the reason for her initial “no.” After my visit, she had spoken with her son, who is also an actor, and he had told her that people had come looking for her to make a movie for the

CCC. Dolores's impression was that it was a movie being made by amateurs, even though she hadn't yet read the script. Her son told her, "Look, mom, you're older now. It's not worth it. They're a bunch of losers, they don't respect union schedules, then they don't finish the films. Don't waste your time on this." She had another reason as well: Beristáin acted in the theater, not in films. Her refusal was very hard. I had to call another actress and they did a costume fitting for her and everything, but at the last minute, I said, "She's not the character." So I went back to Berinstein and told her, "Look, I'm just going to ask that you read the script and give me your opinion. If you don't like it, that's fine." Of course, she read the screenplay and fell in love with the character. She told me, "Why, of course I'll do it." When we were just beginning to make the movie, she still had the idea that it was a little student film. She thought we would be hanging around until all hours of the night, so she was surprised when she saw us working so professionally. For the other actress, I chose Diana Bracho, with whom I would work again because I like how she goes about creating her characters.

The younger actresses I met while teaching film language at the Centro Universitario de Teatro. I'd thought about the whole adaptation of Rosario Castellanos with those three actresses in mind: Lumi Cavazos, Arcelia Ramírez, and Lisa Owen. Although the film required that they look alike, like sisters, they didn't and I didn't give a hoot. My problem was that I couldn't decide which of the two, Lumi or Arcelia, should play the young Romelia. I chose Arcelia because my communication with her was better, even though Lumi looked more like Dolores Beristáin. I sensed that, as far as temperament was concerned, Arcelia was going to give me a very interesting Romelia. I wasn't mistaken, because she changed the character of Romelia that I had created in the script. The young Romelia of my script was more provincial, more

concerned with her clothing; the Romelia of the movie was always jumping around in the same dress; she was wilder.

The change in young Romelia's character happened due to a curious incident. The co-producer, Corporación Nacional Cinematográfica de Trabajadores y Estado (CONACITE), was going to provide the wardrobe but at the last minute they didn't. We'd already been filming for three days when we had to change the whole concept of the wardrobe in the movie because we found out that we didn't have any period costumes. Coincidentally, when we found out about the wardrobe, we were shooting Arcelia's first scene, and it came out really awful. Nothing was right, not her hairdo or her dress; it was so bad we had to cut that scene. One night, to better understand each other, Arcelia and I were talking a lot about her character. We were talking about her feeling for the character, how she was experiencing her, and we compared this with the character I had imagined. That same night a new character emerged. We said, "Romelia is only going to have one dress so the viewer can distinguish her from her two sisters," and we made a change to Castellanos's novel, in which the three sisters resembled each other quite a bit. In Castellanos, the widower could have married any of them because they were all alike.

**Are the topics that interest you different from topics that would interest a man?**

Yes, definitely. I've seen it in all the scripts with which I've been in some way involved, whether as a writer or as a commercial director. After *El secreto de Romelia*, for example, what I most wanted to do was work on a love story. I am always going to want to make a love story. The novelist Silvia Molina has a beautiful little story called *La mañana debe seguir gris* [published in English as *Gray Skies Tomorrow*] that tells of a young woman's relationship with a poet in London. When she finally decides to get involved with him, the poet dies in an accident.

As in most love stories, love is impossible. So, I handed the script to a friend of mine who was the director of a film school and even though I was really in love with the story, he didn't care for it. I, in my stubbornness, said, "I don't care. I'm going to present it to the IMCINE board anyway." Although the script was badly written, I felt that the story had something moving about it. However, for men--and the members of the board were all men--it didn't move them at all.

**Do you mean to say that women are attracted to love stories?**

Definitely, yes. Yes indeed, from the time they are children. Boys like action movies, war movies, and girls like movies about love. The feminine side tends to be closer to the soul, to feelings. Somewhat because of men having to obtain the materials for survival. This is a very important difference and we must bear it in mind when we ask who we are. Because it's one thing to free yourself from a man and another to liberate yourself as a woman.



## 4. Marisa Sistach

---

Marisa Sistach was a member of the second class to graduate from the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica (CCC). Sistach, who began by making independent, feminist films, worked with universities and members of a feminist collective to produce a short and a medium-length film in 16 mm. on subjects of interest to women: sexuality, pleasure, and rape. Later, she found herself obliged to enter the movie industry, but still tried to maintain an independent style and method of making movies: she converted her 16 mm. films to 35 mm., she wrote screenplays with a political bent, and she made cultural series for television. In the 90s, Sistach made a 35 mm. movie that was very successful in commercial theaters and she collaborated with José Buil on a state-subsidized movie that reconstructs the origins of filmmaking in Mexico. Neighborhood

Sistach was born in Mexico City in 1952. In 1971, she went to Paris and studied art and ethnology. On her return to Mexico, she first studied anthropology and later, film. She began her studies at the CCC in 1975 and five years later, made her graduation thesis film *¿Y si platicamos de agosto?* (*What if We Talk about August?*, 1980) whose



context was the student movement of 1968. In this movie, Caritina, a junior high school student, falls in love with a university activist. Caritina is forced to lead a double life: she is an uninhibited and rebellious young woman with her partner, but she must be submissive and docile within her family. *¿Y si platicamos de agosto?* won an Ariel (an award given by the Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes Cinematográficos) for Best Short Fiction Film (1981).

Once out of school, Sistach made independent movies. In the medium-length film *Conozco a las tres* (*I Know All Three Women*, 1983), she introduces three women who live outside the traditional family norm. Ana, a divorced mother, works as a newspaper editor and has a young son, Zacarías, a boyfriend, Pablo. María is a gymnastics teacher at a private high school. Julia is a young woman in love with Juan, a male ghost. María is the victim of rape, which brings the three friends together. After having been raped, María tries to rest in Ana's bed, her two friends keeping her company. Ana reads them a newspaper article Pablo has written in solidarity with the many women who are raped every day. Nevertheless, María does not feel comforted. She starts to twist the sheets and ends up hurling pillows at her friends. María's rage makes Ana and Julia understand that the pain of rape is not cured by the recognition that she has been a victim.

Between 1975 and 1985, feminism viewed independent cinema as a medium through which to create political consciousness around the subject of women. According to Margara Millan<sup>79</sup>, the Colectivo Cine-Mujer (Film-Woman Collective) brought together feminist students who were making movies about sexuality or pleasure and were touching on topics such as rape. The movie *Conozco a las tres*, like many independent

feminist movies, fought to raise people's consciousness, especially that of women. It was made in 16 mm. and had two alternative distributors, Zafra y UNAMX, who took the film to cultural centers and universities, where it was discussed in forums.

Beginning in the mid-80s, the conditions and goals that had created independent cinema began to change, and the system slowly started to die out. With independent cinema in the process of disappearing, Sistach had difficulty finding a producer for her screenplay, *El peso del sol* (*The Weight of the Sun*, 1987). In this screenplay, Juan and María, a newly married couple, experience what it is like to live in a region of confrontation between indigenous people and guerrillas. Traveling on their honeymoon, they pass through a village where the indigenous inhabitants throw a live dog at them, breaking the car's windshield. Juan and María are afraid: they fear the campesinos but also the army. The soldiers could arrest them at a checkpoint because the couple is carrying a pistol. During the period of Salinas' sexenio (1988-94), Sistach was unable to find a producer who would put out the money to make a 35 mm. movie from this screenplay due to its political engagement. In spite of this, the script won awards from the IV Concurso de Cine (1991) held by the Fideicomiso de Estímulo al Cine Mexicano (FECIMEX) and the Fundación de Cineastas Latinoamericanos.

During Miguel de la Madrid's sexenio (1982-88), as there was no state subsidy of *cine de calidad*, nor were the unions open to directors who had graduated from the film schools, the only place where film school graduates could make *cine de calidad* was in the Unidad de Televisión Educativa y Cultural (UTECA), a branch of the Ministry of Public Education. At the same time she was making independent films and writing

---

<sup>79</sup> Millán, p. 96-7.

screenplays, Sistach was earning a living making television programs. During 1983 and 1984, she worked on the series *De la vida de las mujeres (On Women's Lives)* with Busi Cortés, Dora Guerra, Olga Cáceres, and Consuelo Garrido. She also worked on another UTEC series, called *Los libros tienen la palabra (Books Have Their Say)* about contemporary Mexican writers, for which she made “Gilberto Owen, el recuerdo olvidado” (“Gilberto Owen; the Forgotten Memory”). In addition, she worked as script coordinator with Felipe Cazals and as assistant director with Jorge Fons (UTECE, 1986).

Despite the hardships of a period in which film school graduates were unable to find subsidies for their films, Sistach directed her first feature-length film, *Los pasos de Ana (Ana's Steps)*, in 1989. This movie reconstructs the route taken by one side of the film industry during the eighties. Ana, a graduate from the CCC, like Sistach, has to earn her living as an assistant director on a television show because she can't find work as a movie director. This divorced woman in her thirties only finds an outlet for her aesthetic aspirations in the videos she takes of her children, Juan and Paula. Her only friend is Carlos, a homosexual, who listens to her and helps her find work. Ana feels a deep loneliness and attempts to get close to several men, without success.

Sistach and José Buil wrote the screenplay for *Los pasos de Ana*. The director was in charge of developing a sketch of the characters and Buil wrote the screenplay. In 1987, Sistach received a scholarship from the Sundance Institute to polish her script at the San Antonio de los Baños film school in Cuba. The production became a cooperative venture: the participants offered their time in exchange for future payment from box office sales. The road leading to the completion of the movie was a torturous one. The 16 mm. takes were edited on video; nevertheless, this video copy could not be shown in

commercial theaters, as they only project 35 mm. film. When, in 1990, Peter Schumann, organizer of the Film Festival of Berlin, wanted to show the film, the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE) decided to transfer it to 35 mm. in exchange for the rights. Most of the newspaper reviews noted that IMCINE distributed the movie poorly, since it was two years more before the movie would make its commercial debut, and this organization did not do sufficient advertising. *Los pasos de Ana* was shown at the Berlin Festival (1991), and at the VII Muestra de Cine Mexicano in Guadalajara (1991).

In her second feature film, *Anoche soñé contigo* (*I Dreamed of You Last Night*, 1991), Sistach collaborated with Buil to adapt Alfonso Reyes' story "La venganza creadora." The movie reflects on the pleasure and the sexuality of adolescents and shows the erotic awakening of Toto, the protagonist, and Quique, his neighbor and friend. Initially, Toto and Quique spy on Quique's female servant from the roof. Later, Azucena, Toto's 30-year-old cousin, comes to stay for the first time with him and Irma, his mother. Azucena, who wants to be a chorus girl in a musical, becomes the object of Toto's sexual obsession. Sistach's camera follows Toto in his obsession for Azucena.

*Anoche soñé contigo* was produced with private funding. Clasa Film Mundiales, Francisco and Pablo Barbachano's production and distribution company was in charge of producing and distributing the movie. *Anoche soñé contigo* won the award from the Fideicomiso de Estímulo al Cine Mexicano in the "Mexican Classics" category (1991), and was nominated for an Ariel for Best Ópera prima (1992). The movie was shown in the XXIV Muestra Internacional de Cine Mexicano (1992).

At the beginning of the 90s, Sistach and Buil worked on *La línea paterna* (*The Paternal Line*, 1994), a feature-length film that was simultaneously a documentary and a

family history. The movie traces the history of photography and cinema in Mexico as well as the paternal line of the Buil family in Papantla, Veracruz, a city known for its vanilla. *La línea paterna* begins with still photos and 9.5 mm. film that the director's father shot between 1925 and 1940, and continues on to the present, ending with Pía Buil, the daughter of the two filmmakers. This family story of Mexican cinema was made with Tragaluz, Sistach and Buil's production company, and with help from just about every institution possible: IMCINE, Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (FONCA), Estudios Churubusco-Azteca, Cineteca Nacional, and the Filmoteca of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, which was in charge of converting the 9.5 mm. film to 35 mm. Sistach also received a grant from the MacArthur/Rockefeller Foundation to develop this project (1993). *La línea paterna* won two Ariels: for Best Screenplay and for Best Original Plot Written for Film (1996). The movie was shown and competed in numerous festivals, including the Guadalajara Film Festival (1995), Film of the Real at the Pompidou Center in Paris (1996), and the Film Festival of Venice, in the "Window of Images" category (1996).

**“Not to have characters on the screen with whom women can identify is a real shortcoming”**

**How did the idea of making *Los pasos de Ana* come about?**

At first I had the idea of making *Los pasos de Ana* (*Ana's Steps*, 1991) in 16 mm. because I was intending to show it in the same environment as my other pictures, that is, the student world. In the 80s, the film clubs were experiencing a boom throughout Mexico<sup>80</sup>. That's how *¿Y si platicamos de agosto?* and *Conozco a las tres* were sent to universities, high schools, and cultural centers. I made this movie with young people I mind--teenagers and the young adults studying at the university level. I was also interested in the film clubs that existed in the workplace because I wanted secretaries to be able to see the movie as well. But, by the time I finished *Los pasos de Ana*, this circuit no longer existed. Then, with the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE) as producer, I transferred the movie from 16 mm. to 35 mm. and it was shown commercially.

**Would you explain to me the subject you were trying to tackle in your first feature-length film, *Los pasos de Ana*, in which Ana, a former student from the CCC, divorced and the mother of two young children, dreams of making a movie?**

---

<sup>80</sup> El Cine Club de México (The Film Club of Mexico) was founded in 1950 and lasted a decade. In 1955, La Federación Mexicana de Cine Clubs (The Mexican Federation of Film Clubs) was founded, in which independent and university film clubs participated.

I was interested in showing that, for a woman in Mexico, in a medium dominated by men--as is the world of filmmaking--that becoming a film director is practically a dream. In that light, although it might seem strange, making *Los pasos de Ana* was the fulfillment of a double dream: in making the movie, I was making Ana's dream a reality. And, at the same time, I was also realizing my own dream. Given that *Los pasos de Ana* is the realization of these dreams, I believe there was considerable overlap between the two of us, and this overlap is even greater because my children acted in the movie. It wasn't easy to choose the actress who would play Ana. One young woman showed up who would have been fine, but we had dinner with her and when she left, my daughter Pía said, "If she's going to be the mom, I'm not going to be the daughter." So, right there, I thought, "This actress is not the one."

You have to understand that the movie is autobiographical as far as the emotions go, not with regards to the actual events. Although the references in the film don't correspond exactly to ones I have experienced, they do reflect a situation I've been in--that of a woman in any medium that is loathe to accept a female presence. I chose to have Ana be a director because it's a medium I'm familiar with and because I am also familiar with the relationship women have with male workers. Of course the fact that the director drinks, that he wants to seduce her, that she likes the director, are not exactly autobiographical anecdotes. I can observe them in the lives of friends. Nevertheless, people--even in the film business itself--don't understand this, and ask me, "Who is the director?" as if there were an actual director with whom I'd gotten involved. These are

very naive questions, which I answer by saying, “Well, I think that you'll have to ask Pepe [José] Buil<sup>81</sup> about that, because he's the one who came up with that part.”

**Does Ana have other feelings that were inspired by your own?**

I reproduced my own emotions in Ana's love of work and in the type work that she does. Incorporated into *Los pasos de Ana* is the love story of Clementina Otero--played by Clementina herself--and Gilberto Owen, a poet from the state of Sinaloa. This grew out of an educational series I worked on. In 1985, I had done a program for a series on Mexican writers made for UTEC, entitled “Gilberto Owen, el recuerdo olvidado” (“Gilberto Owen, the Forgotten Memory”). They proposed that I do a video on this poet and while I was researching the topic, I discovered, miraculously, some love letters he had sent to Clementina Otero when they were both young. Since Clementina was still alive, I decided to visit her, and later we went together to the old Ulises theater where they had first began to meet and work as part of an intellectual group. The television program was very interesting.

On the other hand, the story of Gilberto Owen and Clementina Otero in *Los pasos de Ana* is one of least successful parts of the movie, particularly the scene of Ana and Clementina visiting the theater. When we were looking for a location during preproduction to do this scene, we went back to the theater and found that the building was still standing, but that it was inhabited by homeless people living in horrendous poverty. We went in and the first thing that hit us was the smell of shit and urine,

---

<sup>81</sup> The best known films by Pepe Buil are *Adiós, adiós ídolo mío* (Farewell, Farewell My Idol, 1981) and *La leyenda de una máscara* (The Legend of a Mask, 1989)



because everyone went to the bathroom in there. Then we saw people like you might find in India: little children, completely naked, curled up where the sun could warm them. The building was practically in ruins . . . . I wanted to keep the real theater in the film, with its real homeless people, as if it were a documentary reference. But it was hastily decided that we had to find another place in the center of the city. The new place wasn't at all similar: it was all freshly painted and had no atmosphere whatsoever. I had to shoot Ana and Clementina's visit to the theater in three hours, because that was how long they had rented the location, and the result was an awfully bad sequence. Even though it wasn't the image I was looking for, it did allow me to explore a topic that was important to me. I wanted to speak about what happens to people in a country with no memory, of the time that passes, of the culture that is lost, of the forgetfulness. Mexico is a country that hasn't managed to preserve many of its architectural marvels. For instance, the neighborhood built in the forties that you knew in 1960 or 1980, has been devastated by aluminum and concrete. In spite of having such strong cultural roots, Mexico has no memory of them, which prevents the country from having an identity.

**How did the script of *Los pasos de Ana* come about?**

It was a funny and complicated process. I made some pretty well-developed storyboards, then Pepe Buil wrote the whole text, then I revised it again, and then we fought. I really liked the script, but I felt it lacked Ana's passion for her work and her tenderness toward her children. I was looking for a solution to this problem when I

attended a script workshop in Cuba, in San Antonio de los Baños<sup>82</sup>, and it occurred to me that Ana could make a home video about her children. In the end, Pepe Buil revised the script again and I added the part about the video. Of course, sticking in a new plot element in a script that's already been worked out is dangerous, because it alters the rhythm. It's true that the movie has problems in its rhythm that stem from that last addition, but I'm not sorry for having done it, because it was what I wanted.

**Were you creating a new character for the screen with Ana?**

Yes. I love Hollywood movies, but I think it's necessary for there to be alternatives. Since in Mexico, women taking care of their children on their own is an everyday occurrence, it seemed essential to me to deal with this topic, because not to have characters on the screen with whom women can identify, which is what happens with Hollywood movies, is a real shortcoming. The cinema I wanted to make was one which Mexican women could identify with. Ana is made up of qualities from all my women friends, from myself, from what I see on the street everyday, from my country, from our idiosyncrasies. There are many Anas--secretary Anas or proletariat Anas who have to earn a living and raise their children on their own.

---

<sup>82</sup> The Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión (International Film and Television School) in San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba, directed by Gabriel García Márquez offers scholarships to directors to work on their screenplays.

**You said in an interview published in the Mexican magazine *Cine* that it is necessary to get rid of the glamorous images of women that appear in mainstream cinema<sup>83</sup>. What other images would you like to substitute for them?**

I wanted Ana to have a three-part identity. Her affection toward her children is the part I thought was the most fundamental. It also seemed important to me that Ana look for her own identity through her work, and that video allow her a very personal avenue of artistic expression, although her dream was to make movies. So video is her second identity and the third is her search for her own femininity with regards to love and a settled sexuality. Ana looks for and breaks certain structures in these three areas without really having created alternative structures. For that reason, she is a very defenseless woman and very afraid in many ways.

**Could you compare the image you create of the mother with other previous images from Mexican cinema? For example, images from performances by the actress Sara García?**

The self-sacrificing mother is the essential element in Mexican cinema and her opposite is the prostitute. Sara García is an actress who always played the role of the self-sacrificing mother in the movies: she is always “the mother of . . .” and has a relationship of very affectionate acceptance with her children. Ana also fully assumes motherhood and, of course, desires to have a husband and to form a nuclear family. Nevertheless, although Ana and Sara García might fundamentally be mothers, their

---

<sup>83</sup> “For some time now we have stopped seeing ourselves in the glamorous images of objectified women. We no longer wish to be the decoration around which turn stories of men, nor can we identify with those unreal women, the product of male fantasies.

principles separate them: Ana gets divorced, breaks with familial security, works, and has sexual relations with several men. That is to say, Ana plays two roles: on the one hand, she is the woman who loves her children tenderly and, on the other hand, her sexuality is overt and liberated. In this sense, they are truly at opposite ends of the spectrum. Everything Sara García believed in, Ana cannot.

### **What is Ana's sexuality like?**

Through the character of Ana, I wanted to speak about the sexuality of Latin women who are divorced, but what happened during the filming of the movie made me reconsider my own idea. In the script, Ana made love with a young man she met at a disco and didn't know at all, and it was an enjoyable experience. However, the person playing Ana--Guadalupe Sánchez, a non-professional actress--along with several members of the film crew, expressed such rejection of the idea that she could find this casual relationship enjoyable that I decided to change the script. I didn't want to project so much optimism about the extent to which women's sexuality in Mexico had been liberated. I changed the relationship so it functioned as a way for her to settle into her solitude, but it wasn't enjoyable. When I changed the script, it wasn't just because of theoretical pressures, but because the actress couldn't play the "games" written into the script. Maybe because she wasn't an actress by profession and found it was more difficult to place herself in that role, but she probably had a deeper reason. I sensed that for Latin women, a casual encounter could not be enjoyable because there are too many

taboos for them to be able to enjoy a purely physical relationship. Besides, women's sexuality is complex. Women need a sensual, erotic, delicate, drawn-out prelude that, perhaps, most men aren't used to. Men's machismo, their tendency to think about their own pleasure and not the pleasure of both people, is a problem for women.

**How does Ana love? Is her way of loving similar to that of Clementina Otero?**

When I met Clementina Otero, she had a certain nostalgia about not having reciprocated Gilberto's flirting. A 75-year-old woman was nostalgic about what she had done at the age of seventeen! She always rejected him and he suffered greatly; he wrote her romantic letters, but she didn't pay any attention to him. Gilberto Owen and Clementina Otero mirror Ana's failed attempts to connect with the men she crosses paths with at different moments. For example, there is the encounter between Ana and Andrés [Andrés Fonseca], the neighbor who lives across the street. He is constantly watching her and helping her. He is like her guardian angel, but Ana doesn't notice him until Andrés has already gone. Vidal [Emilio Echeverría] could be another encounter. Who knows? Probably, if Vidal's wife had not been pregnant at that moment, Vidal might have gotten involved with Ana. I think many encounters like this occur in real life. Besides, the thing about Ana is that she's a romantic. She really believes in that somewhat passionate love of the movies. At the end of movie, when Ana is looking through the camera at the couple in front of her, one can see that romantic side of her. That is something the American feminist audience finds strange, almost disgusting. It is something, we might say, that is somewhat hard for them to "swallow."

**And what do you think bothered feminists?**

At the conference in Tijuana about a half-dozen people stood up and said that the movie was sexist and *machista*<sup>84</sup>. And the worst of it was that they were filmmakers! So, I said, “If *Los pasos de Ana* is sexist and *machista*, then I don't want anything to do with feminism any more.” They said that Ana is never seen in the company of other women, that she exists in a man's world with no women to help her, and that in Mexico, women have very extended families, which wasn't reflected in the movie. It is certainly true that in Mexico women are surrounded by many other women. But that doesn't mean I was interested in bringing a woman surrounded by other women to the screen. I was interested in creating a homosexual character.

**Was Ana's friend, Carlos [David Beuchot], the homosexual character, in the script from the start?**

Yes. As with Ana's motherhood, Carlos was also a response to Mexican cinema. The homosexual is one of the most vilified characters on the Mexican screen; he is the one people mock, the one people denigrate. Given this history, it seemed to me necessary to present a complex homosexual character. Just as I wanted to show a mother of two children who had to make a living, in the same way, I wanted to create a homosexual with human traits. When the feminists berated me for the fact that Ana didn't have a female friend, they didn't realize that Ana's closest female friend was Carlos. Ana poured her heart out to Carlos, and he is also the one who finds her work, who pays her

compliments, who loves her. Carlos is a character I adore, and I just love David's portrayal of him.

**Let's move on to the second aspect that defines Ana's identity: her work. What does work mean for Ana?**

The work you like to do makes you a more complete individual, it fills you up. Ana's search through video, for example, is more positive than the search that Vidal, the director, is engaged in. Vidal does things that, in reality, don't interest him but that he is obliged to do. Work, for me, is essential to my well-being as a person. When I'm working, I feel better than when I'm not doing anything. Work gives a certain meaning to life and at times, if your personal relationships are not the way you'd like, work can be a form of relaxation.

**Tell me about Ana's working conditions. Why did Vidal, the director who hired Ana to make the program on Gilberto Owen, ask her if she had "other obligations"?**

The position Vidal takes in examining the familial obligations of the person who will be his assistant is a very sexist position, but it also has its logic. Film is a career that consumes your life. You get involved in a movie and you are in the movie virtually twenty-four hours a day, no matter what you do. Given this reality, it's logical that the director would ask if she has any other sorts of obligations. Because, how are you going to lead this double life of family and work when both demand so much of your time? Making movies is not like other jobs where you go to work from 9 to 3 and then pick up

---

<sup>84</sup> Sistach is referring to "Cruzando Fronteras: México-Estados Unidos" ("Crossing Borders: Mexico-United States"), the conference of Latina film and video

your children from school. And if your child gets sick one day, you miss work and there's no problem. You can't miss a single day of filming, nor can you say, "Gentlemen, my eight hours of shooting are up. I'm leaving!" When you are filming, it's over when the job is done. That's why it's a job that is particularly difficult for a person who is a mother and has other sorts of responsibilities. It's not the same for men, because they have other people who take care of these responsibilities for them, nor for women with no children, because they can devote all the time they want to their work. I wanted to explain, in all its complexity, this duality of sexism and logic. If someone were to ask me, "How do you think you can do this job and take care of your children?" I would answer that, in Mexico, we have the mother, the mother-in-law, the aunt, and the sister. The importance of the extended family is one of the advantages that we Mexican women have. Other women, however, work in cultures where the extended family doesn't exist.

**A crisis permeates the working world in which Ana moves. Is this a constant in the film industry or is it a characteristic of the late 80s, when the film was shot?**

Film is a medium that is in constant crisis, so you never know whether you're going to survive. You don't know if you can get the money and therefore, you don't know if you'll be able to film or not. Vidal and Ana's fear of not being able to film—although it's not very successfully presented—is one of the fears one has as a director. Part of me identifies with Vidal; I too sometimes tell myself, "Well, it's not exactly what I dreamed about, but it's making movies. So, alright, I'll take the job, because otherwise,

---

makers, held in Tijuana, Baja California, 1990.



I'll start getting rusty.” Mexican cinema has been dying for the last forty years, since the Golden Age. It's a reality that after six months you'll probably be out of work, for a variety of political or financial reasons. Politicians take different positions with regards to the medium of film: some want to control it, others want to destroy it, and still others want cinema to be the way they like it. From the directors' perspective, having one's work depend on the politics of each sexenio creates a lot of insecurity. It's sad that these decisions are not in the hands of filmmakers. Also, there is a lack of solidarity among people who work in the film industry because it requires so many resources. It's different in other artistic media. For example, if you are a writer, although there are literary “squabbles,” you can write; if you are a painter, you can paint. But if you are a filmmaker and they don't give you money, you can't film.

**How did you get the money to make *Los pasos de Ana*?**

Nobody helped me and so, I made the movie in a very independent fashion. I asked for a camera here, material there, and I also asked people to work for free. The magic of independent cinema is that it allows you to be more sensitive to the people around you. This sensitivity is permissible because it's a very small group and you don't have to be battling with a producer who limits the subjects you can talk about and who tells you, “That's how the script was and that's how it's going to be because it's more marketable.” That freedom was marvelous in *Los pasos de Ana*, but everything else was horrible because the shortage of money is awful; it limits you a lot. But on the other hand--at least in Mexico--it is that very lack of money that opens many possibilities for you.

**What kind of distribution did *Los pasos de Ana* have?**

Overnight, the movie club circuit collapsed and that change affected *Los pasos de Ana*'s distribution. Although I intended it for a young audience, primarily college students, the film had to be shown in a movie theater, and the result was terrible. People expect other things in commercial theaters. It's logical: if you normally go to a movie club, you are better prepared to see *Los pasos de Ana* than if you go to the Las Américas movie theater<sup>85</sup>. I realize that the movie is difficult for a broad audience, that it's a bit slow, but they could have prepared the audience in the publicity for the film. But that's not the way it turned out. When *Los pasos de Ana* came out, there was no advertising, as also happened with *Ángel de fuego (Angel of Fire)* by Dana Rotberg. As a consequence, it was a complete flop at the box office. No one went to see it, not even on the day of its debut. By contrast, *Los pasos de Ana* was well received in the festivals and outside the country, because people are very curious to see that kind of Mexican woman.

---

<sup>85</sup> A movie theater in Mexico City that shows mainstream films.

## 5. María Novaro

---

María Novaro began studying sociology before devoting herself to film. For that reason, a sociological, documentary spirit is present throughout her work. Novaro is a prolific director whose best-known work is *Danzón*, a movie that went to the Cannes International Film Festival and was distributed internationally for theatrical, television, and home video release.

María Luisa Novaro Peñaloza was born in 1951 in Mexico City. In 1971, inspired by the political turmoil of the late 1960s, Novaro decided to study sociology in the Political Science department of the UNAM. However, feeling that sociology contributed too little to changing the situation in the poor neighborhoods ringing Mexico City, she became disillusioned with the field and left her studies in 1977. Her transition to film came through the Colectivo Cine-Mujer, made up of students from the CUEC. Feminists from the Colectivo asked her for help because they knew that she had worked in poor neighborhoods. Novaro participated in the documentaries *Es primera vez* (It's the First Time, 1981) by Beatriz Mira, about a gathering of rural and urban working-class women, and *Vida de Ángel* (Angel's Life, 1982) by Ángeles Necochea, about

domestic work. Working on these films, Novaro learned to use the Nagra camera and worked very closely with Sonia Fritz, the screenwriter and editor of both documentaries. With this experience, Novaro discovered that documentary filmmaking offered her the possibility to do the work she had wanted to do as a sociology student. Consequently, she decided to study film at the CUEC.

Between 1980 and 1985 Novaro made three short films in Super-8: *Lavaderos* (Wash-houses), *Sobre las olas* (Over the Waves), *De encaje y azúcar* (Of Lace and Sugar), and four in 16 mm: *Conmigo lo pasarás muy bien* (You'll Have a Real Good Time with Me), *Querida Carmen* (Dear Carmen), *7 a.m.*, and *Una isla rodeada de agua* (An Island Surrounded by Water). In her first student exercises, Novaro chose to work as cinematographer because she was interested in exploring how camera position affected point of view. Later, she focused on editing in order to concentrate on the details of the filmed material. Both areas have continued to interest her throughout her professional career.

In her shorts and feature films, Novaro creates characters that are searching for something or someone. In *Una isla rodeada de agua* (1984), Novaro's thesis at the CUEC, Edith goes to Atoyac, Guerrero, looking for her mother, but instead of her mother, she discovers her own adolescence. *Una isla rodeada de agua* received an Ariel for Best Short Fiction Film (1986) and the Judges' Special Award at the Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival (1986).

*Azul celeste* (Sky Blue, 1987), Novaro's first production in 35 mm, was filmed with union workers as part of the project *Historias de una ciudad* (Stories of a City), financed by the UNAM. In *Azul celeste*, Laureana, a girl from the northern state of Chihuahua, arrives in Mexico City seven months pregnant. With obvious naïveté, she tries to find Edmundo Garza, the father of her child; her only clue as to his whereabouts is that he lives in a sky blue house. To

the viewer's surprise, Laureana finds Edmundo. He, however, isn't interested in continuing their relationship. *Azul celeste* received the Quinto Centenario award for best Latin American production and the Danzante de Oro, both at the Huesca Festival of Short Films in Spain (1990).

Novaro wrote the script for her first feature-length fiction film, *Lola* (1989), with her sister Beatriz. In 1988, she perfected her script first at the San Antonio de los Baños film school in Cuba and later on at the Sundance Institute in Utah. In *Lola*, the protagonist (Lola) is depressed. It's not so much that she has to take care of her six-year-old daughter Ana all by herself, or that she has to earn her living as a street vendor; her depression is caused by the departure of Omar, her rock musician partner, on a year-long performance tour. Lola feels that Omar has abandoned his familial and emotional responsibilities. She comes out of her depression in an unusual way: she travels to the beach and there witnesses a humorous incident. An elderly man wades into the ocean and the waves pull his swimming trunks down. His granddaughter and daughter try to pull them up for him and, hearing them laughing, Lola realizes there are still things to live for.

*Lola* was an international co-production which cost about \$300,000. Novaro received initial support from Televisión Española through the Quinto Centenario program in exchange for a portion of the distribution rights. Because of the support from Televisión Española, IMCINE, through CONACITE II, entered as co-producer. The other co-producers were Macondo Cine-Video (a private company belonging to Jorge Sánchez) and the José Revueltas cooperative. In order to make the movie, Novaro and her working team became members of this cooperative, a labor association parallel to the union. *Lola* received many awards: the Coral Prize at the International Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana for Best Opera Prima (1989); a Heraldo for Best Opera Prima; two Diosas de Plata, for Best Opera Prima and Best Supporting

Actress (Martha Navarro) (1990); four Ariels: for Best Opera Prima (María Novaro), Best Screenplay (María and Beatriz Novaro), Best Supporting Actress (Martha Navarro) and Best Supporting Actor (Roberto Sosa) (1990); Best Opera Prima from the Asociación de Cronistas de Espectáculos, New York (1990); the Mano de Bronce for Best Opera Prima at the New York International Latino Film Festival (1990); and the Encouragement Award at the Berlin International Film Festival (1991).

In Novaro's second feature film, *Danzón* (1991), Julia, a telephone operator in Mexico City, goes off to Veracruz, apparently in search of her disappeared dancing companion, Carmelo. As the picture progresses, the viewer realizes that Julia has other reasons for going. In Veracruz, Julia discovers the world of sensuality, makes new friends, and has an affair with a handsome sailor. In *Danzón*, Novaro experiments more openly with a technique she had previously used in *Lola*: the camera doesn't always follow the characters, but rather seeks out and lingers over the details that reveal their identity, such as Julia's high heels.

*Danzón* used a production scheme similar to that of *Lola*: Televisión Española, IMCINE and Macondo Cine-Video. These associates were joined by the Fondo de Fomento a la Calidad Cinematográfica, Tabasco Films, and the government of the state of Veracruz, where the movie was filmed. *Danzón* was an overwhelming success, breaking box-office records and receiving acclaim from the international press. It drew all types of audiences, from Mexican workers to European intellectuals. It was sold to Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Cuba, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Italy, Japan, and United States for screening in theaters--something unusual, given that the majority of Mexican films are sold only for video or television release. Among other prizes, *Danzón* won the Diva Award for Best Director at the International Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana (1991); a Silver Hugo for Best Actress (María Rojo) at the

Chicago International Film Festival; and, a Mano de Bronce for Best Film at the New York International Latino Film Festival. *Danzón*'s greatest achievement was to be selected to go to the Director's Fortnight at the Cannes International Film Festival, where three additional screenings were added to the four originally scheduled.

In 1992, Novaro received a MacArthur/Rockefeller grant for research in preparation for her next screenplay. The third of Novaro's feature films, *El Jardín del Edén* (The Garden of Eden, 1994), takes place in Tijuana, on the border between the United States and Mexico. *El Jardín del Edén* has multiple story lines involving, among other characters, the travelers Jane and Felipe and three women residents: Serena, Elizabeth, and Juana. Serena, a young widow from Mexico City and mother of three children, runs a photography studio. Elizabeth, a Chicana artist from California and mother of a little girl, opens an exhibition of her artwork. Juana, a woman from Tijuana, owns and operates a secondhand store and takes care of Elizabeth's and Serena's children. The story of these three women who do not travel contrasts with Jane's adventure crossing the border with Felipe and Julián (Serena's son) hidden in the back of her car.

To make *El Jardín del Edén*, IMCINE signed an international co-production agreement with Versau Internacional, a Quebec-based production company. Versau initially offered to participate by contributing Canadian personnel: the sound person, two actors, and the cinematographer. As work on the film progressed, however, they decided to apply part of their investment to sound postproduction. In exchange, Versau retained distribution rights for Canada and Germany. The FFCC, Macondo Cine-Video, and the Centro de Investigación y Enseñanza Cinematográfica (CIEC) at the Universidad de Guadalajara also participated. *El Jardín del Edén* was shown at the Venice International Film Festival (1994); at the Women and Film Festival in Mar de Plata, Argentina (1994); Biarritz Latin American Film Festival (1994); and the

Rotterdam International Film Festival (1995). It was awarded the Glauber Rocha Foreign Press Award at the International Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana (1994); and the award for Best Screenplay at the Cartagena Film Festival in Colombia (1995).



## “Master of Her Own Life”

### **At the beginning of your career, what most attracted you to film?**

I remember that during the first three years at film school, we were given materials to work in black and white and I liked it, but it wasn't my thing. So, when they gave me the materials to work in color during my fourth year, I went wild; finally, I was going to work in color! The short movie I wrote, *Una isla rodeada de agua*, is about Edith, a girl on the coast of Guerrero who saw everything in different colors because she had blue eyes.

My oldest daughter acted in the movie. She was twelve then, and had very blue eyes. The entire story takes place in a small village of mulatto and indigenous people with dark eyes; she was the only one with blue eyes. There were many shots in which the things Edith was seeing through her own eyes were altered. To achieve that, I put some gels we had colored over the camera lens. You can't imagine how much I enjoyed coming up with the color changes: there is one scene in which the sea is violet, the sky is pink, and the sand is gold.

In addition to being a game of how reality is seen differently in terms of colors, *Una isla rodeada de agua* is also the story of a child who is looking for her mother. The movie opened many doors for me because it was quite charming though it had some technical problems. At times the narrative didn't work well, but the movie is very beautiful. Above all, the color is very surprising. It showed my fascination with color, because I was studying film so I could play with color.

**After you finished school, as a director, what were you looking for in film?**

Besides conveying my perception, as a woman, of the world I live in and of my love affair with Mexican culture--a country that seems to me so visually and narratively rich that I could tell its story a thousand and one times--, perhaps the other thing that most excites me is film as an artistic form. It is a shame that the opportunities to work on developing this language are decreasing more and more. Every day there is more pressure to commercialize projects and to work in video, which is a small format that requires everything to be more closely focused on faces, more verbal, more simplistic. To make films for theaters is becoming so unprofitable that you are forced to make movies basically for release on video or television. It's not that there won't be movies--as long as television continues to absorb every possible cinematic product, they will still be made--, but rather that there are very few possibilities for developing cinematic language.

In terms of cinematic language, I have been lucky in my three feature films--in some of them more than others--because I've had a certain freedom to narrate things my way. With almost every movie I've made, I've modified my own assumptions by trying out new things and learning. There are things, however, that I have kept, and that have become my way of filming. For example, in my way of thinking, time and the viewer's emotions are decisive factors. The spectator's emotions are a factor for me because although you can manipulate the viewer very easily, you can't move him or her so easily. You can tell the audience something dramatic--a child is run over, you see him crying--and of course it's moving! But that sort of emotion is somewhat artificially induced. On the other hand, if you are very skillful, you can move the viewer with a scene that doesn't seem to be about anything, but when it's over, it leaves a knot in

your throat because it calls on your involvement as a viewer. That process, for me, is an artful way of working.

However, it is now very difficult to get producers to accept the kind of film I like. I feel I have to trick them, have to give them a story that pulls them in, often in the form of a romantic comedy. This was my strategy with *Danzón*, which appears to be a nice, colorful comedy, and which, for some people, is a very entertaining movie. But beyond that, *Danzón* also revisits a Mexico that is vanishing, and plays with the nostalgia that envelops that world.

**You said that one of your great passions is to construct Mexico. What does Mexico look like in your movies?**

From the time I was a child, my parents--super nationalists and socialists from the 1930s who worshipped the country--always taught me to travel throughout the country. They taught me to relate to people, to look, to draw conclusions. Since it was our most important family ritual, we all went together to Oaxaca and also toured the convents in the land of the Aztecs. I grew up with a very romantic and idealized image of Mexico. My mother would say--at the time it wasn't so grotesque to say this--that Mexico City was the best city in the world, and she would make many jokes like, "The poor people who live in Paris or London! How they suffer in such horrible climates!" In fact, when I was a child, Mexico City was very pleasant. Part of this idealization, however, came from the vision that reigned at the time, similar to that of Mexican muralism: everything Mexican was great. Obviously, as I've grown, the vision I inherited has become more complex and I've contrasted it with the reality that I've seen in my country. Yet, at the same time, I've retained a great deal of wonder and love for my country. In my films I explore and play with that permanent contradiction between my vision and that of my country. I quite enjoy looking, having a sense of humor, and even, as a Mexican, making fun of Mexicans.

Yet, I also have a tremendous amount of love for my world, for my culture, for my people. I am very critical, but Mexico charms me all the same. I select a subject and try to examine it closely; it is a mechanism I think I inherited. I pose every possible question, try to go to the extreme, try to see the ugliness, but the ugliness ends up at the bottom. I bring the best to the top, and then I arrange things around it as best I can. This double mechanism of loving and being critical is common in many people from colonized countries; such people feel they belong and yet don't belong to the country. Of course I am Mexican and the daughter of Mexicans, and I don't consider myself to be from anywhere else. But I am part of the legacy of the colonizers, not of the others. Also, I spent part of my childhood in Europe and part of my upbringing was very European. These factors always put me in an ambiguous position with respect to my own country. In Oaxaca, or when I walk around some places in the Yucatan, they think I'm German, and for me, the fact that these people see me as a foreigner--perhaps a little less so when I speak--is a permanent contradiction, permanent limitation. Truly, it's like being a foreigner in your own country; however Mexican I feel, I also know that I'm not totally Mexican. In that sense, I am like many of the Mexican intelligentsia, who really are a bit on the outside. Carlos Fuentes, for example, has made such acute observations about Mexico; yet he is someone with a very European culture who has lived a good part of his life outside the country. Like him, I am that kind of Mexican who experiences a distance from Mexico and cannot help but incorporate it into all of my work. I was quite aware of this distance when I made *El Jardín del Edén* and was speaking with Chicano and Chicana friends. I was thinking, "In some ways, they are more Mexican than I am--in their facial features, in the culture of their grandparents, of their parents." When they spoke the sort of old Spanish poor people speak, I realized that my Spanish, in contrast, was that of the colonizers. It is a culture shock of class with very heavy cultural

implications. In the end, I am who I am. I have only one life, I have the face and history that is mine, and these reflections need to be incorporated into my work. I want to deal with all this baggage and that is why the topic of Mexico has fascinated me. I am constantly questioning my own ideas. I haven't come to a point where I can say, "I have it all very clear. I know exactly where I am. I now know who I am, in which country I'm living." On the contrary--the more questions I ask myself, the more questions arise, and I don't think I'll ever exhaust them.

**What is the relationship between the Mexican state, the Mexican government, and your characters? Does it protect them, neglect them, ignore them, abandon them, or does it vary?**

I think I am a very political person, although I might be against structure, and don't have much faith in the parliamentary left. I come from a generation that truly believed it was going to change a lot of things. I was a hardcore militant for ten years, a Maoist. My children, who were quite young, and I experienced many hardships when I renounced a number of things related to class and my own personal history. I also did political work at the collective Cine-Mujer, which I joined because I was the one who could connect the film women with farmworkers and urban neighborhood organizations.

When I began to make movies, I had become disenchanted with the politics of the left--the only kind I had been involved with--to whose cause I had dedicated years of my life. When I started making movies I renounced militant politics. I said to myself, "No, go back to something more creative and save your life." At no time after entering the CUEC did I introduce things that had to do with militancy. From that moment on, I wanted to do very personal things. In the early 1980s, there were still people from the left at CUEC who were making documentaries, but a generation much younger than I had also entered. Since I didn't feel I was a participant in what

the twenty-year-olds were doing, and couldn't relate to the people in militant cinema either, I looked for something else.

Despite having left militant politics, my political experience filtered into what I was doing in film. I was searching for a way to integrate that experience into a more personal and artistic form. During my fourth year, for example, I set *Una isla rodeada de agua* in the city of Atoyac, where Lucio Cabañas's guerilla force<sup>86</sup> had a stronghold, and although I made a very unrealistic story, I included the presence of the guerilla through the graffiti on the walls. In addition, I worked with people whom I had spent time with during my militant period. I experienced a lot of guilt during this whole process, because it represented an abrupt change. During my militant years any personal, *petit bourgeois* expression had to disappear because it didn't serve the Revolution; in this environment I, as a person, did not have the right to express myself, because I had to work for others. When I got to the CUEC I went to the opposite extreme: "Now I am expressing myself, I am telling my stories," but what I learned about Mexico stayed with me.

I have strong feelings about the injustice that exists in my country, about the horrors it is undergoing, and I wanted to bring this into my films, but I never did anything militant. In *Lola*, I was disillusioned with my country's government, especially the PRI, which I think should disappear. I didn't propose that directly, although perhaps it was reflected in a visual way. I used a slogan painted on a wall that says "México sigue en pie" ("Mexico marches onward") ironically, as a gibe. It was the anger that I, like other Mexicans, felt because the government was unable to organize assistance after the 1985 earthquake and because it had disseminated lies

regarding the true figures and the responsibility of the companies that had constructed the buildings.<sup>87</sup> I angrily contrasted “México sigue en pie” with very strong images, and even had Lola walk with her daughter past a store where you could read: “Death to the PRI, electoral fraud.” In one way, it wasn't anything, but in another, it was everything because in those years, putting that slogan in a movie in Mexico could mean that the film would never be seen. In the case of *Danzón*, I didn't introduce a reflection about the government or politics, but rather, about the responsibility we have to ourselves, about who we are and if we have to be ashamed of or can enjoy the way we are.

In *El Jardín de Edén*, a film about the tense racial and political situation at the US-Mexico border in Tijuana, it was much more possible to speak about the government. I did it in a fairly ironic and subtle fashion. Because of my personal experience, I abstained from blaming the government for all our problems. Rather, I chose to see them as problems rooted in ourselves; in my opinion, what is happening to us gives us the key to why it is happening to us. I wasn't interested in speaking of villains, of which government was or wasn't right, nor of whether the two governments had their own specific agendas. The Mexican government is as intolerant regarding immigration as the American government. In *El Jardín del Edén*, I show some images in which the Mexican government treats the Chinese the same as the Mexicans are treated in California.

---

<sup>86</sup> El Partido de los Pobres, led by the teacher Lucio Cabañas, was a guerilla organization active in Guerrero in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was violently suppressed by the government; Cabañas was killed in combat in 1974.

**Let's begin now with your first feature film. There were people who said nothing happened in *Lola*. To what do you attribute these comments?**

It was symptomatic that they said that nothing happened, because it showed that they didn't find motherhood to be an interesting topic. When I took the screenplay for *Lola* to different institutions to get funding, they said that it wasn't *about* anything and so, *Lola* wasn't worth anything. These people didn't see anything about the life of this young mother who has to take care of her six-year-old all by herself as meaningful or worthy of being told. I think that behind that great nothing with which they received the screenplay for *Lola* was a lack of interest regarding issues of motherhood. It's a very widespread social attitude; motherhood is taken to be something natural that doesn't need to be explored or that poses no questions. However, we authors who are women are reclaiming things from daily life, apparently mundane things, and giving them their due in terms of our lives. I tell my stories as a pretext to speak of something much larger. In the case of *Lola*, for example, I'm interested not only in the particular story of Lola and her child; *Lola* is also the means by which I can reflect more deeply on women, motherhood, and Mexico City.

**Which plays the greatest role in *Lola*'s crisis: the economic aspect of her subsistence or Omar's emotional abandonment?**

For me the trigger is not the economic situation. The crisis really occurs because Omar leaves and Lola experiences a brutal, emotional vacuum. She is not experiencing an economic

---

<sup>87</sup> Two major earthquakes, measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale, shook Mexico City and three other states on September 19 and 20, 1985. Between seven and ten thousand people died in the earthquakes and it is estimated that approximately 50,000 people lost their homes. Due to the failure of the government to respond with a plan to assist the victims, civil organizations formed



crisis. She goes on selling clothes, just as before; she was screwed before and she is still screwed economically. Where there is a complete change--at first, in the development, and also at the end--is in her emotional makeup. Some feminists were bothered by the fact that Lola's crisis is related to the emptiness that she feels when she finds herself without a partner. I think that I'm very sincere; I'm not judging her, I'm speaking about what I have observed in the lives of a great many women. Being abandoned creates a very serious emotional problem for us and I reflected on this in the movie, with much pain. Maybe one would want things to be otherwise. I simply told it as I've experienced it and seen it happen around me. I could have changed the story of Lola's depression, but I think that rather than mythologize that emotional emptiness, it's very important to reflect on it. I don't think it works for us women to wish to be what we aren't, but rather, to look at what is happening to us and to transform ourselves from there. The main idea that we had in mind when creating Lola's character was that she had to act according to how she felt and not according to reason. Lola's character, we thought, didn't analyze or reflect; rather, she did things very impulsively and followed her gut, her emotions. We came up with a woman who, when she thought about things, thought about them afterwards; who was constantly acting out of rage, anger, jealousy, desperation, emptiness, loneliness, sexual desire. Even her relationship with her child is very visceral; after the culmination of her crisis, when she needs to relate again to her daughter and build a life with her, she isn't thinking, "My daughter needs me" or "I ought to . . ." Lola is acting based on her immediate feelings.

---

to deal with the catastrophe. For many people, the earthquake signaled the emergence of a democratic society in Mexico, a society of citizens who want and are able to govern themselves.

**Could Lola have possibly ignored her emotions and mastered her situation when it began to topple? Were you not interested in this type of option?**

I came up with Lola's reaction intuitively. First I created Lola and only afterward, as I reflected on the character, did I understand the aspects I had wanted to deal with through that character. I now think that to have Lola in control of her emotions would have been to ask her to have an attitude toward her life that would be more male than female. According to my way of thinking, we women are much more in contact with our emotions than men are. We let them possess us and carry us off. They have a far greater effect on our lives. There are all kinds of women; there are women who are stronger, more intelligent, more self-controlled, but there are also women who act more from the gut. Let me be so bold as to say that within the entire range of variations that might exist, there is a common trait among women: our emotions are much more a part of our lives. We let ourselves be carried off much more by depression, we allow ourselves to cry more, we allow at least a part of our lives to be swept away by our emotions. Lola is--I don't know if this is the right word--quite typical. She is like many women are--at least, at certain times in our lives, when we don't recover from our emotions. We let them sweep us away, although they might be destructive emotions; we let our lives be completely controlled by these emotions.

With men, we see much less importance placed on the emotions, and that's why I think it is one of the traits that distinguishes us. It's funny: often what we ask of men is that, as far as their feelings go, they be like us. I believe that women have learned that part of being masters of our own lives is to accept that emotions matter to us. It is a shame and a little dishonest to deny it, although in some countries there may be a generation of women who have lost touch with the power of their feelings and have played at being equals in a male world. Perhaps, that wasn't the

option. Those women might feel they have changed into something else at the cost of renouncing other things. A certain sector of feminist critique disagrees with the way *Lola* ends and thinks it should be different. It seems strange to me that this feminist criticism is in agreement with a segment of the male audience that is bothered when Lola starts to cry and can't control herself. For a man, it would have been much easier to watch a movie in which the woman is abandoned but lifts herself up, works, and deals with things. If the woman lifts herself up, he bears no responsibility nor does he have to consider certain issues. However, when you let that woman be destroyed by some guy's selfishness, then the men get awfully irritated. To make Lola reason and overcome her abandonment is to make it easy for everyone: for women, because it gives them a model character to emulate, and for men, because then they don't have to deal with the conflict. In *Lola* I did, according to my own parameters, what had to be done: stick the knife right into ourselves and say why do we suffer so much, why do we let ourselves be dragged around so much, why do our hearts, our feelings get the better of us so often, why are we so fragile. I wanted to explore it in depth and, in this way, enlarge the hole so as to see in better. One must also keep in mind the response of the female audience that did like the movie-- the many women coming out with their eyes all swollen and speaking freely about their lives after seeing the movie. Essentially, the movie is a trigger. Now, a person who doesn't like seeing this won't like it. I understand that. I know there are many people who don't like to think about things. But for others, it's an important source of reflection, precisely because I talk about things as they are, at one extreme of female vulnerability.

**Tell me a little about the end of *Lola*. Why did you choose that ending?**

To tell you the truth, when one writes stories the characters grab the reins of their lives. As a director, you can guide them, but you can't really interfere with their desires and their natural development. It would have been completely contrived if Lola, such as she develops in my story, were to come up with a different solution for her life. It wouldn't ring true. The character found herself with very few possibilities for self-realization: the only thing she had to counter a dead-end life was the love she felt for her daughter. Things are as they are; Lola shows her life the way it is, and works with whatever possibilities she has at hand and no more. I had even written a much harsher ending for the movie but it seemed too strong to me and I changed it to one that allowed you a glimpse of hope, an opening in the sky. I really dislike that cinema of tacked-on happy endings where we have to be fools to believe the denouement because the story is leading us in a different direction. Although there might not be a happy ending, and Lola doesn't become the woman who will solve every problem, she does show a certain strength; there is an evolution in what she does. Lola is one person at the beginning, another at the middle of the movie, and another at the end.

***Lola* and *Danzón*, your second feature film, are very different movies. Could you explain to me what the differences are between them?**

My emotional state was very different when I was doing *Danzón*. While I was still editing *Lola*, I commented to my sister--with whom I always write the scripts--that we had to write something very happy, which would fill us with joy and love of life. After all the emotions we had touched upon in Lola's story, my heart was torn apart and I felt like doing something completely the opposite. One of the first things we talked about was that it had to be a movie with a lot of color, with music, with dancing, with laughter. Almost immediately we had the idea of giving it the form of a comedy or of a melodrama played throughout as a comedy. The

script for *Danzón* was the opposite of the script for *Lola*--it concerned a woman who could forge her own path, virtually without limits. Although she was a woman from as limited an environment as *Lola* was, she was able to do almost whatever she wanted, because of her fantasy, her generosity, her openness to life.

Artistically, there was an important difference: in *Lola*, the lead roles were played by a five-year-old girl who had never acted and a young actress. In *Danzón*, I used much more experienced actors. Of course, there was a difference at the economic level, but it wasn't really drastic--a difference of scale, nothing more. *Lola* cost around \$200,000 and *Danzón*, \$600,000. Much of the money for *Lola* was symbolic because in reality, we never collected it. It was money we accounted for but that never actually passed through our hands. With a larger budget, *Danzón* allowed us to work much more comfortably, but always within the budget of a small movie. The form of production was very similar: there was money from Televisión Española under the same kind of agreement we had with *Lola*. It was a program in support of Latin American cinema on the occasion of the celebration of the 500th Anniversary [of Columbus's arrival in the Americas], which, if I remember correctly, gave us \$150,000. Unlike a normal co-production, in which the co-producers are involved in making decisions about the film, we in Mexico were able to manage the money Televisión Española gave us, very freely, through the private company Macondo. Because they weren't done as formal co-productions, both productions were under my control, within what the money permitted. In both cases I felt good, only that in one there was more comfort than in the other.

**Why did you choose the world of the *danzón* as the main subject for your second feature film?**

I chose it because it is a very rigid, very conventional world. It seems to be structured differently for men than for women: women have to dress in a specific way and men have to dress in another; men are in charge and women obey them; the men lead and the women follow. Many *danzoneros* (danzón aficionados) even think that real life is like this, and they live their lives according to those rules.

The danzón seemed to me a perfect structure to use as a framework and play with. I wanted to show how, even within this framework, a woman could be in charge of her life. *Danzoneros* say, “In dancing, as in life, the man commands and the woman obeys,” and I translated it as “In dancing, the man commands and the woman obeys, but not in life.” For me that was essential: yes, we can get along together, we can dance, but that doesn't mean that you order me around in my life.

Julia dances the danzón and does so following the man, because that's the way one really enjoys this dance. What's the problem there? Julia is a woman with a passion for the danzón and is able to follow its rules--to dress like a real woman, to be the one who obeys in the dance, who follows the man. Nevertheless, she is also totally and absolutely the master of her own life--that is, according to how her life has shaped up and the possibilities she would logically have, given who she is. She lives her life according to what she is given and she is so open, so generous, and so full of life . . . She is so willing to take what comes to her in life and to react accordingly that, ultimately, she's in charge of her life. She's more in charge of her life than she even realizes. Julia shows this ability to choose on her trip to Veracruz, when she chooses her young lover and when she leaves him, and also by dancing with Carmelo, this very elegant gentleman.

I even found myself affected by the rules of the *danzón*. The high heels one wears to dance it, which characterize Julia, turned into a game that became explicit: the *danzoneros* told me I should wear high heels to dance. I responded, “I’m sorry, but that’s how it is. I’m learning to dance the *danzón*, I’ll follow the rules, but I don’t wear high heels.”

**In addition to playing with the rules of the *danzón*, you also played with the rules of melodrama. Why?**

It is a genre that thrives among Latin Americans. My sister and I--we've talked a lot about this--have said that the emotional upbringing of Mexican women is totally bound up with melodrama. We were raised on melodrama, grew up on melodrama; it is a form that has dominated cinema for a very long time. Perhaps the Latin American militant cinema of the 1970s broke that somewhat and turned, in my opinion, to pamphleteering, whining, and dispensed with many of the values inherent in melodrama as a form of expression. On the other hand, if one never leaves melodrama, the genre can become somewhat limiting. What we do is to work with this genre, make fun of the forms melodrama takes. In *Danzón*, we certainly were playing constantly with a melodramatic form, but then we took another tack and the movie ended up going in a different direction. The scenes were constructed very much in the style of the Mexican cinema of the Golden Age, but we came up with totally different, and I hope surprising, resolutions.

When we made *Danzón*, on the one hand we took elements from our emotional upbringing, but on the other, we distanced ourselves from those elements. So, through humor, we were able to accept our culture, yet, at the same time, we freed ourselves from what we were taught to feel when we were growing up. For example, when we were creating the scene with Susy in which she shows Julia how to fix herself up like a “real woman,” we were playing with

the images of the women you see in magazines. Beatriz got this idea from some magazine that autumn women and summer women dress in certain ways. These are things you see in a huge number of magazines that in a way fascinate me, while, at the same time, I find them ridiculous. Another example is the scene in which Tito Vasconcelos [Susy] teaches Julia not to be afraid to be a woman; he doesn't want Julia to believe that "looking like a woman means looking like a whore." Also, when Julia is primping, putting on make-up, dolling herself up, ready to go to the docks to look for the sailor she has seen in one of the tugboats, ready to say that he's her cousin in case anyone thinks badly of her, we were playing with our emotional upbringing.

In playing, we explore all the things we have inherited. With this method it doesn't weigh on you: "This is how I was raised, this is my tradition and I recognize it as part of me, but I'll make fun of it and won't let it run my life." I am not like a woman from melodramas, and I don't understand motherhood in that way--I broke that mold. However, I recognize that melodrama has affected my way of being, my dreams, and some of my characteristics. We were always playing with that contradiction by using humor and it worked for us because we had a good time and was quite enjoyable.

We also wanted to use humor to handle the relationship between Julia, an older woman, with Rubén, a young sailor. We wanted to laugh at Julia's need to say a pile of lies and get caught in them, to invent a younger daughter in order to appear younger when she spoke with Rubén. What I didn't know was that later, that same mechanism would work for the audience: that the audience itself, because of this humor, would take the melodrama they were used to and loosen up, have fun, feel really good. When you finally recognize your whole heritage, you feel good; you see all the paradigms here, arranged in a friendly way and they weigh on you a lot less. In *Danzón* I wanted to rejoice, to be moved by my cultural legacy, by what it means to be a



woman in Mexico. I even wanted to praise a part I no longer identify with fully because I'm at another point. Despite my distance, I wanted to play with looking at Mexico that way, through those eyes.

### **Does that mean that *danzón* and melodrama are related?**

Yes, they're linked by a certain era. In order to make the movie I thought a lot about the movies and music of the 1940s. In that era both the great Mexican melodramas and the *boleros*<sup>88</sup> had an enormous impact. They are linked historically and woven together within the same cultural panorama; they are like different aspects of our emotional education, our way of feeling. As I was writing the screenplay for the movie, I thought a lot about the music I'd heard all my life. If you live here, it is music you never stop hearing. You hear it in the restaurant, in the taxi; it shows up in the old movies that are constantly shown on TV and it's the music your boyfriend serenades you with. Many values are structured on these melodramas: the value of self-sacrifice on the part of the mother, of the relationships between men and women, of the purity of the woman and the ever-present dichotomy: Madonna or whore.

Furthermore, the 1940s was the time when Mexican culture extended its reach, above all, through film and music. When you talk to people from other countries in Latin America, they will always tell you that they listened to those songs, saw those movies, adored Pedro Infante and listened to Toña la Negra. In Spain--which went through that whole period, so oppressive and so dead, during the dictatorship--they welcomed Hispanic culture. That cultural project of Mexico

---

<sup>88</sup> A romantic musical genre very popular in Mexico and often used in films, especially during the Golden Age. In *Danzón*, Doña Ti sings boleros written by Veracruz composer Agustín Lara and recorded by one of his most famous interpreters, Toña la Negra.

in the 1940s, which I refer to in *Danzón*, which is quite charming if you can make it your own, traveled around the world.

**Tell me something about Toña la Negra.**

Toña la Negra is a very special character in Mexico's nostalgic memory; to such an extent that in Veracruz there is even a monument to her. She was a woman with a very strong personality, who sang marvelously, with a feeling that came very much from the soul of Veracruz. There are people who say she was a real bitch, but personally, I love her. I find any song she sings absolutely delightful. When we first sketched out the character of Doña Ti we decided that she was a woman who was always singing. And because of the film's constant play with nostalgia, we decided that she would sing boleros, the old music. Then it began to emerge that she sang like Toña la Negra, that the point of reference for Doña Ti was Toña la Negra. Also, when we decided on Carmen Salinas for the part of Doña Ti, it turned out that she was a Toña la Negra impersonator and had known her personally. Since she had imitated her many times, she felt quite comfortable that her character resembled Toña la Negra. In fact, the reference of Toña la Negra helped us as we worked on the script. I remember Carmen Salinas saying to me many times, "Toña la Negra was a real bitch--she acted like a bitch and was one too. Doña Ti, on the other hand, acts like a bitch but isn't. As soon as Julia starts crying, her heart opens up." We came to the conclusion that Doña Ti was the salt of the earth, a good woman, although she presents herself as if she were also a real bitch.

**You have mentioned that the scenes in *Danzón* are constructed in the style of Mexican cinema from the Golden Age. Which movies do you remember the most?**

I always liked Tin Tan a lot. My dad even wrote some of the screenplays for his movies. He was almost ashamed to be doing it because he was a serious writer and he'd write them now and then to make a living. But I think it's an extremely important part of his résumé. For me, Tin Tan is black humor Mexican style: Tin Tan is us making fun of ourselves. Also, I like his love for life, and even his adoration of death. I also liked Pedro Infante's movies very much; in general, I preferred the comedies. I would watch the movies of suffering mothers or redeemed prostitutes to the tune of my mother's critique, who would say how those women were idiots. Mother was a feminist in the making and so, I looked at female characters from a somewhat critical perspective. Nevertheless, I remember that since childhood I was fascinated by the beautiful women of Mexican cinema--above all, María Félix. I also liked the old Cantinflas movies a lot because even though they were foolish on the surface, they gave you a lot to think about. You find in them a desire to live life happily which could overcome a great many problems and misfortunes. To me, that seems like a good counterbalance to the tone of the modern era. That's why I tried to follow this tradition in *Danzón* and give value to things that are essentially more gratifying than monetary gain or economic stability. That fundamental attitude toward life in Mexican culture seems very healthy and very intelligent to me.

**Let's move on to more concrete details about the movie. Describe Julia's character for me.**

It seemed truer to me that Julia not be a reckless character along feminist lines, but rather, the average woman next door. Julia is neither beautiful nor young, she has a daughter and no partner. She is a woman with a shitty job as a telephone operator and is surrounded entirely by women the whole day long. She is a woman who is not particularly cultured nor is she particularly intelligent nor rich; she doesn't even have many friends.

**When Julia is watching Susy perform in the cabaret, why does Julia's gaze linger on the breasts of those dolls that decorate the cabaret?**

When I chose the cabaret where Susy was singing--which was a location in Mexico City, not Veracruz--, I was fascinated by the naïveté with which this rather gloomy place was decorated. It was a horrendous place: dark, with fifth-rate prostitutes charging almost nothing and these dolls with enormous tits and wigs out of which cockroaches were crawling. Whoever decorated the place must have considered it quite arousing; they imagined it as something that would create a very sexy atmosphere. I reacted to a dive decorated like this, however, with immense tenderness. I chose the cabaret because it seemed to me a very naive cultural expression and because that naïveté was part of Julia's character. Julia is a very proper woman, with certain values, with a long skirt, but she also has a generous spirit and is very open. When she bumps into a transvestite, she has two reactions. On the one hand, she tries to judge whether he is a fine person. She asks herself, "Is he helping me? Is he being sincere with me?" On the other hand, with great ingenuity, she wonders, "Why, if he's a man, does he dress like a woman?" and she tries to find a place for him in her head. That's why at a certain point she says, "Oh! They're artists. That's why they dress that way," because she's a bit unsettled. In the same way, when she's watching the show and looking around the place, I thought that those dolls lining the walls were an excellent portrayal of the naïveté with which Julia looks at life. She looks at the dolls that are supposed to be sexy and reacts with a bit of embarrassment, as if she were looking at a naked woman. She also is embarrassed when she looks at the fake breasts. I chose to linger on this detail because that's what Julia is like, that's how the movie is narrated, that's what the *danzón* is like, and that's even what Mexico is like.

This embarrassment produces a great feeling of tenderness in me because it's not about antiquity, about the past, but rather, is a generous and quite naive feeling. The most amusing and greatest proof of the existence of this embarrassment at a national level came when *Danzón* was shown on television in Mexico, and these scenes were censored. They took out precisely the shots of naked dolls. This made me think that I wasn't wrong at all; my country is naive in that way. The censor's embarrassment was exactly as I portrayed it: he refused to let those plaster women with the enormous tits be seen on television.

**Let's move on now and talk about your third feature film. What is the main subject of *El Jardín del Edén*?**

My intention was to explore the range of diversity and visual madness that exists on the border between the United States and Mexico. In making the movie, I tried to reflect the different visions of life that co-exist on the border. I was also interested in the physical border itself; that wall, that line that so violently divides two cultures, two languages, two ways of life. Considering that people see the things around them through the perspective of their cultural lenses and their individual stories, I tried to contrast the viewpoint the characters had of what was happening on the border. The cultural and personal differences mean that the characters' points of view begin to contrast. For example, much of what an undocumented Mexican like Felipe is looking for is what an American like Jane wishes to leave behind. And, in contrast, much of what Felipe wants to leave behind is precisely what Jane is looking for and mythologizes. There is a lot of mythologizing in Jane's vision of Mexico--not because it isn't real, but because from her particular point of view she is seeing what is poetic, adventurous, harmonious, and exotic. However, someone coming from Mexico, like Felipe, mythologizes

what is stable, safe, a well-paid job, eating every day. Seen from this standpoint, each is mythologizing the other side of the border.

**In each of your two previous films you chose a structure that highlighted a central character. Why have you changed structures in *El Jardín del Edén*?**

On the one hand, I felt like trying a much more difficult and much less conventional film structure, but mainly I wanted to represent the diversity you see on the border. I thought that if it were told in a single story, with one or several characters, I would lose very many of the characteristics that I found so striking. I decided to create a number of stories that wouldn't depend on each other but rather, would all exist simultaneously. I chose to bet on the craziness you experience on the border and still I came up short in the movie because I could have employed many more of the variations--visual, linguistic, spiritual--that one experiences in the different people of the border. I didn't want to give up a single element: not the collision of indigenous cultures relocated to the border, which is a very violent process; not the perspective of someone without documents who hopes to achieve something on the other side and has his own myths; not the view of an American woman in love with the exotic and the "other," which is what a country like Mexico means for her; not the view of an American like Frank, who, because he is studying whales and dolphins, turns his back somewhat on Mexico. Frank embodies something you find in many Americans: an enormous preoccupation and commitment toward animal species but an insensitivity toward human matters, even toward the people who clean his house. The movie reflects on the enormous egotism of North American culture with tenderness. I also wanted to talk about the perspective of a Mexican-American woman, a Chicana, who invents for herself a Mexico that probably doesn't exist, but who has to follow her own need to search out her roots. I wanted to handle all those perspectives visually and emotionally, and the

only way I felt it was possible was through a mosaic in which the point of view would be shared among many.

The point of view is always my own but I can get under the skin of all the characters. I've never been able to write characters that had nothing to do with me. I even have a little of Frank, that egotistic American, the one I would consider to be the farthest from me. I also have a bit of all the other characters and that's why I treat them with affection. It's not a critical viewpoint but rather, one of an enormous diversity.

**As far as directing goes, what problems did the mosaic structure of *El Jardín del Edén* present?**

In *El Jardín del Edén* I had certain ideas clearly formed in my mind but the pressure I had to face was too much. In this case, my power to make decisions decreased; I was forced to do things and, in short, wasn't given the power of negotiation or control over the movie, and I even had problems with camera placement. I also think there were many organizational problems in the filming. There were moments in which the difficulty in establishing relationships with the actors really affected my way of working. I like to work on my movies ahead of time, but in this case the actors weren't able to meet one another. Because of financial problems, we couldn't hire an actor to come in with enough lead time to work with the other actors. This meant that I had some difficulty building relationships--between me and the actors, as well as between the actors themselves. To make matters worse, changes were constantly being made in what we were going to film and, as a consequence, it was difficult for the actors to follow the logic of their character development given that we weren't filming the scenes in any kind of logical fashion. The shooting schedules were very poor, the organizational situation was very poor, and that

certainly had its impact on how settled and in-depth the work with the actors and even my own work could be.

There were also production problems. From the moment preparation began, approximately a year and a half before making the movie, I had spoken with United States authorities and even with members of the Border Patrol in order to work on the border itself, which was the first part we were going to film. However, just when we were about to start filming, these agreements fell apart. At the time, I didn't clearly understand what was happening. I found out there had been an order from Washington and a meeting in San Diego, but actually what was having its effect was the politics of Wilson's Proposition 187.<sup>89</sup> What we were experiencing at that moment was the growing xenophobic attitude that existed on the border. It didn't come from the members of the Border Patrol, who, individually, in many cases can actually be very nice people, but from state orders not to support us and to hinder our work. That presented us with virtually unresolvable problems. We constantly had to change our schedule and locations for all scenes filmed on the border itself so they wouldn't find out, because they had been instructed to hinder the shooting of the film. That was very serious because it changed our whole way of organizing the work. These were the big problems, the ones that didn't come out of my daily work or that of the production supervisor, but rather, came from higher up. I think that since it was a very ambitious movie, very expensive for a Mexican film, and in addition, a co-production between several countries . . . Suddenly it turned into a veritable nightmare.

---

<sup>89</sup> A law proposed by Governor Pete Wilson and approved by California voters in 1994 that mandated that the state deny medical services and education to undocumented immigrants.



What I did like a lot--and it was good for the movie--was the mixture of cultures that took place within the film crew. It was a border movie not only because we were in Tijuana, but also because the people working on the film came from different cultures. The biggest difficulties we had in communicating were not due to language differences, because everyone could more or less speak both languages. Rather, they were due to cultural differences, which were the cause of our mistrust and other feelings we had toward each other. Suddenly we wouldn't understand one another because of differences in our rules of courtesy. We Mexicans are very sensitive to politeness and take the very direct or blunt manner of foreigners as aggression. Occasionally, there were misunderstandings between the actors due to this bluntness or we would end up in comical situations. I felt these differences within the team were positive and I tried to bring them into play to encourage the diversity I was seeking in the film.

**What elements are essential to your cinematic narrative?**

When I saw the cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky or the old Michelangelo Antonioni or Theo Angelopoulos, I realized that film narrative is far more related to poetry than to dramaturgy. Tarkovsky explains that if one wants to put pieces of life on the screen, poetry is a much more accurate tool than dramaturgy. I think Tarkovsky was right. I believe that film is, precisely, another artistic form, related to literature and painting but with its own forms. However, there are people who believe that things must be told in film in dramaturgical terms.

An example of this tendency is North American screenwriting, which evolved from dramaturgy. One is commonly asked to organize a narrative dramaturgically, almost as if it were a recipe; one must structure that hour and a half to tell something and get to the end. The

extreme example of this is someone like Syd Field,<sup>90</sup> who has a book in which he says what must be on what page, how the dramatic conflict must be created, how it must be resolved and even when characters can be introduced.

Looking at this scheme of organization, you might wonder, “Really? Why? Says who? To what end?” Really, they are formulas you use so that in an hour and a half you’ve told a story that satisfies the audience and, above all, the producer, who generally has a very different mentality. I don’t believe one should judge whether a movie is well narrated based on that sort of dramaturgy. That “proper” way of narrating bores me. I studied “proper” narration in school, I could have done it, but I didn’t see any point to it. Ever since I made *Lola*, I constantly run into critics--above all here in Mexico but also in the United States--who say that my narrative is weak, that I don’t know how to tell a story. For them, a good narrative is a one based on recognized conventions, like Field’s. It’s true that there are marvelous North American movies, excellently narrated, but they don’t know that there is a much broader cinematic narrative. It’s not that my narrative is weak in *Lola* and *Danzón*, but rather, that I’m not using a conventional narrative design.

**What importance do you place, in the progression of the narrative, on things happening?**

The truth is that I’m not concerned about things happening, but I feel somewhat forced to put in more action, because I know that if I don’t, people will miss it and will feel disconnected or think that what I am doing is weird. I try to negotiate in order to survive, but my natural way of setting up the narrative has always been based on what I want to be looking at. Thinking

---

<sup>90</sup> An American writer, author of *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1979). This book was promoted on its cover as “A Step-by-Step Guide

about it, I've come to the conclusion that often the most significant memories of a person in real life or in the life of the character I'm writing are not powerful actions or events. Sometimes, things are more subtle, almost imperceptible. What is important is how we are affected by them and what our reception of them is. For me, the way in which events affect us is more important than the action itself, because the action distracts; when there is no action, your attention focuses on something else. The manuals on how to write screenplays, in contrast, take a different view: Spectacular events are set in place and then things are forcibly made to mesh. First you program what is going to take place and then, in the action, you fit in the characters, their experiences, and their feelings. I don't see life this way and I don't like to narrate like this.

I don't impose a given action on the characters. I let them guide me to whatever might happen in their life. To give you an example, I hadn't planned for Lola to break a bottle over the head of that guy on the beach. I had the idea that she was going to the beach to get better, to breathe, even to get depressed to her heart's content. But at one point, this guy was bothering her so much--without him being anything close to the worst guy in the world--that suddenly Lola has no choice but to smash him with the bottle. And that's what she does. I wrote the Lola incident this way, because it made sense that Lola would react in that way, not because the script required it. For me, what takes place in a script is a consequence of the factors that come together. Like life itself, they happen.

I'll give you another example of the difference between my scriptwriting and Syd Field's: Julia's departure from Mexico City in *Danzón*. I wanted Julia not to have a concrete, clear, single reason to go to Veracruz. A conventional narrative approach would have forced her to go exclusively to find out what happened to Carmelo. Because, according to the conventional

---

from Concept to Finished Script." Field has taught screenwriting courses in Mexico City.

approach, since people tell her that Carmelo left for Veracruz, she has to go find him. I, on the other hand, did not give her just one reason. Besides Carmelo, I also have a bunch of other factors in mind: Julia is depressed and wants to go wherever she can; she has never been to the beach, and now is probably the time to go; she talks with her best friend, Silvia, who encourages her and says, “Come on, honey. Go. Go wherever you feel like going, but go, because nobody can stand you.” All these reasons count as much as the fact that that Carmelo probably went to Veracruz. Besides, the business about Carmelo going to Veracruz is something she probably only overheard, is only partly true, and even she probably knows that it’s crazy. Julia doesn’t go to find out what happened to him. Even though she says, “I have to go to Veracruz to let him know they’ve found the person who did it,” it’s a lie. We have to know--as much as she does-- that in the bottom of her heart she is leaving because she has a yearning to get away, because she’s at a time in her life when her daughter no longer pays any attention to her, because she’s in a bad mood and the city makes her feel worse. One is always justifying oneself and saying the most rational things about how one really acts. It’s the perfect excuse: she has to go tell him. To go and tell him, but where? She doesn’t even know where he lives or what he does. While it isn’t altogether true that these reasons don’t matter, the most important thing is that she goes out of an internal need. In Veracruz, she searches for something that is inside herself and difficult to define. That explains why, once she gets there, it is easy for her to forget that she went to look for Carmelo. Everyone else continues to believe that she went to look for him, but she’s already somewhere else. Things take place and one always has explanations, but there are much blurrier motivations than the ones employed in conventional screenwriting. Those blurrier motivations are the ones that really move people to act.

My desire to explore certain topics through my characters also influences the way I write my scripts. In a movie like *Danzón*, my constant guide as I was writing the script was my desire to explore Julia's naive view of life, optimistic in the extreme. As a director, I shared the view of my characters, regarding Mexico, dance, women, happiness, love, fate, coincidence, the generosity some people have toward others. That was our attitude. In writing the script, that naïveté and endless optimism were much more important than any specific action. Julia's way of looking at the world was the reason I made *Danzón*. Really, Julia is traveling because she feels like it; she is allowing herself something that few of us allow ourselves, something that probably only children allow themselves to do. When I wrote the script, I thought, "There it is, this is the state of mind in which she travels." I'll give you another example. When I have Julia get off the train in Veracruz, I use a classic framing to indicate that she has arrived at her destination: I put the camera on the steps of the train and the character gets off. However, I also add an important detail: Julia's high heels. For me, this scene offers a different reading than would a conventional scene that would simply say, "The character arrives at her destination." With the high heels, I'm suggesting that, although the character arrives and gets off the train the way all characters do, this character is different. Julia's very high heels, which characterize her throughout the movie, symbolize the way she perceives the world. The high heels allow me to link her descent from the train with her feeling that the men are looking at her--so much so that it seems that when Julia arrives in Veracruz, the station is full of no one but men. When we shot this scene there were a number of extras--women and children--whom I didn't want to include in the shot. People recommended that I not exclude them, but I didn't follow their advice because the fact that there were only men in the scene was important to represent the spirit of the trip. It had to convey the sensation Julia was feeling, that there were no one but men looking at her. The

essential thing was to respect the state of mind with which she got off the train. Whether or not it is true that there are only men looking at her in Veracruz isn't important. What is important is that those little feet in high heels that get off the train believe that is the case.

**Tell me about how letting characters create their own screenplay and showing their state of mind gets translated into cinematic language.**

I am constantly suggesting camera movements I haven't seen and sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. When I finished *Lola*, I had the feeling that in some cases the movement added something to what I was telling because I move the camera not to follow the action but to add details about the character or the environment. For example, if I'm filming how Lola goes into the kitchen and takes something from the fridge, there's no reason to follow her with the camera. So while she's getting the milk, I let myself look at how she has decorated the wall or some other important detail that shows how this character lives.

In *Danzón*, I continued developing my cinematic language by trusting my intuition more and more. The scene in the original script in which Julia leaves for Veracruz was different from the one that appears in the movie. It wasn't a traditional scene in which the train is about to leave and she rushes to get on board with her suitcases, nor does Julia watch through the window as Veracruz approaches--nothing of the kind. It was a scene in which she saw a young soldier with very short hair sitting in front of her and she examined him closely, looking at his boots, his uniform, his boyish face, and his short hair. Afterward, she looked out the window at an old man with a little girl who was listening to a children's song from Veracruz that is very traditional in Mexico. What I was trying to do in this scene was to put Julia in a frame of mind where she was ready to look at any detail that presented itself to her and absorb it like a sponge. In the end, we

didn't have the resources to film the train in motion as well as at a station en route, and I had to rewrite the scene.

Thinking about how I was going to redo Julia's transition from Mexico City to Veracruz, I remembered a picture in the house of Jorge's mother<sup>91</sup> of a train crossing a bridge. I trusted my intuition and told them, "Okay, bring me the picture of Metlac Canyon<sup>92</sup> because I'm going to use it to film the transition." I was confident that this hunch meant something, like the associations that show up when I analyze my dreams. If I asked for that picture, I must have had my reasons. Confidence in my intuition also made me think that when they brought me the picture, I would be able to come up with a shot that would work.

Later, I was able to rationalize the process: a trip whose narration begins with a little train going over a canyon with exotic vegetation is much more closely linked to the character's desire to travel than a trip whose narration begins with the character saying goodbye to her daughter through the window. It is a kind of trusting my subconscious that has to do with Tarkovsky. As I said before, I agree with his idea that in the end, poetic association can contain an infinitely greater depth. A poetic allusion works better than a rule; rules only work if you are going to play with them, if you're going to make fun of them, if you're suddenly going to subvert them.

### **In general, what has been the most difficult for you in terms of directing?**

When I'm directing, the most difficult thing for me is to create a space in which I can hear my own voice. It seems difficult for me to maintain a type of shell or internal niche from which to continue speaking with my creative being. I'm not referring to a dialogue with your

---

<sup>91</sup> Jorge Sánchez was María Novaro's husband. He produced *Danzón*.

<sup>92</sup> This canyon is on the route to Veracruz.

cameraman, with your assistants, or in the best of cases, with your actors: that is not speaking with yourself. I once clipped out a quote by Ingmar Bergman that said that when a director no longer hears his internal voice, he's lost. I think Bergman was right regarding the need to protect the artist's voice so that it can express itself. Over time I've learned to realize that when the pressure was such that I couldn't listen to myself, I would lose touch with myself and do things mechanically. And over time, I've created a mechanism to avoid that. After those terrible days of filming, I go to my room and review the recording on "video assist," a kind of sketch made on video, in black and white and with poor sound quality. I used to do it to see what I'd done and how it had turned out, but I've come to realize that it's also a form of discipline that requires me to be alone and get back in touch with myself.

This dialogue with myself is crucial because I have a particular creative process. My method is intuitive, absolutely emotional. What moves me is tenderness. If what I see when we are doing a scene moves me, I know how the camera should move. If the actor gives me goose bumps, if he makes me feel a knot in my throat, I immediately have the camera follow this character. This process is not exclusive to filming; tenderness also moves me in my life. The same thing that happens to me in filming happens when I see something in the street, when I'm looking at children, with a dog that walks by, with trees. As a film director, apart from making sure that things happen on time, the planning, problem-solving and decision-making, it is crucial to not lose that internal dialogue. I try to perceive that tenderness that means so much to me and organize my story around it. I think it has to do with the way one was as a child, with what is deepest, truest, and most hidden inside.

When you are sitting at your desk alone, thinking, listening to your music, it is easy to get in touch with yourself, but when you are filming, it is very, very difficult. People don't imagine



the work required to make a movie. It is a titanic, almost military, and even hellish job, because it is extraordinarily expensive and involves a huge amount of stress and demands made by the technology used in filming. You have to adapt to an overwhelming and crushing reality: people ask you if the cable can go here or if you want them to put green eyeshadow on the actress or if the actor should say his lines in such-and-such way. A thousand things, even those that supposedly aren't your job but come to you simply because you're the head of it all: that certain equipment trucks got stuck and won't arrive on time, that this actor is suffering a nervous breakdown. In short, everything.

It's a process that's a bit schizophrenic; you must have a part of you functioning artistically, allowing your most natural perception of things, your intuition, to work. You have to nurture the part of you that is always alert to what you are seeing--like visual composition and a sense of time--so that it keeps working, and to do that, you have to create a niche for it. At the same time, another part of your being has to be absolutely practical and always be thinking in terms of money. Since making films is quite expensive, you have to know what you can't permit: that this take can't be repeated because it uses so much material, that you have to do it with just one camera because you can't afford two, that the sun is going down and you only have three minutes to do the take because there's no way you can even think about coming back tomorrow. It's like going crazy: you have to function skillfully and intelligently, be director of the ship and make everyone do his or her job and, on the other hand, be engaged in your interior dialogue.

The most difficult thing is that the two parts must function efficiently and clearly as you are doing the scene and the day's filming is coming to an end. It's difficult, because one part fights brutally with the other, one wants to annihilate the other. When you want to make

personal movies, when you truly believe in the language of film as a specific and unique artistic manifestation, you must safeguard the artistic part against the infernal machinery. It is essential to be able to say something that makes sense, but to do that, you must be able to listen to the reason why you thought up this scene.

With practice, I am creating my own way of telling things, my own internal security: I'll take this and leave that. It's a process that produces a lot of insecurity and problems for me. At times I think there's probably no point to what I'm doing or that it's not taking me anywhere. There are moments in which that commitment to developing the language of film as art is very difficult; particularly, because you feel a huge loneliness.

**Can you give me concrete details regarding this dialogue with yourself?**

One of the things that grabbed me in *Lola*, and that I think I was right about, is the scene on the beach when Lola is looking at the old man who goes into the water and loses his shorts. I was told that this wasn't appropriate, that narratively--in the classical sense--it wasn't crucial to the story. It so happened, besides, that this scene was very complicated to film because we couldn't get anyone who would agree to let his shorts drop. There are so many women willing to take off their clothes for a sex scene and yet we couldn't find an actor who would simply play in the water, let his shorts slip off, and let it all hang out. No one would do it, and even less for a small role. There was a moment when I was told, "Don't film it, it's very complicated, what is the point?" But at times like that I think you must listen to that internal voice of yours that says, "Yes, it serves a purpose, I'll sacrifice this other scene," because you must know how to recognize what you shouldn't suppress, however crazy it might seem.

When I made *Danzón*, I had some conclusions that I had drawn from my work on *Lola*, which I continued to modify. The dialogue with myself was much stricter and I tried to be more careful so I could distinguish when I would allow myself digressions, like the one of the old man in the waves, and when I wouldn't. For example, in *Danzón*, changing the names of the ships to film them was torture: we had to get the captain's permission, permission from the ship's country of origin, permission from the harbormaster--it was an awful mess of red tape! In addition, we could barely afford to paint the names, film them, and repaint them. The producers tried to convince me, they told me, "María, film the ships with the names they have. Look, it's a pretty name, it's called *Milano*," but I said, "No, it has to be called *Puras ilusiones* (Pure Illusions) or *Amor perdido* (Lost Love). That's got to be the name." But inside, in this loneliness I was talking about before, I asked, "Do the ships really have to be named like that, or am I exaggerating?" In this case I told myself, "Well, it's a mess, everyone will have to work triple, the permits are a real hassle, this is going to cost more than what I was figuring, but the ships have to have those names. Yes, it's important to the story: they're not normal ships. We're in this woman's fantasy."

**Each director works in his or her own way. Some work first with the actors, others place the camera, etc. When you get ready to shoot a scene, how do you do it?**

The traditional method--going through a scene and placing the camera according to what the actors give me--doesn't work for what I want to do. My natural tendency has always been *first* to establish the movement of the camera and *then* to have the actors conform to what will be seen. For me, where I'm going to place the camera is of vital importance; it's my main worry, it's essential to the story I'm telling. It's not a process I can explain rationally; I will have thought about it since I wrote the script, since I got on location. I close my eyes and see how I'm

going to do the scene. You can't be fooling around with this point of view; for me, how the story is seen is more important than the story itself. That's why it is crucial to me that the camera position I've thought out beforehand be respected: so that the feeling of the scene as I see it with my eyes closed is what shows up on the screen. Consequently, since this point of view is of primary importance, I first place the camera and then plan the action accordingly.

Nevertheless, to keep the predefined camera movement from being castrating and for this view to work, it's necessary to prepare the actors beforehand. It's very important that the actors fall in love with their roles in the script to the point of getting completely into their characters. Once the script and the emotions of the actors are worked out, you can begin filming, but if the work with the actors is not solid, the characters become blurred and the movie puts up a struggle. The actors are the ones who, from the specific positions I have determined beforehand, will bring to life what I wish to express. In the end, life does not lie in the camera positions.

The preparation of the actors, the way I frame shots, and my rhythm are processes I need to work out separately so that they can come together in the filming. At times I've achieved it, but other times I've failed for a variety of reasons. I was in constant conflict with the American cinematographer of *El Jardín del Edén*, for example. He definitely never understood why I had preplanned a camera movement or why I would subordinate the action of a scene to the framing. He was convinced that *first* one had to see what the actor was going to do and *then* see how the camera would move. The worst thing of all is that he never considered that it could be done any other way. I think it is possible, although dangerous. I realize that in *El Jardín del Edén* there were times when my way of filming was weakened, but the problem was not caused by my method, but rather, by terrible working conditions and by the number of characters and stories.

That's why I'm going to keep on respecting my way of looking at things, which was very clear to me in *Danzón*, in *Lola*, and in *El Jardín del Edén*.

**Given that working with the actors is so important, tell me how you have worked with them.**

I have my own way of casting and I also do exercises with video. Before doing *Lola*, I didn't care if the actors were professionals or not; I thought that anybody could do it. But when I saw the results and realized--especially at the Sundance Institute--that Mexican actors were poorly trained, I began to reconsider. In Mexico there is little tradition of preparing actors. Many young actors get their training entirely from the theater and they have a very hard time dealing with film, especially the filming itself.

To make *Lola* I needed a group of very young actors, but, with the exception of Roberto Sosa, who has been an actor since he was a child and works very well with the camera, they didn't have a clear idea of what film was all about. Even in casting I didn't have many choices of experienced actors. In the case of Ana, Lola's daughter [Alejandra Vargas], even fewer. I wanted a girl who was not an actress because I had seen how the children who have worked in commercials or movies are little monsters; they are children with little spontaneity who think that acting is reciting. For *Lola*, since there were no experienced actors, I began to prepare them myself using games with the video camera. For example, with Alejandra Vargas, I spend entire days recording her. At times I asked her very open-ended things--to do whatever she felt like. Other times, I asked her to do specific things. But the condition was always that she couldn't look at the camera; if she looked at the camera she lost. I realized that Alejandra was fantastic because she could go for hours without looking at the camera. If the game was not to look at the camera, then she didn't look at it and that was that. No problem. Not looking at the camera was

also like forgetting that I was there, and she was able to do that very well. I spent a lot of time videotaping her or getting her on video. I went to pick her up at her house, I kept her company while she ate, and I took her to get ice cream, to the subway, to the park.

Later, I did a lot of video tests in order to choose the rest of the actors, particularly Lola. Leticia Huijara, who was going to play the part of Lola, was a young woman who had only done theater, so I gave her a lot of tests to see if she was going to cause me problems. There are people who simply can't work in front of the camera, it causes them a lot of anxiety. Since the tests with Leticia went well, I began to put her together with Alejandra. I wanted to see if they looked like mother and child because I hate this cinematic convention that the mother and daughter don't seem to know each other at all but you're supposed to believe that they're related. I took them both for ice cream in the park and saw that, in fact, they did make a good pair.

Then we did a kind of game with Mauricio [Rivera], who plays Omar, Alejandra's father. We pretended that Leticia was pregnant by putting a big belly on her and we filmed several tapes in which we acted as if she were expecting a child. We played in the pool and on the slide, improvising scenes of how they had related to one another when she was pregnant and I took a lot of photos. This helped me relax, made me feel less timid about getting to know them, because I used to be quite timid with actors. For example, I had worked with Javier Torres, who played the role of Mario, the gigolo. I met him when I was an assistant and had liked him. But this time around, as the director, I felt a little uncomfortable. He is a very aggressive guy, he challenges you a lot-- more so if you're a woman. With him, I began to work in video along the lines of "let's see who wins" and we started playing until things became relaxed. Thanks to the video, even though Javier is the way he is--completely aggressive--, we managed to break the tension. All of this helped me and when we filmed *Lola*, I felt comfortable with everybody. The

one person I didn't reach this point with was Martha Navarro, who plays Chelo, Lola's mother. Although Martha is a very nice person, I always felt as if she were the experienced actress who had made a lot of movies and I was the novice.

Since getting to know the actors in *Lola* using the video camera worked very well for me, I adopted it as my method. *Danzón*, however, was a different situation. Since the actors had a lot of experience, I was afraid that they would feel they knew more than I did and would be hesitant to let me direct them. In contrast to *Lola*, in *Danzón* the games with the video camera beforehand and the casting helped, not so the actors could face the camera, but rather, so I could face them. With María Rojo, for example, it really helped me get to know her. I spent months going to the Salón Colonia, taping her dancing, watching her expressions, her smile, the angles of her face, her moods, knowing when she was uncomfortable, when she could be spontaneous, when something was bothering her. Knowing her was important because she's a very intelligent woman and very sincere in her work, and if she didn't like what she was doing, it showed. She would do exactly what I said, but you could see it in her eyes that she didn't like it. I learned a lot from this work and it made me be sincere with myself. I learned to say, "No, that's no good. Let's fix it."

In the case of Tito Vasconcelos, I knew him and he seemed to me to be a marvelous actor, a very intelligent guy. My first contact with him was when we had finished the script. Beatriz and I called him so he could tell us if our portrayal of the transvestite seemed real and respectful to him. Susy was a very comical character, very crazy, but he had to be lovable. We didn't want to make fun of him. Of course, since we had a different sensibility as women, I thought, "Could we be getting this right?" Besides, curiously, there were always men with very macho opinions saying that we were making fun of the character. Even afterwards, when

reviews of the movie came out, some critics turned into defenders and said that the movie was an attack on the gay world. But, returning to the question we asked Tito, he said that Susy was a marvelous character, lovely; that there was a need for a character like that.

Later, when I called him for casting, I felt very insecure and thought that he wouldn't let me direct him. I was afraid. I imagined that he already had the character in his hands--that he was himself the character of Susy, which meant that the character was farther away from me because I didn't know him. Also I thought that because of his theatrical education, I wouldn't be able to control him. It was a slip on my part not to have called him. Right from the casting, which went very well, you could see he had charm, a very special energy. Nevertheless, I couldn't decide and began the movie with another actor. Practically at the start of filming there was a crisis and the other actor didn't work out. I immediately phoned Tito and asked his forgiveness. I asked him to come to the filming and he, a gem, arrived with his own wardrobe. We prepared as quickly as we could. In this emergency situation it helped to have made the video with him before so that his acting wasn't improvised. He knew what he had to do and I knew him.

So you can say that this way of using video to experiment, to relate to the actors while hidden behind the camera, served me well in *Lola* and in *Danzón*. One of the losses I experienced in *El Jardín del Edén* was in relation to my work with the actors. I did the casting of Renée Coleman (Jane) and of Joseph Cueur (Frank) in the United States. That of Gabriela Villaroel (Serena) I did in Spain. The problem was that by being in different countries, I couldn't go beyond the casting; we couldn't get to know each other and so, I lost a lot. Especially with Serena's son, Alan Ciangherotti (Julián), it didn't work for me at all. I feel I would have gained a lot had I done the initial work on video because I would have felt more



comfortable. I worked a lot with another kid who was my first choice for the character, but when we were already filming, they sent me Alan, with whom I'd done a casting test, but hadn't worked with. What I lost in *El Jardín del Edén* by not having the work done solidly really hurt.

The acting work is very useful so that the actors can get to know each other. It is also useful for me to know how to ask them for things, and it is a preparation that either you have ready before the filming or it doesn't happen. It is exceedingly important to have the script all worked out well; there isn't time during the shooting to be looking for or figuring out situations. Not in the most pleasant of shoots--like that of *Danzón*--nor in the most trying--like *El Jardín del Edén*--, is there time for people to get to know one another.

I just taught an acting class for film students. I had no time to prepare and was following my intuition, because I've never studied anything in the field. But I've reflected a lot on how an experienced actor finds his or her place in the medium of film. I've been able to think about the extent to which they are not prepared to work as actors in film, the amount of cobwebs and fear they carry around in their heads, and even the atmosphere of scorn for film in which they have been trained. They adore the movies and are dying to make them but their teachers--and there are great teachers of theater in Mexico!--have told them, "In film, actors do tricks, they don't have to act." I have explained to them that that's not the case. Film requires a different language--there are far fewer deceptions, there are techniques, there is fragmentation, one must work with great sincerity, and one must have a fine control of one's gaze. This course forced me to reflect on my own experience with Mexican actors, because it's a different case with North American actors. North Americans are sometimes better trained for film and television than for theater; the camera is not a problem for them. By contrast, in Mexico, it's an important issue because there's an acting tradition that creates a lot of short circuits in film. This acting tradition

that is very Mexican and Latin American and that we originally inherited from Spain is very exaggerated, very melodramatic. For many people in our countries, what is considered good acting is being very spirited, saying things well, and not so much acting with sincerity or making the character believable. Whereas Latin American and Spanish cinema is full of examples of very exaggerated, very heavy-handed acting, in American cinema--even in totally superficial movies-- you can generally believe what you are watching. This is marvelous for a film performance because the cinematic convention is that you believe what you are seeing.

**Let's move now to another topic related to the image: what has your relationship been with cinematographers?**

The cinematographer of *Lola* and *Danzón*, Rodrigo García, in addition to being a good cinematographer, is a very sensitive man and one in whom I have a lot of confidence. In *Lola*, he was kind of shocked when I asked him to have the camera follow the girl and, as if the camera were the girl's eyes, have it look around at all her toys, which are on the floor. It wouldn't have occurred to him to move the camera like that, but I was interested in Ana's little hands, her face, and how she related to her toys. I placed a different value on these details than do certain movies made by men, where children are made to say certain things but what they feel is not included. I wanted to present the girl as I believe girls and boys really are, and Rodrigo liked that and accepted it.

There have been more difficult situations, like in the scene in *Danzón* where Julia is in her hotel room with Rubén. In that case, the difference between Rodrigo's and my ways of seeing became an obstacle. I told Rodrigo to have the camera linger over the half-naked body of a man: "It's as if you were caressing his thigh, his calf; you move up his naked back and then move back to María Rojo." But Rodrigo couldn't get the camera movements I was asking him

for. It was as if, in effect, I were asking him to touch the man. When I got up on the camera and showed him graphically, so he could see on the monitor the movement I wanted, he almost died laughing, because it was almost as if he couldn't get it. He wasn't willing to caress the body of a man with the camera! It was his own resistance. He wanted to just watch María Rojo but not to caress the body of the young man. We resolved this difference because in our work relationship we have constantly talked things over, discussed them. Afterward, we even joked about what happened. It is all about different ways of seeing but . . . Of course, the look that I want is the one that comes most naturally to me.

The case of the cinematographer of *El Jardín del Edén* was different. My main conflict was that the American cinematographer didn't understand my method at all, even though I explained it to him ahead of time. I told him that I would place the camera and set the movements and he accepted that verbally, but never internally. He refused. He couldn't bear the thought that I might tell him how to focus the camera. For me, that was a huge problem, because if the cinematographer changes the movement on me, the scene doesn't flow. I feel a great necessity to protect my intuition and feelings and they are expressed through the position of the camera. Although I'm very open, I have never been tolerant with either the framing of shots or the movement of the camera. Sometimes, I don't even let anyone get close to me when I'm setting up the camera nor do I let them give me advice such as, "Wouldn't the camera be better a little more this way?"

**Would a female cinematographer have helped you find the viewpoint you seek?**

It's possible, but I don't know, because in Mexico there simply aren't any female cinematographers working in 35mm, the industry standard. I don't think we're trusted or

allowed to do it. Or is it that women are unable to use cameras or think in terms of emulsions? Does it go against our way of being? Discrimination has been broken down considerably with respect to directing--where it existed before as well--but it persists in the technical fields in positions of responsibility: there are no female sound people or cinematographers. There are assistants, but they don't have any responsibility. It's true that there are concrete reasons why women are not familiar with particular fields. For example, a woman might be clumsier with a camera than a man because, as a child, she didn't play with tools or wasn't encouraged. But she can look at where her lack of ability occurred within her own line of development. It's natural. It's like a man who doesn't know how to change a diaper. It's not something he can't learn to do. He's probably clumsy and grabs the baby without the faintest idea of how to do it, but it can be learned.

### **What can be done about the lack of female cinematographers?**

I have asked myself that question throughout my career. In my first 35mm movie, I asked the woman who had been the cinematographer for my shorts in 16mm, María Cristina Camús, to do the filming. I insisted, but she refused because she had never filmed in 35mm and felt unsure of herself. I would have taken any woman who could have filmed in 35mm, because I think that we must create more opportunities and we ought to help each other. But she wouldn't do it and there was no one else. I have always asked the cinematographers with whom I work to take on female assistants so they get trained and participate in feature films.

When I did a little five-minute short called *Otoñal* (Autumnal, 1992), I did use a female cinematographer who had never filmed fiction before. The result wasn't very good. It was her first shoot and it was a very complicated film about ghosts, which required a certain technical

ability. It turned out fine, but the producer of the shorts told me, “You should never have taken on that girl, you should have hired so-and-so (a guy).” He made me feel guilty for having used a female cinematographer. It’s a vicious circle: women don’t take on these things and when we do, the pressure and our inexperience are such that, effectively, we can’t do a good job from the outset. Then comes the reproach and the lack of confidence: “It’s a fact; they don’t know how to do it.” We must continue, however, until we break the vicious circle. I’m proud that, to the best of my abilities, I engage in a certain amount of activism and struggle because I’m aware that we haven’t had the opportunity to learn how to use film technology. It’s the same as before, when men had no confidence that women could direct. In my first movie the electricians would look at me as if I were mentally retarded. For them, a woman directing is just like a child directing. It’s as if they were saying, “How could she possibly direct? She doesn’t know how to order people around, she doesn’t know how to demand things.” It’s true that, perhaps, it was like that because it was my first film, but with a man they might have had a little more confidence. Directing is an authoritarian job and to do it, you must have a certain energy that, supposedly, women don’t have. I worked as an assistant to a few directors here in Mexico and my experience was that they are a bunch of shouters and swearers. I don’t want to name names, but I would include in this group almost the majority of the people in the generation prior to mine. They are directors who ask for things by shouting, who run people off the set, mistreat the actors. Well, things work out in the end, the movies get made, but I always told myself, “I don’t think that this is the only way to deal with this business of directing.” And, I have shown that it wasn’t. I have never shouted at anyone, but I’ve managed the movies I’ve made very well, on time and on budget. I have always made a work plan, and there has even been a good working environment. I encounter people, however, who think that I don’t know how to direct because they haven’t seen me shouting. But

you have to show them that it's another style and that, in all likelihood, everyone will come out ahead with this other style. It's much more pleasant to be working with someone who gets the job done without kicking or screaming than with someone who does it bragging about their abilities.

**When you've finished filming, do you feel that the impulse that led you to make your movies has been satisfied?**

When the movie is finished, to what degree do I recognize my internal voice as having been realized? I think I have a number of responses. When at night I go over what has been done in that day's filming, I am very strict and criticize myself a good deal. I say, "Tomorrow I can't make that mistake," or "How could I not have realized that?" Of course, after six or eight weeks of filming, I'm a wreck. Then when I see that material again, projected in rushes, I tell myself, "It wasn't so bad, I like it, it makes sense." But if you were to see me each night of shooting, I'm completely different; I don't even think the same way about my work.

The same mechanism happens all over again with the movie as a whole. When I finish the movie, I get brutally depressed, I feel a vertigo, a feeling that I did not accomplish what I wanted. I have the feeling that everything turned out so much less than what I was dreaming of . . . That has happened to me every time--even in my short films! So, now I don't get so anxious, and I tell myself, "All right, calm down, let's see how you see things in two weeks." When the time passes, sometimes, in synch with my internal voice, I acknowledge that it didn't turn out the way I wanted. Yet I also realize that other times I did achieve what I set out to do. Then it is very enjoyable. Although there might be problems, and although *Danzón* was very successful and *Lola* and *El Jardín del Edén* weren't, I'm convinced that I'm right in many respects. I might be guilty of pride, but I feel sure about what I've done and it gives me an enormous satisfaction.



# 6. Dana Rotberg

---

Dana Rotberg questions institutions as much in her professional life as in her movies. She has challenged the film school's educational system, the judicial system, the religious system, and even notions of the collective imagination, such as the idea of the love affair. Rotberg reflects on taboos and criticizes social hypocrisy. Her movies are controversial and address questions people don't want to ask.

Dana Annie Rotberg Goldsmith was born in 1960 in Mexico City and grew up in a Jewish microcosm: she lived among other Jewish families and went to Tarbot, a Hebrew school. In college Rotberg studied music at the Universidad Veracruzana in Jalapa and Latin American Studies in the Department of Philosophy and Letters at the UNAM, but didn't finish either program. In 1982, Rotberg decided on filmmaking and entered the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica. In her second year, she took Eduardo Maldonado's documentary film class. For her final project, she studied the case of Elvira Luz Cruz, an illiterate indigenous woman who lived in a shanty town in Mexico City and who had been accused of murdering her four children. This film, which began as a requirement for the class, turned into a community project.



First another student, Ana Diez Díaz, joined as co-director, donating the cans of film allotted her by the school. Later, Rotberg obtained donations of film from supporters as well as the CCC's permission to use its laboratory to develop additional film.

With Diez as her assistant, Rotberg made contact with the Elvira Luz Cruz Support Committee and examined the evidence on which she had been charged. In *Elvira Luz Cruz: pena máxima* (Elvira Luz Cruz: Maximum Sentence, 1984), Rotberg shows that Cruz was considered guilty before she was tried. Rotberg uses the testimony of the neighbors and friends who formed the Support Committee, and the opinion of a psychologist and a sociologist in defense of the innocence of Cruz. In addition, she questions the supposed innocence of Cruz's husband, Nicolás, showing how he and his mother, Eduarda, were complicit in Elvira's oppression. *Elvira Luz Cruz* moved its viewers. It received an Ariel for Best Documentary (1985) and a Diosa de Plata award for Best Documentary (1985). It was also shown at the United Nations Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya, (1985); the Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana (1985); the *Con un toque femenino* series at the Andrea Palma auditorium in Mexico City (1992); the Mexican Women's Film Series in Berlin (1992); and the Festival of Women United in Granz, Linz and Dornbirn, Austria (1993).

In 1985, Rotberg left the CCC after her third year without finishing her thesis, preferring instead to learn on the job. From 1985 to 1989, she worked as an assistant to director Felipe Cazals on a number of hour-long programs for Channel 13, and so became acquainted with the film industry and the technicians of the union Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica (STPC).

In 1989, Rotberg had the opportunity to make her first full-length fiction film. *Intimidad* (Intimacy) presents an affair between, Julio, a man in a long-standing marriage, and Tere, a

woman in a younger couple. Julio, a high school teacher with literary aspirations, watches Tere, a housewife with great sexual exuberance, through a peephole in the wall. His life is transformed; the peephole brings new light into the room, and Julio feels his creative capacity renewed. Yet once their affair is established, the passion disappears and the relationship becomes a nightmare. Tere demands to be supported in the fashion she deserves, and the situation leads to ridiculous results. In addition to bearing the emotional consequences of having two families, Julio must take out both families' garbage. Through its use of humor, *Intimidad* insinuates that love is a nostalgic illusion that must constantly be renewed.

The idea to make *Intimidad* originated not with Rotberg, but rather with her producer León Constantiner, who financed the film through his production house, Producciones Metrópolis. Constantiner hoped to produce a high-quality picture that would attract both the upper-middle class, which normally preferred foreign films, and less-educated viewers whose reluctance to read subtitles usually limited them to low-quality, lowbrow Mexican films. With that goal in mind, Constantiner bought the rights to Hugo Hiriart's play *Intimidad*, which had enjoyed great theatrical success, and hired a new and dynamic team to make the movie: Rotberg as director, Leonardo García Tsao to adapt the screenplay, and Carlos Marcovich as cinematographer.

Because Constantiner produced *Intimidad* independently, he had difficulties getting it shown. There are two production systems in the Mexican film industry, each of which has its own mechanisms for distribution and exhibition: that of the state (through IMCINE), and that of the established private producers. *Intimidad* fell into neither of these categories, and as a consequence, had difficulties reaching an audience. In addition, Constantiner encountered financial problems with *Intimidad*: he found himself forced to pay taxes on the initial investment

of \$450,000, despite not having recouped any of it. As a result, Constantiner was obliged to sell *Metrópolis* and relocate his business to New York. In spite of these difficulties, *Intimidad* went to various festivals: the San Sebastian International Film Festival (1989), the Young Mexican Filmmakers Series in Berlin (1990), the Sundance Festival (1990), the Tokyo International Film Festival (1991), and the Muestra de Cine Mexicano in Guadalajara (1991). In Spain, it won the Don Quijote award for Best Film of the Year at the International Festival of Film Associations (1990).

In *Ángel de fuego* (Angel of Fire, 1991), her second feature film, Rotberg creates a fable with a religious theme. In the *Fantasía Circus*, Alma, a 13-year-old trapeze artist, has incestuous relations with her father, the clown Renato, who dies near the beginning of the movie. Alma, pregnant by her father and without his support, must leave the circus. She joins a group of puppeteers who enact passages from the Bible and whose leader is the priestess Refugio. Horrified by Alma's incestuous relations, Refugio promises to "cleanse" her through sacrifice and fasting. Alma fasts, but the lack of food causes her to lose her child, her great dream in life. She decides to seek revenge, using Refugio's son Sacramento to accomplish her goal. Refugio had prepared Sacramento to be her successor; to do so, however, he had to remain celibate. Alma seduces Sacramento; after losing his virginity, Sacramento commits suicide. After exacting her revenge, Alma returns to the *Fantasía Circus* and commits suicide by burning down the circus with herself inside.

*Ángel de fuego* was produced within the state system with financing from IMCINE and the Fondo de Fomento a la Calidad Cinematográfica, and also with the participation of Constantiner and Rotberg: Constantiner through Producciones *Metrópolis*, and Rotberg through her own production house, *Una Productora Más*. The script was written by Rotberg and Omar

Alain Rodríguez. *Ángel de fuego* was shown in 70 festivals, among which the most notable were: the London Film Festival (1992), the Tokyo International Film Festival (1992), the Toronto International Film Festival (1992), the Sundance Festival (1993), and the Sidney Film Festival (1993). This very controversial movie was well received at the Cannes International Film Festival in the Director's Fortnight (1992). It won an award for Best Latin American Film from the Asociación de Cronistas de Espectáculos in New York (1993), and was nominated for 17 Ariels.

## **“I Don’t Judge Malena”**

**In one of your interviews you say that you decided to make Elvira Luz Cruz because you read in the newspaper that a mother had killed her four children. What was it that interested you?**

Well, at first it wasn't anything rational. When I read the news about that woman it was a visceral reaction more than anything else. It was a brutal blow to my person. I couldn't begin to imagine the circumstances in which such a tragedy could have occurred. Before I found out the concrete details of Elvira's story, before I did the research and all the preparatory work, I had the idea that through her I could recapture a sort of contemporary Mexican Medea. Once I began my research, I discovered many more things. Before picking up a camera we spent a year doing research and discovered another story that completely altered the preconception I had from the media. Finding the true story changed me greatly. Well, it's impossible to know the true story. I am referring to the story I could glimpse through the information I received about Elvira and about the death of her children. At first there was something visceral--I was very interested in an act that was so extreme, definitive, absolute, and tragic, in the classical sense of the word--, but I was infinitely more interested in her as a human being than in all the circumstances that surrounded her. I was interested in examining Elvira more than the crime or the conditions she lived in. It really made me very curious and hit me profoundly that a woman should murder her children.

**What struck you about her having killed her children?**

That it is such a totally extreme act. I was interested in examining what could happen to a woman that would make her decide to kill her children. At that time I neither had children nor the remotest idea of what motherhood could mean in its most basic sense. And yet, this singular act of murder--no matter who is killed--must be a completely unique dimension of life, very specific and very terrible. In fact, the same thing has happened in all my work: rather than having a theory I've wanted to confirm on film, my work always has been a project of inquiry. In the end, what I find to be most fascinating about making a movie, be it fiction or documentary, is that it is a process of investigation in which you discover something. That is what must end up on the screen, not so much your opinion or perception of things.

**And what did you conclude from your research on Elvira? What were her motives?**

Look, obviously the conclusions from my research are infinitely more complex than the act of killing itself. On the one hand, in the process of investigating, filming, and editing, I learned that the absolute objective truth does not exist; we will never know who murdered those children. I believe that Elvira did not kill them, but I will never know. On the other hand, I understood that that was not what was important; what was important was to see this person in the context of very specific emotional, social, and economic conditions, because of which--whether or not she committed the murder--she is really the first victim of this story. Killing the children is not an even remotely heroic act, she doesn't even come close to being an antihero. It is a profound tragedy, which was imposed initially on Elvira as a human being. The conditions in which that woman lived! She was the first murder victim: she was an indigenous woman, illiterate, a single mother of her first child--a set of circumstances that, in Mexico, condemn you

to death from the outset. In the specific case of Elvira, if she did kill her children, it was a profoundly maternal act and an act of animal survival. That is what is so terrible: to reduce a person to her most primitive condition, to tear away every aspect of her human, social, and emotional life and reduce her to a savage, desperate animal. It is very complicated to discuss Elvira because we don't know if she killed her children or not.

**Tell me, why do you think that killing one's own children could be an act of survival?**

Look, when you see the conditions in which these people live--not only the economic conditions but also the emotional, working, and social conditions, among others--, when you have four children crying for 24 hours, 48 hours, or a week, without any way of satisfying that most elemental need, which is to feed them, it must be profoundly painful. In the autopsies it was discovered that those children had nothing in their stomachs, they had not eaten in four days. This, I believe, is the final point in a series of very extreme privations that Elvira and her children experienced. I can begin to understand that, if in fact she did kill her children, she killed them as an act of love; as loving, feminine, and maternal an act as is giving birth. Because those children were hungry, and that was all there was to it. In addition to which, they were battered children, Elvira was a battered woman, they were the most marginal of those on the margin. They lived under a set of conditions that added to the extremity of their hunger. I can understand that a mother might say: "These children can't take any more." There is no rational level; we cannot read the story of Elvira in rational terms. There is a very specific social reading of economic conditions, of ethnic conditions, of the emotional conditions at the family level, that prevent one from analyzing the event in terms of a rational reading of things because it is an

irrational act. It was an irrational act, but you can begin to understand it from your gut, from your stomach, from your soul, can't you?

Now, it is complicated to discuss Elvira because everything rests on a hypothesis: the hypothesis that she killed her children. After having worked on this project for three years, and even after the time that has passed, I don't believe she killed her children. I believe her husband killed them, but that because of the sociological conditions of the country in which I live, the easiest thing was to accuse her. The Mexican judicial system is a contemptible disgrace. On a previous occasion it allowed Elvira to be dropped off at a public ministry, beaten and semiconscious, and on top of being beaten, since her husband was a former policeman, she was put in jail. Although the woman didn't know how to read, they made her sign all the same. Research done by the defense provides yet another example: it sets out a series of grounds that lead us to believe the possible conclusion that she was not the one who killed her children. It is infinitely more terrible and infinitely more complex, for not only was she accused of murdering her children, but she was in the depths of mourning her loss and in jail. From a contemporary perspective, years later, the most terrible thing was that Elvira had better living conditions in jail than she had had before, even though the living conditions in Mexican jails in general, and in women's prisons in particular, are poor. How must she have been living before then that jail could be a better place, a place where she learns to read, where she gets her teeth fixed, begins to work, begins to experience social reintegration in a penal system that doesn't even consider social reintegration? At first, when I read the news, I realized there was a very important story here to look into. I might have had my ideas that she was the Medea of the end of the century in Mexico, etc., but in the long run, it was simply an open door through which to descend into the fires of Mexican hell.



**Let's go now to your first full-length film, *Intimidad*. You say in an interview with Eduardo de la Vega<sup>93</sup> that it was difficult to adapt the play for the movies. What were the problems?**

Look, I think the work *Intimidad*, as a piece of theater, is a brilliant work, truly brilliant. It is a brilliant work for the theater, but it isn't a text readily adaptable to the movies. It functions perfectly in terms of theatrical language, but we know that in the creation of a cinematic story this language requires other elements in order to work. The play was not conceived in cinematic terms: in the play you have two couples in bed and their dialogue. Those dialogues contain immense stories that are embedded: they depend on the theater viewer's assuming them. In the movies, one doesn't assume these things; in the movies you have to spread things out like the tail of a peacock and show all those small elements that are going to make up these characters when, in the theater, we see them sitting on the edge of the bed. Of course, and not surprisingly, at the time they proposed to me that I adapt that piece, well, I knew that I would have to take a great number of liberties: with the narration, the characters, the time, the circumstances. I had to unpack those details so that the concept derived from the staging and the play could actually be translated and be comprehensible in the language of cinema, on the screen and by a moviegoing audience. It was a very complicated task. Because it is not a work that I had written for the theater. If it had been, I could have said, "As the author, this is the language I choose for the theatrical scenic space and this is the space I choose for its translation to the movies." So, there were two options: either Hugo Hiriart would do the adaptation or some other person would do it. That was a production decision in which I really was not involved. Once the rights are acquired for the work, the producer decides--rightfully so--to call on the screenwriter he considers most

---

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Rotberg by Eduardo de la Vega, March 1991. The transcribed interview is held at the CIEC at the Universidad de Guadalajara.

appropriate. Here the task was to try to identify and capture those closed elements from the theatrical work and set them off--open them up and make them into a linear, narrative story in movie time so the theatrical concepts could be expressed. Obviously, it is a very complex job because the particular theatrical language Hugo Hiriart chooses in *Intimidad* requires that histories be created for all the characters and that they be placed within a specific context, since in the play there is only a bed. My intention was to take the concepts Hugo Hiriart is dealing with, that have an edge, that are acidic as far as the couple is concerned, and to translate them into a form I considered appropriate to a cinematic language. I feel that the spirit of Hugo Hiriart's intention was preserved in the movie. We can never hope for it to be a textual adaptation, because then either we would be making a film of the play or we wouldn't be experiencing it. As director, I wasn't being asked to do either of these things.

**The two versions of *Intimidad* speak of the intimacy of the couple. Do you think the two of you have different ideas about the identity of the couple or the same?**

I think that the two works, because of the complexity of the adaptation and a number of other elements, cannot be compared. *Throne of Blood*<sup>94</sup> and Shakespeare, well, obviously, the adaptation is quite faithful in certain aspects, but they are also two distinct universes. What I did try to do--with or without success, it's not for me to judge--was to always respect and follow Hugo Hiriart's intention. I, as a reader and viewer of the play, feel a total identification with Hugo Hiriart's intention. If not, I wouldn't even have taken on the project. On the other hand, I am a different person and I have my own concept of a couple's life, which is also manifest in the cinematic approach of the movie. There is another fundamental aspect here, which is one's

---

<sup>94</sup> Akira Kurosawa's 1957 film adaptation of *Macbeth*.

professional experience and one's life experience. Obviously Hugo Hiriart has a life experience that is infinitely greater than mine. At any rate, at the time I was making *Intimidad*, he had a life experience with respect to the couple and the intimacy of the couple that was far greater than mine. I was 27, had had many boyfriends, good-looking and all, but in the end, I didn't have his experience of or knowledge about couples. I think that living a life of intimacy, in the long run, gives you, or should give you, a great wisdom. Perhaps, one can find in this play that wisdom of daily experience, along with a talent that allows him to put it into a play. Likewise, I might have left out *en masse* many details from real life that Hiriart can incorporate and that I can't or couldn't even glimpse. I don't consider this to be a negative criticism of my work; it is a fact. On the other hand, the movie can include so many fresher elements, perhaps due to my own lack of experience of intimate life or simply because of my different experience of intimate life, which lend other characteristics to the movie.

I have not seen *Intimidad* for a long, long time. Personally, for me it was a very, very difficult experience, because comedy is not a genre I work with. And that was one of the elements I told León Constantiner, the producer, at the start that I was going to use. I told him: "If you choose to work with *Intimidad*, the only way I can approach the intimacy of the couple is through comedy, because I can't do it with solemnity."

**I have a question about *Intimidad* I would like you to answer: are you playing at all with the genre of porn movies?**

In the movie *Intimidad*, no. If that is there, it's entirely unconscious. I did want to make something frank, not something solemn, heavy, elegant, with regard to its eroticism.

## Why?

Simply because I don't see things that way. In all these extramarital encounters in *Intimidad*, which are very exciting and full of romanticism and adventure, there is something that could be understood as very vulgar, very routine, very basic. There are acts that one covers with this patina of fantasy or magazine eroticism. For example, one fantasizes: "The day I go to the hotel to meet with that marvelous lover of mine, I'm going to take my super sexy slippers and my best lingerie." But it turns out that the day you go the washing machine breaks down, your prettiest panties are burned, and you have to wear a different pair. There are many things that happen in your life that make it ordinary, vulgar--not in the sense of the obscene, but rather, as the daily routine.

In *Intimidad*, the sexual scenes are not erotic, but rather sexual, because that is what the two characters want: to fuck. There is no erotic world, there is no discussion of you and I, because one is married to a gargoyle--whom he hasn't fucked since I don't know when--and the other is married to a snot. That is how I saw it, and I really enjoyed taking on the sexuality of the characters in this sense. It is funny that you ask me if I am playing with the porn genre because ever since *Intimidad*, perhaps without realizing it, I've wanted to make a porn movie. When I go to the movies and see those sex scenes in the "good" movies, I think: "Probably actors are the only ones who fuck like that, because in my experience . . . ." There is something far less "sparkling," there are no sighs that turn into the sound of music. It is much more animal, much less rational, planned out, elegant. There are very few movies in which I believe the characters might live their erotic scenes this way, and that also have an erotic effect on me. There is an extraordinarily artificial way of representing sex in the movies that distances that representation enormously from the daily experience we human beings, here with our feet on ground, have.

Now, I don't mean to say that there aren't encounters in which you rise into the sky and float on the clouds. They do exist. What I mean is that the quality of the sexual encounter is not necessarily related to the form, and the form I find in the movies is profoundly artificial. At that moment, with all the fear I was feeling--because I would die of fright with every movie--, I tried to follow that frankness, to eliminate that high-contrast, "sparkling" aspect of the sexual encounters. That is why the rooms where these characters make love are the sorriest in the world: pistachio green and a dreadful bed, but that is what pay-by-the-hour hotels are like in Mexico City.

**The scene that most caught my attention at the very beginning is the one in which Tere is with her husband Pedro, and she tries to seduce him, but he's very tired, having just come home from work, and doesn't want to pay any attention to her.**

Curiously, it is one of the scenes that has an incredibly erotic effect on both the women and the men in the audience. That is what I sense from the audience, because everyone says: "That woman has such a magnificent ass!" Now I can tell you that it had to do with, on one hand, making the sex scenes less artificial, and on the other, my inexperience. I probably would have had to put another lens on that camera so it wouldn't have looked so large . . . It was the first time I took off my glasses and looked through the camera. During the many years I worked as an assistant, I would pay attention to the lenses they were using and then would see what happened in the rushes. It was one thing to do that and another to say: "For this scene that I have in my head, and that I am composing here, with my whole crew, I want this lens. Let's see how it looks." There is a great difference between the experience of being a spectator or an assistant and the experience of learning to see with the camera lenses, and you only learn to see through experimentation.

I love that sequence. I generally stand at the back of the movie theaters, and when I did it during *Intimidad*, I saw that during that sequence everyone was rocking in their seats. I remember that when they showed the movie in the Berlin Festival, all the German feminists went for my throat, those hard bitches! They asked me why had I made a movie in which the female characters . . . I said, “Hell, I didn’t invent the female characters of this world. There are gargoyle women, there are women who want to fuck their neighbor.” That it isn’t the way it should be, well, probably not, but they do exist. Just because we might wish it didn’t exist doesn’t mean that’s the case. That was the intention throughout the movie, including the erotic scenes: I wanted to make things less artificial, even with all the mistakes that might result.

**Tell me more about the character of Tere: How do you see her? Do you think she is naive or very much aware?**

I wanted her to be both at once, the way we all are. There are aspects of her that are very naive, very childlike, very romantic. On the other hand, the woman also says: “Alright, I have to go on, because if the men here don’t appreciate me, I’m moving on and anyone who stays behind--tough luck to them!” Had I created a character who was simply naive or simply a bitch, a cynic, a user, you wouldn’t even have asked me that question. I believe that both levels exist in Tere. In the beginning, she has a lot of illusions about her husband, but her illusions get worn out and collapse with each passing day. Suddenly, the possibility of meeting her attractive neighbor Julio arises and she doesn’t let it slip by. Now she is also a woman who, when she sees that the practical life she seeks is not going to happen--because her husband takes her house and they dismantle her apartment--, says: “Let’s go to Hawaii. And to hell with the rest of you.” The intention of the whole movie is to be naturalistic. It is also true that I had a very serious problem

facing me: comedy is a very complicated genre, which was coupled with my great lack of experience because it was my first picture.

**With regard to *Ángel de fuego*, your second feature film, Tomás Pérez Turrent suggests that the audience never fully identifies with the protagonist, Alma.<sup>95</sup> What do you say about that?**

Look, it is very difficult to identify with Alma because she is a girl who lives in a circus, who has a loving and sexual relationship with Renato, her father, by whom she becomes pregnant. Alma is a character who is living in an extraordinary situation, and the majority of people might not be able to identify with the narrative elements of the story. In this sense, I agree. On the other hand, my intention was not to have the audience identify with the characters in that way. I was looking for the public to identify with how things happen: how a character who breaks the laws--whatever laws they might be, laws of God or laws of man--will inevitably be condemned to be sacrificed. I wasn't looking for identification through a specific character, nor through the concrete action that happens to this character. This would require me to trust that 99 percent of the audience had had an incestuous experience, which, fortunately, is not the case.

**I was thinking, perhaps, of the opposite: that you use the incest so that the audience is unable to identify with Alma, that what you need is for them to be unable to identify with her.**

---

<sup>95</sup> In "*Ángel de fuego y otros asuntos*" Pérez Turrent writes: "Dana Rotberg's look is not understanding (pious?); hers is a look of surprise towards a world that can't be grasped because of its complexity, and at the same time, fascinates her with its unforeseen possibilities."

I didn't plan it in that sense. I had planned to build my story from very specific elements of dramatic construction, not to bring to the screen the idea of sacrifice. Let me tell you how the movie came about. The day I realized I was going to make this film--because the script didn't even exist--I was on the Calzada de Tlalpan<sup>96</sup> at two in the morning in a greasy spoon cafeteria. At that hour many people are out walking, and I saw a man walk by with infinite fatigue drawn on his face, his shoulders slumped. It was a truly and profoundly sad image that made me wonder about what could have happened to that man. It occurred to me that this man had gotten up that day at three in the morning to take nineteen buses, had gone to work at a job that barely paid him a living wage, so he couldn't afford shoes or food or schooling for his kids or anything. His job reduced him to his most animal and primitive condition. And there he was, at two in the morning, walking home. Day in and day out, and for what? Simply to survive like an animal. And, when all is said and done, who is sacrificed throughout history? People like him. Elaborated verbally, it all sounds like so much drivel, but it was an emotion produced by the face of a man walking by at that hour. That emotion had to be elaborated upon, translated into a story. At that point, other elements--infinitely more--came into play.

Perhaps, as you say, the fact that people don't identify derives from the incest, which gives them the distance they need in order to read the other story. That is a theoretical discussion I don't engage in my head. I tell the story and it falls on others to discover the machinery behind the story. On the other hand, while incest may be an element that repulses the audience, motherhood is one that brings it closer. There is no woman who has had a child who doesn't feel an immense identification with this girl. That is marvelous, because you succeed in getting viewers to rid themselves of the prejudices they have in their heads about incest and to recapture

---

<sup>96</sup> A major street in Mexico City.



the maternal experience of pregnancy that Alma has. By being able to identify with her maternity, you help the audience rid themselves of the garbage hanging over them and reclaim fundamental emotions like: “This girl loves her child, she loves her baby. Leave her alone. Let her keep it!” In this sense, I believe that *Ángel de fuego* plays an awful lot with the minds of the spectators: with their sensations, their culture, with their prejudices. Somehow it manages to strip away and apply layers that sensitize or desensitize you.

**You were just speaking about the tension that is created between incest and motherhood, and I would like you to talk about the mothers in *Ángel de fuego*, beginning with Malena.**

What I try to do, and what I tried to do in this movie, is not to render judgment. The same thing happens in *Intimidación*: I don't judge them. If the woman is a gargoyle, she's a gargoyle and that's that. I don't judge Malena. She is a woman in this world who doesn't find what she needs: to have a better life and, perhaps, a better partner. So, the circus is the most wretched circus in the world. If the circus were pretty, brilliant, a place where Malena could cross the sky on a trapeze and people would applaud her, then the fact of her leaving the circus would indeed condemn her. But that circus is the most miserable, wretched pit in existence, and she has to save herself. To save herself, she leaves, but she commits an enormous error, which is to leave her daughter there and not take her along. She pays for that mistake when her daughter says to her: “I don't want anything to do with you. You left me. Now, what are you looking for here?” She is a character who leaves and who, at the beginning of the movie, is trying to return to find the girl, but it is already too late. The owner of the circus tells Malena to stay away, because Alma is the precious jewel of the circus, the one who flies through the heavens, the only attraction this now-dead circus has. Alma does what Malena refused to do; Malena left the

profession of circus performer and Alma inherited it. Malena is a mother who, by saving herself, loses her daughter and is condemned.

**Let's go on to Refugio, the mother of Sacramento. Can Refugio feel pleasure?**

Yes, Refugio experiences a constant mystical pleasure; in my judgment, it may be sick, but she certainly experiences pleasure. I believe that she is a woman who believes what she preaches. For example, when she receives the line of people seeking the book of forgiveness, she is living in the mystical pleasure of her visionary plan.

**And erotic pleasure? Or the denial of erotic pleasure?**

I believe that she absolutely denies it. When we were constructing the character, we thought that Refugio had the same story as Alma; not necessarily in terms of incest, but certainly in terms of being a single mother, with all the shame and stigmatization that involves. Perhaps, in reaction to this shame, in order to cleanse herself of it, she holds onto her longing for mysticism and purification. Let me tell you two of the possibilities I used to provide the character's background when we were writing the script. Perhaps the man that got Refugio pregnant was the town priest; that option has an infinite number of possibilities. What I can tell you is that she is not a middle-class woman who married for love, who had a child while in love, and who one day saw the light and said: "I am going to make puppets to spread the word of God." This character has a much more marginal past. Imagine another scenario: She comes from the state of Guanajuato--a Catholic state--and falls in love with a man. She goes to bed with him or runs away with him--in the face of everything her familial, emotional, and social community represents. She gets pregnant, and the guy leaves her. She must find a way back into that world

of goodness in which she grew up, but now, coming from the outside. That is why she invents this religion.

There are an infinite number of ways to elucidate the character of Refugio, but that is the business of the spectators. Place the bomb in their hands, let them open her up, study her and search back through her history, her character, her knowledge to understand why Refugio has arrived at the state in which we find her.

### **How is this idea of the character of Refugio translated into cinematic terms?**

Obviously, my style of narration is much more codified than what we are used to from watching North American movies. In Hollywood cinema they give you each and every one of the elements so you can scrutinize, understand, categorize, and label all the characters: what they do and what happens to them. In the case of *Ángel de fuego*, it is much more codified and it falls upon the viewer to decode that information. There is no character that is the “good guy” here, and that is what keeps the picture always alive. Each spectator--depending on his or her culture, history, and ideas--is going to have elements with which to construct a past for Refugio that, in one sense, is the most secret. When all is said and done, you can “read” Malena; she is more common. In contrast, Refugio is a more mysterious character, she can have an infinite number of histories. The only thing we know is that it is not a common story in which pleasure is a permitted experience. Evidently it was a condemned act, which produced her son Sacramento and for which she assumes the task of redeeming herself and redeeming everyone. This redemption is a fairly common mechanism in all religions. The priests who abuse children are the strictest priests, with themselves and with others. I believe that Refugio feels a mother’s love for her child. She does love him and she does believe, sincerely and lovingly, that her son is

going to be her successor in this evangelical task of redemption. Nevertheless, she commits the terrible mistake of attempting to impose a project upon someone else. The other person has his own will and by denying his will, she will sacrifice him. Now, Refugio's original intention is good; she is not a wicked, Machiavellian bitch. She believes that her son will be a saint, that he will be pure, that he will continue this project, and so she must care for and protect him. But in the end, the same thing happens whenever a totalitarian force is imposed upon another person, be it in religious or ideological terms, be it in terms of an economic or an educational system. When you force an idea on someone else in totalitarian fashion, you eliminate and sacrifice him, and you condemn yourself as well.

Now if we return to the matter of identification, in that sense the movie again achieves its desired effect. The audience probably doesn't identify with the specific actions Refugio takes, but is capable of reading Refugio as representing those totalitarian systems that are imposed on others, canceling them out, and that necessarily lead to tragic ends, be they individual, social or political.

**Your explanation brings me to another question I would like to ask you: Could you talk about Sacramento's loss of virginity?**

Sacramento, in acting against his mother's prohibition of his sexuality, recovers his humanity, but condemns himself in the process. At the moment he becomes a man, when he is no longer going to be a saint, at that moment everything is over for him. It is a double circle. In one circle Refugio is imposing a destiny on Sacramento that is not his own, is condemning him. In the other, while Sacramento is reclaiming his manhood, he is also condemning himself, for already pressing down on his shoulders is that brutal weight that is his human condition. Either you are a saint or you aren't. Now, in order not to be a saint, you must be a man and, specifically

in the case of Sacramento, being a man happens through sexuality and love, because Sacramento is very secretly in love with Alma.

**What does the loss of his virginity signify for Refugio and Alma?**

There are two reactions present together in Refugio: on the one hand, that of the mystic who loses her saint, and on the other, that of the mother who loses her child. Refugio sees Sacramento's loss of virginity as a rape that puts an end to her mystical project; Sacramento can no longer be her successor. But, at the same time, Refugio, as a mother, experiences brutal pain when she realizes her son is dying. My intention was for the mother to triumph dramatically on the screen so I directed Lilia Aragón--who is an extraordinary actress--to act like a she-wolf howling in pain because she has found her cub completely torn to shreds. Perhaps, on feeling that pain, Refugio hit the jackpot because she had carried her project too far, imposing it on others, and that is not possible.

Alma knows that sexuality will cause Sacramento to cease to be a mystic; to return Sacramento's sexuality to him is to make him human. When she goes to see Sacramento, it is a rape without physical violence; it is an infinitely sweet, physical coming together. However, at the same time there is a mental violence: in her returning Sacramento's humanity to him there is an intention to take revenge on Refugio. Having lost her childhood and motherhood, Alma comes to understand that the only way to avenge the loss of her own child is to cause Refugio to lose hers.

**There is one detail that really caught my attention: in order to seduce Sacramento, Alma is not dressed in the red tights she uses in the Angel of Fire act but appears on screen for the first time in a dress. Why?**

The change in dress symbolizes Alma's loss of innocence. Alma's story is the story of the sacrifice of innocent people. All that she has gone through--incest, trying to protect her child by abandoning the circus, getting involved with this troop of religious zealots--they are all innocent acts, absolutely childlike. Even in her relationship with her father there is a romantic quality: she gives her body the ability to express itself through love. There is no physical violence, no violence in her loving; there is a conceptual violence, because it is incest. Alma is innocent until, in seducing Sacramento, she takes her revenge. Then, Alma forgets that the body, sexuality, and eroticism are acts of love, and she uses them for the first time. She enters the world in which all human beings live, the world in which we are not innocent. That is why she loses the angel costume, because she has stopped being an angel, and that is also why, when she wants to climb the trapeze, she can't. She has ceased to be the Angel of Fire. Also because of her loss of innocence, Alma begins to work as a prostitute. At the beginning of the picture when Rito tells her she has to go attend the customers, Alma responds, "I'm not going. I'm not a whore--I love with my body." But once her ability to operate exclusively through love is eliminated, Alma turns to sleeping with the men in the circus. At this point, nothing matters any more, right? Alma sacrifices her innocence in order to survive.

**You were just talking about love. How do you understand love in *Ángel de fuego*? Does it exist?**

I believe that there is a lot of love between Alma and her father. A love that is, if you wish, condemnable; call it what you will, but there is love. There is also love between Alma and Noé, the little boy. There is Refugio's love for Sacramento; without question a sick love, but love nevertheless. And there is the love of Josefina for Renato and Alma. Josefina is the surrogate mother and is Renato's surrogate partner; although we don't see anything happen with

Renato, she really is a loving character, very loving. And finally, there is the enormous and intimate love Alma feels for her baby. That is why Alma frees the animals before setting the circus on fire. I think it's a movie in which there is a tremendous amount of love: sick, in the case of Refugio; condemned and forbidden, in the case of Renato and Alma; unsatisfied or through substitution, in the case of Josefina; a child's friendship, with Noé.

**Do you mean to say that love is more than what we normally understand love to be?**

Of course. One is accustomed to reading--at least in the movies, which is undeniably an ideological discourse--about Manichaeian love, altogether established, functional, and legible. That's why the movies fascinate the public to the extent they do, because that's where you see what you don't see at home, right? That's why in the movies the only thing lacking in erotic scenes is angels floating overhead. Well, that does happen, I don't deny it, but a good many other things that don't exist in the movies also happen. That's why *Ángel de fuego* is a very difficult movie, as far as the audience is concerned, because it isn't showing you what you want to see and don't have at home. It is showing what you have at home. It's not an edict that everything should be marvelous, artificial, and often brilliant, which is what the movies propose--it's something else. There is an infinite range of possibilities for love. Not all of them are healthy, not all of them are acceptable, but they exist. Whether we like them or not, whether we condemn them or not, they exist and they work.

**I was reading an interview with Evangelina Sosa where she says that she liked the work she did with you.<sup>97</sup> Tell me about how you work with actors.**

I worked for many years with Felipe Cazals. As his assistant I directed the actors, and I learned a lot there. In *Ángel de fuego*, the movie absolutely depended on the skill of my actors, so I did a meticulous analysis of the text, the characters, the staging, the tone, and the rehearsals. It was very intense work because the script had so many elements and intentions. The first thing I did was to give them the script and ask them to read it and make notes. Then, I sat down with each of the actors separately, and we analyzed the entire script: what we wanted to do, why, what it meant. Once we had digested that, we would move on to a specific analysis of the character each actor would be playing. After that, there was a session focused on tone, during which we would just work on the dialogues and agree on the tone we would use for them. Since there was a great variety of actors from different schools, I wanted to even out the tones; I didn't want anyone standing out.

**What were the styles of the different schools?**

There were people who had worked exclusively in the theater and had a theatrical style of projection. Which is to say, in general, grandiloquent, projecting a great distance for an audience sitting 20 meters away. They also had a specifically theatrical form of physical and vocal expression, particularly with their eyes, which doesn't work in the movies. There were people who had come from television, in which a totally different expressive language exists, and there were people from the movies. So, there were three styles of acting that wouldn't necessarily

---

<sup>97</sup> José Luis Gallegos, "Ángel de Fuego es una Obra Importante en el cine Latinoamericano Contemporáneo," *Excélsior*, 24 Apr. 1992.



work together. It was necessary to refine here and push there. There was Noé [Montealegre], the little boy, who had acted in two little plays for children's theater, but who hadn't had any schooling or instruction in acting. He did have, however, the very bad habits that characterize Mexican children's theater, which are pathetic--or which, at the time, were pathetic--I don't know what they are doing now. In that sense, there was a very particular job to do with each one of the actors.

In addition, it was necessary to find the tone for each of the characters. Sacramento, for example, has a very particular way of speaking that derives from the nature of his character. Noé has another; Refugio, yet another. The characters are like us; just as we speak differently, they also talk in different ways. If you and I read a screenplay, we're not going to read it the same way; that denies you your personality and your history and denies me mine. So it was a matter of paying attention to those details so that the characters each spoke and expressed themselves in a particular manner according to their past, their character, and their situation.

Afterwards, when things were more or less set, I brought together the actors who shared scenes so that they could talk to each other and experience the scenes together. This way, before filming began, they could get to know each other as characters, rather than as actors. At the very end, when everything was more or less set with the circus and the costumes, I brought the entire movie together: technicians, department directors, actors. We ran through the script: I would read the scene description and each actor would begin rehearsing his character from memory. I used this technique because I had very limited shooting time, as we all do in Mexico. The fact that my work with the actors was already "ironed out" allowed me to concentrate on the lights, the staging, the camera placement. Furthermore, because of their preparation, my actors were at ease, because they had two months of work under their belt. They weren't thinking, "Why isn't

the director paying any attention to me?” Another important advantage for the actors was that, with all this preparatory work, they were at ease, could improvise, and come up with all kinds of ideas. These are things that you either come up with spontaneously, while the film is rolling, or you never come up with it at all. For me as a director, it was a marvelous, extremely enjoyable way to work. I have to thank the actors a great deal because this process was only possible because of their commitment to the project, since I didn't have money to pay them for rehearsals. In the case of Evangelina, it was even more true, because she is the protagonist of the movie and also because she had to learn to breathe fire while perched on a trapeze, which is not easy. Without a doubt, in Evangelina's case, it was a tremendously demanding job.

### **Why did you choose Evangelina Sosa?**

Because I saw her in a play and she gave me exactly what I wanted: a very beautiful face, pure, innocent, glorious eyes, and at the same time, a very powerful hardness. Not only that, but Evangelina had the perfect figure for this role: the dear face of a clean, sweet, innocent, naive girl, but with a far more developed body. I very much liked the fact that her body was not like one of those *Vogue* or *Televisa* girls, but a more human body, more common, off the street. It is a body like all of us who live on the planet have, not that marvelous, precious thing of magazines, which you always see on the screen. For example, when she discovers that she is pregnant, you realize for the first time that she is not a little girl: her breasts are large, she has a belly. It was a fascinating paradox: a child with a woman's body. It is a body that is not only sexually developed but that has been abused, battered, hurt, that has gone through the wringer and experienced life.



# 7. Eva López-Sánchez

---

Eva López-Sánchez made her first short film in 1988. She is best known for her 1991 short *Objetos perdidos* and her 1993 feature, *Dama de noche*. The psychology of the couple interests López-Sánchez; her work explores topics such as memory, revenge, and the negotiation of intimate space within relationships.

López-Sánchez was born on January 24, 1954, in Mexico City. In 1972, she began studies in anthropology and history, but soon realized that she preferred to study film. Marriage and motherhood caused her to postpone her studies until 1986, when she took various courses at the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos. At the end of the same year she was admitted to the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica, from which she graduated in 1991.

During her first year at the CCC, López-Sánchez adapted the short story “No se asombre sargento” (“Don’t Be Astonished, Sergeant”) by Eraclio Zepeda for a short film, which she completed in 1988. In this movie, Julián must dig his own grave. To the surprise of the sergeant watching him, Julián is not afraid. Julián’s calmness is due to his already having reconciled himself with death after having lived through the death of his parents.

In 1988, López-Sánchez participated as an apprentice script coordinator on Busi Cortés's *opera prima*, *El secreto de Romelia*. In *La venganza* (Revenge, 1989), a school project begun that same year and finished the following year, she explored the psychology of resentment. This short fictional film resulted from a story that had captivated her as a child: that of Rafael "Yapo" Galeana, a boatman from the coast of Guerrero who was shot in the leg and left lame. Galeana searched for his assailant for years to get revenge. In *La venganza*, in a scene filmed in one continuous take, the assailant, Juan Osorio, shoots Galeana by mistake, believing him to be the person who had run off with his wife.

The following year, López-Sánchez returned to the story of Yapo Galeana to make a documentary. *Yapo Galeana* (1990) explores the boatman's need to "give back" what has been done to him to be at peace with himself. It is clear that Galeana cannot pardon the assailant who shot him by mistake. Galeana is only able to sleep again when, two years later, he kills Juan Osorio. *Yapo Galeana* was shown in the New York International Latino Film Festival (1991), the Bilbao International Festival of Short and Documentary Films (1991), and the International Festival of Short Films in Leipzig, Germany (1993).

In her fourth year, López-Sánchez filmed *Recuerdo de domingo* (A Sunday to Remember, 1990), in which two adolescents, Javier and Daniela, fall in love and then must separate. In this film, beneath what appears to be a simple love story is a complex analysis of memory. One Sunday before leaving for England, Javier takes some photos of Daniela. During the four years he is away, Javier doesn't correspond with Daniela, so the photos are the only images he has of her. Upon his return, Javier realizes that the image he had of Daniela doesn't match the person Daniela has become.

In her fifth year, López-Sánchez filmed *Objetos perdidos* (Lost and Found, 1991), the first thesis made at the CCC in 35mm. In *Objetos perdidos*, two travelers, Juan and Pilar, who do not know one another, mistakenly take each other's suitcases when they arrive at the station. They each try to contact the other to return the luggage but, as they have difficulty meeting, each begins to use the other's personal effects. This device becomes the means by which López-Sánchez explores how identity is negotiated within the intimacy of the couple.

*Objetos perdidos* received assistance from the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA) and the CCC. It was exhibited with great success in 21 festivals and won various prizes, among them an Ariel for Best Short Fiction Film (1992), a Silver FIPA at the International Festival of Audiovisual Programs in Cannes (1993); a Pitirre at the San Juan Film Festival in Puerto Rico for Best Short Fiction Film (1992); and a Unicorn at the International Film Festival in Amiens, France, for Best Short Fiction Film (1992). *Objetos perdidos* has been sold for television release in Sweden, Germany, and the United States.

After graduating, López-Sánchez adapted David Martín del Campo's novel *Dama de noche* (Lady by Night) for the screen. Her screenplay won the third *opera prima* competition at the CCC, allowing her to direct her first feature film. In *Dama de noche* (1992), Sofía has a married lover, Matute, who takes her on a trip to Veracruz. One day, while they are making love, Matute suddenly dies and Sofía, not knowing what to do, asks her friend Bruno for help. Bruno promises Sofía that he will get rid of Matute's body, but instead of doing so immediately, he first uses the dead man's credit cards to their limit and sells his jewelry. While Bruno is taking care of this "business," Sofía discovers Matute's body in the car and, feeling betrayed, commits suicide. In *Dama de noche*, López-Sánchez analyzes the possible consequences for a woman who doesn't take charge of her own life. *Dama de noche* was shown at various festivals:

The Muestra de Cine Mexicano in Guadalajara (1992), the International Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana (1993), the Chicago International Film Festival (1993), and the Edinburgh International Film Festival (1993). It won second prize in the Open Subject category in the Fideicomiso de Estímulo al Cine Mexicano (FECIMEX) competition in 1993, and was nominated for five Heraldos and five Ariels.

## **“There are things I write just for myself”**

**In your recollections of when you began school, you told me about a class with Ludwik Margules in which you realized the amount of work involved in studying film. You said, “I remember leaving very depressed and wondering how I was going to take care of my three small children, meet the school requirements, and fulfill my dream of making movies.” Later, you said that you dedicated *Objetos perdidos* to your children and your husband because without them “my dream of making movies would have gone up in smoke.”<sup>98</sup> Can you tell me a little more about why making movies is a dream?**

The possibility of entering film school one day and being able to tell a story through images was one of my life’s dreams. From the time I was a little girl I wanted to make movies, and the entire process that led me to believe it was possible to go to film school was like a dream come true. It wasn’t like saying, “I will enter kindergarten when I’m four and then I’ll enter college when I’m 18.”

I pursued this long-standing desire for about ten or twelve years. I have always said that I’ve lived my life backwards: people normally don’t get married at 18, they go to college. I decided to get married first because I wanted to go to Europe with my companion. Carlos didn’t even ask me, “Would you like to marry me?” He said, “I just got a scholarship. Would you like to go to London with me?” and I answered, “Well, of course! I’m going to London,” and left with the delightful ingenuousness of an eighteen-year-old. I arrived in London and took the examination to enter film school at the Polytech but, since I was pregnant, I told myself, “Alright, I’ll do it next year.” The following year I took the test again, they accepted me and told

---

<sup>98</sup> Personal communication.



me, “This year we are going to change the course of studies. We are going to switch from being a certificate program--I think that’s what it was--to a bachelor’s degree. The paperwork will take a year. So you have been accepted, but for next year.” Before I knew it, between pregnancy and paperwork, two years had passed and Carlos, my husband, had had time to finish his master’s. I asked him if we could stay another three years. I said to him, “Why don’t you do a doctorate? Do something, because I have to study.” To which he responded, “No. I have a commitment in Mexico.” Perhaps at that point I should have said, “No. I’m staying and getting my degree. It means the world to me.” But, because of our commitment as a couple, I didn’t. I gave in and said, “Alright, I’ll do it when we return to Mexico.” That’s why I said I’ve lived my life backwards: first I had my three children, then I went to school.

When Alfredo, the youngest, was five, I thought, “Now!” After a close call with death, I suffered a severe existential crisis and said to myself, “Alright, if I had died today, what would have happened?” And I thought, “My children would surely have missed me but, apart from that, I could have died and nothing would have happened. The world wouldn’t have missed me nor would I have missed anything either.” Following that, I began one hell of a process in which I questioned everything: my marriage, my position in life, etc. I asked myself, “As a person, what am I doing in life that is worthwhile?” I took a trip and when I returned, I decided to separate from my husband and enter film school. Again, my decisions were entirely unconscious because I never considered the practical issues. I never thought “How am I going to live tomorrow?” Rather, I grabbed my three children, packed my suitcase, and went to my mother’s house. Carlos thought, “Okay, she’s always been restless. Surely when she starts school it will all blow over,” and he was very understanding. It must have hurt him, but he said, “Alright, go and do it.” And I did.

When I arrived at the school, I registered for the competition. I remember clearly that it was a long process. You have to go through seven stages and in each stage you have to wait for the list to come out. When you see your name you say, “Yes, yes, I made it!” And the next stage, and the next stage and the next stage. There are many people in the world who want to make movies and film school openings are few. And of course, when the final list comes out and you see your name, well, what can I say? It’s the greatest possible accomplishment because you know that being accepted gives you access to that world you dreamed of having some day. There were only eleven of us in my class.

To discover that I could get along on my own, that I could do things just as I had dreamed them, and that my life could, from that moment on, begin to be worthwhile, was like being reborn. Every day I would get up thinking, “What I do today is important, perhaps not for the world”--since I believe that few people can say they have done anything transcendent--, “but for me.”

For me, making movies is to have my aspiration become reality on a daily basis and then have it become a dream once more. Every time I start a new project, I dream again and then turn my dream into reality. I tell my children that film is one of the few professions in which one can truly dream and make that dream a reality. It means that when you see the suitcases passing by on the belt at the airport one day, you can dream of creating a story about a lost suitcase. Then this dream gets more concrete: the days, the years pass, during which you keep on nourishing, nourishing, nourishing the idea of this suitcase. The process of thinking about and making films is like that of raising children: although they drain you and wear you out, they look like you and the reward at the end is to see them standing on their own feet. This “child” begins walking alone, takes you by the hand, and leads you far away. When I went to Japan with *Objetos*

*perdidos*, my “child,” and had to talk about the film, I experienced an incredible a feeling of fulfillment.

Film is a passion, it’s a dream, it’s something that fills your life, that seizes you, that makes you live, that makes you notice the quality of light every morning and what you saw as you passed by in the car. I found the path I wanted, what motivated me. All the reading I do, all the music I listen to, the painting I see--everything is surrounded by this desire to make movies, to make a well-rounded person who can express herself better and who, little by little, becomes something greater.

**When you began at the CCC, you met Busi Cortés, who was already a professor. Can you tell me what your first meeting was like?**

I met Busi in 1986, she was part of the selection panel of the CCC. One of the seven stages of selection was interviews in which you had to face an entire table full of inquisitors. Busi was one of the people questioning you. I remember that she was always very nice. Since she was the only woman, her support was important, because the interviewers raised the question of how I would handle the difficulties of being responsible for a family. I had three children and the people interviewing me wanted to know if I would be able to commit myself completely to the school’s tremendous schedule. I remember that Ludwik Margules said to me, “All right, suppose that one day you have worked very hard to get a location and one of your children gets sick. What would you do?” I responded, “Well, the great advantage of living in a country like Mexico is that one normally has family and other people with whom you can safely leave a child. If the moment came to make a decision like that, I believe I could deal with the situation.”

Knowing Busi was an important experience because she had already crossed the bridge of having children and going to film school. She had also attained what she considered an

achievement of her generation: to have made her first movie very quickly, to involve students in its production, and to have them work with members of the union. Once I started at the school, I had very direct contact with Busi. During my second year, she was my teacher; I did my first “professional” work with her. As a student, I worked on her *opera prima*, *El secreto de Romelia*, which was made under the auspices of the school. Many of us who worked on the film were students and we didn’t earn anything. My memory of these years is that Busi gave me a lot of support because she had a very good understanding of what it meant to spread yourself between two great loves. In truth, cinema tends to be a monogamous passion: it is jealous of your time and everything else. In the last stages of a project, the project becomes a veritable obsession; it takes absolute priority, and people can lose relationships because of it. And that’s the way it has to be. Otherwise, it would be almost impossible to take care of things because there are a multitude of small aspects you must be taking care of. The thousands of things you have to be managing in your head would overwhelm you. A friend told me that when you’re going to shoot a movie, your spouse should take your kids and move down to the floor below and come see you when you’re finished. That way, while your spouse takes care of your kids, you can devote yourself to the movie. Otherwise, it’s impossible. And I think he was right.

**Tell me some more about your opera prima project.**

Producing a feature-length film gives you access to the industry, even though you might still be in school. It’s an interesting project and, I believe, a unique one. In the schools that belong to CILECT (Centre International de Liaison des Écoles de Cinema et de Télévision), which is a world-wide association of film schools, students make short films, medium-length

films, and animated films, but not features. That is why the *operas primas* of the CCC and *El secreto de Romelia*, which was the first feature-length film the school made, are important.

**Was it Busi's idea to propose this project?**

It was the idea of a group. Busi and Gustavo Montiel--who was the CCC's director--had been classmates at the CCC. I'm not sure, but I think those who thought up the idea of the contest were the two of them and a few others. Well, to be more exact, *El secreto de Romelia*, because it was the first, wasn't part of a contest, but a contest was created later to which students and former students of the CCC could submit scripts. The winner of the contest made the movie. After Busi's feature, Carlos Carrera won with *La mujer de Benjamín* (Benjamin's Woman, 1991), then Francisco Athié with *Lolo* (1992), then I followed with *Dama de noche*. Then came *La orilla de la tierra* (The Edge of the Earth, 1994) by Fernando Ortiz, *Un hilo de sangre* (A Thread of Blood, 1995) by Erwin Newmaler, and *Por si no te vuelvo a ver* (If I Never See You Again, 1996) by Juan Pablo Villaseñor.

**Do all the school's students participate in the opera prima?**

No. The school lasts five years and the ones who are chosen are students from the second year because the third-year students are already working on documentaries. The second-year students are the most appropriate ones to participate in the filming because, as they have gotten a little training, they need more practice. To participate in a feature film allows the students to have direct contact with cinema as an industry. Each student says, "Alright, I'm going into photography," and that student works as the second, third, fourth, or fifth assistant to the cinematographer. Others say, "I'm going to go into editing, so I'll work on postproduction."

**What did you choose to do in *El secreto de Romelia*?**

Since I wanted to go into directing, I began work as an apprentice to the script coordinator, Lulú Álvarez. The script coordinator is the one who takes notes so that everything fits together properly when the movie is edited. For example, the script coordinator makes sure that when you lift up a cup, you're holding it at the same height as you were in the previous shot. This work requires an impressive ability to retain visual information. I chose it because I thought that was where I could learn the most. As a script coordinator, you find out what lens the cinematographer uses, what diaphragm he uses, what type of film, what make-up the actress has on, how she's wearing her earrings, her dress, her hair, etc. You have to take note of everything so that if a certain scene doesn't come out and a portion of the scene has to be reshot, it can be done under exactly the same conditions. I also liked the job of the script coordinator because it means you are always next to the director, which was the other thing I wanted: to be on the set next to the director when the scene was being shot, not off running errands. It was an absolutely wonderful experience. Lulú, very generously, taught me what she knew and I never felt any competition from her.

**Do you think the process of apprenticeship would have worked the same if Lulú had been a man?**

Lulú was a person who was very generous with her knowledge and perhaps gender didn't have much to do with it; although it could be that a desire to have more women in the movie industry might have been a factor in her caring. Now that I think about it, when I was already a director and made *Dama de noche*, the line producer --who was also the boss of the union section--told me, "This is the first time in my life I've worked with a woman director." It was

the first time in 35 or 40 years that he had worked with a female director! If you think about the reaction of the line producer, then maybe being a woman is significant. Within my class, or the graduates who grew up with another mindset, it might not be so significant, but in the union, maybe it is.

There's a big difference between the people from the schools and those from the union. Before, for someone to get into the union, somebody else had to die. People moved up, little by little, within the hierarchy of the union to be able to finally get a position. What happened with the film schools--as much with men as with women, but especially with women--was that we got certain positions because, in order to make some of the movies we made, we didn't have to belong to the union. For the men from previous generations, it was probably hard to accept women in the first place, and also to accept that they hadn't worked their way up. I think that Lulú somehow identified with the fact that I was a young woman still studying and who wanted to do the same thing she did. I am really grateful for her generosity when she told me, "It took me twenty years but I'm going to teach it to you in eight weeks of filming." She certainly had invested many years in her apprenticeship. In the end, I hope that it was also interesting for the union people to have worked with us. They must have realized that we weren't a bunch of dummies, but quite the opposite, that we really had a great desire to learn. They understood that they could teach us and that together we could make a movie.

**Did you only participate in making a movie in your second year?**

No, from your first exercise in school, you are making movies. The first exercise, which is called "La pelota" ("The Ball"), is an exercise to train students in moving a camera along different axes. It's a short story in which there are some children playing with a ball and some

other kids who steal it from them. It teaches you how to place the camera and swivel it without making mistakes. In video, mistakes don't matter because you can use a lot of material and switch cassettes many times. Afterward, you'll have a mountain of work looking at all those hours of shooting, but you can do it. On the other hand, with negatives, you can't allow yourself those luxuries. You're always looking for just the right moment because the film, the developing process, and the printing are very expensive. From the very beginning you learn that you have to be very careful with the material, that you have to practice, that you have know exactly what you want to say with the image so that, at the moment you say, "Roll it!" you won't have to do it in too many takes.

**Were you involved in movies directed by anyone else?**

From the first year, the director is a student; the movies are by the students. In the first exercise, the people studying to be cinematographers are in charge of photography, and the ones studying to be directors direct their classmates. In my first year, I made *No se asombre sargento*, a seven-minute short based on the story by Eraclio Zepeda. In that movie, for example, Rodrigo Prieto was my cinematographer. And since we understood each other from the very beginning he continued being my cinematographer for all of my student films, up through *Dama de noche*.

In contrast to our own films, when we worked on those of other classmates, we would rotate. Switching jobs is a very good idea because it allows you to try out other areas: production, filming, assistant directing, sound engineer, etc., and at the end, you can choose what you want to be. The CCC is not a school where you select right away; students and teachers gradually become aware of your strength and, in this way, each person begins to decide. It's a



different training than that offered by the union, where, from the beginning, you have to be much more decided and say, “I want to do production,” for instance.

**Let’s move on to your first 35mm film, *Objetos perdidos*, for which you won an Ariel in 1992 for Best Short Film. Tell me, what was the subject or subjects that you wanted to address?**

*Objetos perdidos* was quite a fun game. On the one hand, it gave rise to a love story in which Juan and Pilar deal with their own conflicts to some extent. Pilar leaves for the beach, thinks about her partner and returns with the conviction that she no longer loves her boyfriend. On the other hand, Juan and Pilar have an accidental and surprising meeting because of a switch in luggage: each mistakenly takes the other’s suitcase. What I was trying to do through this story was speak about the connection that is established between love and intimacy in the relationship of a couple. You know, I vividly remember the moment when Cecilia Toussaint, the actress playing the role of the protagonist, said to me, “Eva, I don’t understand that monologue and since I don’t understand it, I don’t know how to say it.” Right there, I explained how important it is that intimacy be given voluntarily. It’s important to realize that whether or not an act is voluntary changes the circumstances completely. It’s like solitude. Solitude is marvelous when you are looking for it, not when it takes you over or when it is forced on you by someone. If I choose today to stay here, within my four walls, happy as a clam, doing my thing, feeling fulfilled by whatever I enjoy doing--that’s very different from when someone leaves me. When you want to be with someone and that person doesn’t want to be with you, then you have a solitude imposed by the will of the other person.

Intimacy must be offered voluntarily and its limits must be respected. It's one thing to reveal my intimacy to you and another if someone comes and spies through a hole, remaining hidden. I wouldn't like anyone to spy on things I don't want them to know. There are things that I write to be read, there are scripts I write to be shown, but there are things I write just for myself. They are reflections, doubts, questions that intrigue me, emotional things that happen to me that take me over. They are such strong things that they are for me and me alone. But, if I want to share them with someone, that's different. Once I had a big, big problem with someone who read something I didn't want him to read. It bothered me because one thing is what you volunteer, the space you are willing to give, and another is violation. Violation only takes place when someone takes something of yours, knowing that it is a transgression of the rules you have established.

The relation between two intimacies can be a violation or an offering. You might say, "I'll open up these spaces that are very intimate, very personal, to you and you open up some spaces to me that are very, very personal." It's difficult to share that intimate space. Sometimes it takes years to understand simple things that are part of the emotional upbringing of each person. In my case, if you tell me something using five thousand words, I'll understand you. I don't like to argue, I don't like people to shout at me or violate me. I find this to be a very violent thing to do to someone; I like to talk. Other people shout quite happily and aren't bothered in the least. You have to have the wisdom to realize to what extent a person is sharing his or her intimacy, at what point it is being violated, and to what extent the other person wants you to enter into this piece of his or her life. Intimacy is a very important and a very difficult commitment. So when people who know each other get mad, what I can stand the least is that they bring up issues that were shared with them in that intimate space. That is truly a violation,

it's the lowest thing a human being can do. They wound you where they know an old injury lies, precisely because you opened up this space, you revealed your fragility.

**How does this idea of intimacy apply to the story of *Objetos perdidos*?**

In *Objetos perdidos* I talk about the limits of intimacy by means of a suitcase that gets lost. The idea came out of a personal experience that happened while I was traveling. I'd left my diary on the plane in the seat pocket in front of me. I was thinking about writing, but I bought a movie magazine and began reading it. The flight was very short and I left my diary in the seat pocket. I got off and when I was already on my way to the Austrian village I wanted to visit, I said to myself, "Oh, no! My diary!" My next reaction was to think, "Ah, but the diary is written in Spanish and they speak German here. At least nobody will be having a ball reading it."

When I wrote the script for *Objetos perdidos*, I expanded on my personal experience: I put the diary inside the suitcase. I thought that the possibility of a switch of suitcases could work very well to express the idea of intimacy I had in mind. Because after the anger you feel when someone gets confused and takes your suitcase, the first thing you want to do is get your things back. And, of course, you want to get them back even more if there are things inside that suitcase you don't want to show anyone. Specifically, in *Objetos perdidos*, I wanted to talk about intimacy in a couple's relationship. That's why, instead of just one suitcase being lost, I made it two. This allowed for an exchange to take place: Pilar carries off the intimacies Juan has recorded on his tape recorder and Juan takes the intimacies she has written in her diary. What follows is a process in which these intimacies are violated. Sure, if you find someone's suitcase and it has a tube of lipstick inside and you use it, that's a violation; if you find a letter and you

read it, that's even worse. That is covered under the law: you're not allowed to open other people's letters. *Objetos perdidos* begins precisely with a violation of intimacy, because you have no right to search through anybody else's personal belongings. We all have a right to our secrets. In *Objetos perdidos*, Juan begins, happily, with a cigarette. Later, he feels like it, he's cold, and so he puts on a sweater. These are basic things that can be justified, but then he finds the diary. Normally, if curiosity did not play a decisive role, nothing would happen, but in *Objetos perdidos*, curiosity kills the cat. The curiosity of both leads them to enter ever deeper into each other's lives, and in this way, they begin to fall in love.

It's easy to understand why they violate each other's intimacy: if you give me your diary today, tomorrow I will know more things about you than if we'd been friends for twenty or thirty years. It's like when someone peeks through a hole in the bathroom door. With that invasion, that enormous violation of intimacy, the person who is playfully looking through the peephole becomes connected to the other person, who is sitting there with his shorts at his feet. When Cecilia's friend Alicia asks her, "So, did you listen to his tape recorder?" Cecilia says, mischievously, that she did. When this scene occurs in the film, the viewer can think: "Wait a minute. It's one thing if they let you listen and another if you listen without asking permission." Finally, because of this violation of intimacy, a very specific situation is created. Pilar and Juan know so much about each other that they can't even talk. If Juan says, "Here's your sweater. I wrote you something in your diary," Pilar knows he's taken it out of the suitcase. And if Pilar says, "I recorded something on your tape recorder," he knows there was a violation. So, they can't say anything more than, "Hello." "Hello." "That's mine." "Okay." "Goodbye." There are no more words for fear that the violation might be obvious.

**Why were you interested in talking about intimacy?**

The intimacy I wanted to talk about is part of the relationship between couples at the end of this century. Before, one person in the couple would be like a gas that expanded and invaded everything. Meanwhile, the other person would remain within the volume of oxygen she or he managed to save. That is, there was one personality that invaded the relationship absolutely and the other person would submit. In the 1990s, people are attempting to change that situation. A woman friend of mine calls our modern search for intimacy, somewhat sarcastically, “the astronaut syndrome,” meaning that everyone wants their own space. The big goal for the end of this century, in my opinion, is the establishment of a balance so that people who are in a relationship understand the needs and space of the other. There is a huge difference between what I set as my priorities, what the other person sets as his priorities, and the spaces we share.

There are things people don't tell you until many years later. One day, something happens in the space they had wanted to keep for themselves, and they want to share it with someone else. And I think it's important to respect this individual decision about when is the right time; that's why I don't understand jealousy within a relationship. I feel that if there is complete surrender to a relationship, then jealousy has no reason to exist. It's like a hidden vice. I can share a great intimacy with you and tell you something hard as hell, something extremely difficult, extremely important that I didn't even realize was inside my head and that I don't want to share with my companion. One can have those moments of friendship and great fulfillment, of great closeness with other people, without necessarily taking anything away from the relationship of the couple.

You choose with whom you share the pieces of your intimacy and why, but that doesn't mean that you love one person more than another. The other day, someone died and someone else asked one of his children what the father's relationship with such-and-such woman had been

like. I thought, “It’s really a bad idea to ask that question.” I share a great trust with my children, but there are little things that my women friends know more about than my children do. They are very subtle things, much more intimate, even sexual matters.

**What was the public’s reaction to the ending of *Objetos perdidos*?**

After its premiere, as people left the theater, everyone asked me, “Why didn’t you let them get together?” I responded, “It wasn’t possible.” There are some things that are permitted--things that are done--, and other things, like rifling through the intimacy of another person’s belongings, that aren’t. Finally, one has all these questions from being brought up in this society. The only one who understands this in *Objetos perdidos* is Penélope, a woman who is sitting on a bench at the train station, knitting. First, she sees Juan arrive with the suitcase and wait for Pilar, and then Pilar and Juan meet. This woman knits and knits and knits at the train station because she has been waiting for her lover for years. She is us, she is the viewer who recognizes these two characters as being two lovers; even though they aren’t lovers, she recognizes them as such and smiles. She is looking at them through our eyes and she understands a little more clearly what they don’t understand.

**What is it that they don’t understand? That they’ve violated their respective intimacies because neither one was given access to that intimacy?**

Exactly: that they have stolen the intimacy of the other. Motivated, totally, by curiosity.

**But it isn’t seen as something negative in this case, is it?**

No, it’s not negative because the outcome is a love story. I wasn’t looking for a simple solution. In *Objetos perdidos*, that violation of intimacy provided them with the opportunity to

meet one another and to come to terms with themselves. A love story could have emerged, but it didn't because the love story was based on a violation of intimacy. It was impossible for them to admit that they had each violated the other's intimacy.

### **What, then, is love?**

Love implies an offering of intimacy; that voluntarily, you open that intimacy to somebody. There are moments when these two territories, what you share and what the other person wants to give, can partially touch, and it's fabulous. These moments when one voluntarily offers one's intimacy, however, are extremely rare. The opening of territorial space has to do with how much you want to commit yourself to sharing territories and to what extent you can play in this coming and going of intimacy. How many couples pay for two apartments because they don't want to lose the possibility of seeking refuge for a while in their other apartment? "Where are we going? Your house or mine? Where are we going to spend the night? At your house? At mine?"

When a couple has children, however, it often strengthens their desire to share a single life and space. Also, raising children is a process that makes you question aspects of that intimacy. You suddenly find yourself repeating phrases you were told as a child, and then you begin to wonder about the cultural baggage you've inherited: "What am I going to teach the person who is the most important person in my life? Are we going to teach him what you believe or what I believe?" If there's a good understanding and good discussion, you will certainly arrive at a compromise regarding what you're going to tell this tiny child. The raising of a child can end up being a projection of the couple's intimacy in which there is a sort of

adjustment of what is important. The result is a person who, on the one hand, looks like his father, but on the other, reacts like his mother. He's like two people rolled up in one.

**Do you know Dana Rotberg?**

I've known her since that fabulous documentary she did about Elvira Luz Cruz. She went through school long before I did. She'd already left when I began. She knew me through a seven-minute film shot in one continuous take I made called *La venganza*, which she saw at the Guadalajara festival. I liked her work a lot and she liked mine so much that later we developed a very close and intimate relationship, very affectionate. We've talked a lot since then.

**Let's move on to your first feature-length film, *Dama de noche*, your opera prima at the CCC. Tell me about the character Sofía. What makes her tick?**

Well, Sofía is a tragic character. From the beginning of the movie, you know she's going to die. Every decision she has made, not just in the time the movie takes place but throughout her life, has been a mistake. When you want to create a dramatic character, you create a set of premises that direct the character to the accomplishment of his or her dramatic purpose. Sofía is a dramatic character who must fulfill her destiny and, quite simply, the only thing I do is to move her life toward that tragic destiny. In *Dama de noche*, I didn't want to make a militant picture about unhappiness, but rather, to show Sofía's inability to act. Because throughout her life she has made the wrong decisions, she is now in such a state of rest that she has no fight left in her. At the beginning of the movie we see her suffering the consequences of not having fought. She is a weak character--no personality, no character, no strength.

One of the most important things I wanted to get across in the movie is that this tragedy could have been avoided. Tragedy can be a vicious circle from which you can't escape, but not



in all cases. For example, I'll give you a rather common case: a fourteen-year-old girl gets pregnant, she's kicked out of her house and, consequently, has to work as a prostitute. That is a tragic character. Yet, how many other women sleep around and don't have children! Or who have understanding parents and don't need to become prostitutes. Someone they know comes along, gives them a little job, and they keep going. Although the experience of getting pregnant might be the same, the outcome can be different. I believe that the outcome has a lot to do with the destiny one has to fulfill in life, and also with luck and personality, which are contributing factors.

**What is it that has led Sofía to enter into this tragic vicious circle from which there is no escape?**

The decisions you make lead you to your destiny. These people who put a rope around their own neck have always fascinated me. Why, if you didn't have any money, did you just buy a television set? Why in the world, if you can't afford to pay the rent, are you having a child? Then, of course, you see the person overwhelmed and exhausted. Sofía does just that: instead of hooking up with Bruno, with whom she had such a good time ever since they were teenagers at the university, she marries a man who beats her. She has a daughter, gets divorced, and goes off with an older man, Matute, because he takes care of her.

Matute is an ugly, fat, unpleasant lover who only wants her as a prostitute. He tells her in conversation, "The only thing you can do in your life is put on fashion shows." It's absolutely disgusting to talk to a person that way. Sofía puts up with these comments in exchange for a comfortable situation, for having a credit card and going on vacation once in a while. But in turn, Sofía defends herself against Matute by not showing him her intimacy. Although Matute would like to rent an apartment for Sofía, she won't go for it. She prefers to live with her

mother. She accepts not having her own space in exchange for being able to conserve a little piece of intimacy in which there is room for her daughter and Bruno.

On top of the mistaken decisions she's already made, the ones Sofía makes during the slice of life we learn about in the movie are mistaken as well. She decides to go with Matute to Veracruz and the guy dies. In a final attempt, she calls her close friend from the city to come and help her, but it's a bad decision. If, instead of calling Bruno, she had called the police, there would have been a scandal, Matute's wife would have found out that her husband had a lover, but there wouldn't have been a tragic ending. Here's another example. When she discovers the documents Bruno has been forging with Matute's name to drain his credit cards, if she had realized that Bruno was taking the money out for her rather than thinking he had betrayed her, she wouldn't have decided to take her life.

**I'd like to know what role Bruno has in this tragic world in which Sofía moves. Why doesn't Sofía trust Bruno?**

Because that's the nature of the character. Sofía is more prone to believe that people will treat her badly than that they will act toward her out of goodness. To provide a contrast to Sofía's lack of strength, I created the character of Bruno, who is her opposite: a dreamer, a cynic. They share a great affection and later on, identify with one another, because he really is in love with her and wants to save her. But Bruno doesn't know how to do it. He is led more by fantasy, by his fascination with the story of the knight in shining armor, the robber who protects the poor; so he doesn't realize that this woman is slipping from his hands. Bruno, instead of worrying about the future or using up the credit cards, could have said, "I'm holding on to you, we're getting on this bus, and we're going to Mexico City." He too begins to make all the wrong decisions. When Sofía questions him, Bruno says, "Don't you worry," and lies to her when he

adds, “I’ve already gotten rid of the body.” And of course, when Sofía discovers the body, she is sure that she’s been betrayed. Not only does she think he has lied to her, but also that he is probably going to leave her with no money and with the body. It is a totally understandable reaction given Sofía’s experience: she finds out the hotel bill hasn’t been paid even though she had asked Bruno to take care of it and really, the whole world comes crashing down around her. She’s already very upset, she’s exhausted, and at that moment, she loses the little reason she has left. If you add to her emotional state the fact that she finds Matute’s body in the trunk of the car, it makes sense that Sofía would believe she has the final proof she’s been betrayed.

### **And Bruno?**

Throughout the film, Bruno thinks he has been acting correctly and at the end, he believes that the money he has will be useful for something. But that’s not the way it ends up. He is the eternal dreamer, thinking that life is a fairy tale or a cowboy story, like the ones he writes. Even at the moment when Sofía dies and he realizes she’s dead, he wants to recapture her through Salomé, the prostitute, by transforming her into Mirna O’Hara, a fictitious character he has created for the stories he writes.

### **Returning to the character of Sofía, you said that in some cases it is possible to escape from this tragic destiny. How does one do so?**

I think that, partly, it’s a question of personality. Certain women lack strength and must search for it. The character I created and the character that the novelist David Martín del Campo created lack strength for different reasons: his due to misogyny, and mine because of an interest in the lack of strength, in the weak personality. I wanted to show that the simple solution--not thinking, having an easy lover--is always going to exist. Yet if you want to change your destiny

in life, you must have the strength to pick your pieces up off the floor and say, “Where did my heart go? Where did my stomach go?” and try to reconstruct yourself and start fighting again. All human beings--some in a more noble, easier, more pleasant fashion, others in a more disagreeable way--experience a situation in which they must say, “Wait a minute. You are all expecting this of me, and it’s true that I had father who beat me, but I also have the ability, the energy, and the dignity to say: ‘I can do this and I’m getting on with my life.’ ”

Although you’re always going to come up against adversity and it’s easy to become depressed, that internal force can achieve anything in your life. There are people who don’t have that suicidal spirit in their makeup. Despite those moments when you say, “The easy way out would be to kill myself.” No! One has to work, one has to fight, one has to overcome, and one also has to know how to drag oneself across the floor. “A time in hell” was never bad for anyone. It also makes you grow as a person, it gets you moving forward again. There are always more noble, more dignified, more edifying ways out for your character, although they might be more difficult because they require greater strength.

One of the most important things I wanted to do with *Dama de noche* was to talk about the reasons why a person might think she doesn’t have that strength. At times, the reason for acting in a certain way is the family. When you have children and economic needs, the very act of thinking about how to resolve the most basic needs can lead you to feel weighed down. Another is upbringing, above all in Mexico. Women’s upbringing makes them think their possibilities are limited. Men, on the other hand, are made to think that they have all the possibilities in the world. That seems like a terrible mistake to me!

**Do you mean to say that society gives your life a certain determinism and if you have a passive character and let yourself be led by that determinism, you will come to a tragic end,**

**but that you also have the capacity to choose and sufficient internal force to change the course of your destiny?**

I believe so. I exemplify this idea with the character of Sofía. Sofía is sinking, sinking, sinking into a depression that is so severe that it almost immobilizes her. It is something that, up to a certain point, can be observed in the rhythm of the movie. Sofía hardly goes out of her room, she is practically inert, her ability to fight is almost lost. When she decides to move, when she makes the decision to get in the car, it's nothing more than to hasten her own death. She's already so submerged in her own destiny that she has already killed herself in her mind and that's why she ends up committing suicide. Through her, I wanted to show that if you don't do anything, it can become too late. Sofía lets herself be led and when she decides to make a decision, it's already too late, so it's the wrong decision. To call even more attention to that mistaken decision and her lack of strength, I put Sofía with her daughter, who is a reason for her to live. If I had put Sofía alone, her lack of willpower would have been more understandable, but when you know that her daughter is waiting for her, it's more obvious that she has no strength. She can no longer see ahead, she doesn't see that another day is going to dawn. Some of the people I know who have survived suicide attempts will tell you that there's a time when you feel there is no other way out.

**Yes, but instead of creating a character who transforms herself, you prefer to leave this type of reflection to the viewer, don't you?**

Exactly. For example, once, when we were having lunch in Guadalajara, a woman came out of the movie bathed in tears and said to me, "You don't know how grateful I am for this movie, because I lived through something very similar." That day I thought, "How lovely to

have made that movie!” With all its errors and its virtues, there's still a time when you say, “Someone in that theater was able to experience, relive, or feel something.”

**Let's move on to another topic: actresses. Why did you select Cecilia Toussaint to play both of your female protagonists?**

You know, that's a very interesting question. I chose Cecilia for *Objetos perdidos* because I went to a rock concert and when I saw her on stage, I thought, “What strength that woman has! What projection! How she radiates a personality of knowing what she wants in life! How she moves, how she handles the audience, how she makes them feel things!”

Cecilia is a rock singer and the music she sings is composed by Jaime López, by Pepe Elorza, and by Marcial Alejandro--by many people, but most of all by Jaime, who writes very aggressive, urban lyrics. There is one called “Viuda negra” (“Black Widow”), which goes something like this, “I'm going to bite you, I'm going to poison you, I am going to kill you, after we make love.” It shows the very strong personality of a woman who manipulates men. I really liked all that projection on the stage. I didn't even know she had played some roles in movies I had seen.

After the concert, I looked up her phone number and called her. She told me, “Come over to my house right this instant and we'll talk.” Although I hadn't met her before, as soon as we started talking, I liked her a lot. She was known for being pretty difficult, but she wasn't that way with me. Since our chat was very pleasant, we identified with each other quite a bit and I asked her, “Does the script interest you?” and Cecilia told me, “I'll call you tomorrow.” The next day, when she called me, she said, “I liked it a lot. Yes, I'll do it.” But, because she was a little surprised that I'd chosen her, she also added, “Are you sure you want to work with me? Because I'm not an actress.” I told her, “Look, I'm sure I can direct you; you be sure that I can

too. You can project on screen what I saw in the concert if we know how to do it.” We began working together and I really liked how the character turned out in *Objetos perdidos*. But the story didn’t end there. The work with Cecilia that began with *Objetos* continued with another, totally different project in *Dama de noche*, in which we deepened our already existing friendship.

As I got to know Cecilia, I realized that there were other aspects of her personality that were different from the ones she projected on stage. It was very interesting because in *Dama de noche*, we tapped into the other side of Cecilia, which is the weak character, Sofía. I don’t mean to say that Cecilia is like Sofía--not at all. What I want to suggest is that actors, by drawing on their personal experience, are able to show emotions that are, perhaps, the opposite of the ones that characterize them. We human beings are multifaceted and contradictory; we have as much good as bad, as much strength as weakness. I liked being able to see the other side of Cecilia in *Dama de noche*. The producers, and even Rodrigo, the cinematographer, had their doubts. I said, “As far as I’m concerned, the actress we are seeking for the role of Sofía is Cecilia, but I could be mistaken. Let’s call in actors and have them try out for the role of Sofía to see if Celia really is the one, because I don’t want to be wrong either.” After the casting, we were all convinced that Cecilia was perfect for the role.

The same thing happened in the case of Regina Orozco, who played Alicia, Pilar’s friend, and then played Salomé, the prostitute in *Dama de noche*. Everyone wanted a pretty woman, a typical prostitute. I had all sorts of beautiful girls in to do screen tests and I said, “No, no, I want Regina.” Rodrigo and everyone else told me, “No way. What are you thinking? Forget about it!” We didn’t go wrong with Regina either. I was very pleased with her work; she did an extraordinary job playing that role. The movie is as it is with Regina and would have been something else without her.

**Let's move on to another topic: Do you believe that the commercial nature of film limits your interests and your creative power? Do you feel you have to modify your works to make them commercial?**

I have felt completely at liberty to tell stories. I believe that my responsibility is to tell stories. I try to make sure the story I am telling has an identity and that it is well narrated, so people find it interesting. But it isn't a matter of seeking commercial viability. What interests me is that the story be well structured, that it be relevant, that it be contemporary, that it speak about me, that it speak about my country, that it address the issues I am experiencing. That it be interesting is the important thing, not that it be commercial.

I believe I must concern myself with telling something that exists within me. My basic concern is to be able to tell a story that helps me to better understand the world, and that it also be a story that, I hope, might help other people understand the world. There is a satisfaction when you succeed in capturing the viewer, but it isn't monetary. The fascination lies in capturing the viewer's attention through the story you want to tell. For example, the other day I was asked to speak about the movie business to a group of students about to graduate from high school. When I arrived to give the lecture, I saw that the audience was composed of some fifty eighteen-year-old kids, and I realized they might get bored and start doodling, or maybe, if I captured their attention by telling them how passionate I am about my work, some of them might end up becoming directors. That idea captivated me, and I think it captivated them as well.

But, of course, one must also keep reality in mind. One is always thinking about the possibility of making another movie and one must take into account the condition of the film industry and its lack of economic resources. I would be lying if I said I didn't think to myself, "I hope that the story is good and that I can make another movie in order to tell another story." The



truth is that we live in a capitalist world where success is measured by awards won, by acceptance. Also, it's very important for the producers that they recoup their money from the movie they've invested in. Even though it might be just to make another movie!

**To finish up, now that you're well established in the professional film world, can you evaluate the effectiveness of the training you received at the CCC in preparing you to enter commercial cinema?**

I believe that the school, without a doubt, helped me enter the film industry. That's where I made *Objetos perdidos* and my *opera prima*. The CCC made it possible for me to be everything I am now by giving me the economic possibility to make these movies, to tell these stories. With the movies, I won awards that gained me a certain recognition, which now allows me to show up at a production company with a letter of introduction and show them my résumé. So I would indeed say that my ability to make films is due, on the one hand, to my formal training at the CCC and, on the other, to the opportunities the school gave me to make films. Now I have a cinematic body of work I can show outside the school.

# Epilogue

---

Since the interviews in this book were conducted, the five women interviewed have continued to direct films. When looking at the feature films they have made since 1995, several questions arise: Have the conditions of production changed as far as state cinema is concerned? If so, has the change been beneficial or detrimental for women directors? To answer this second question requires that we first clarify what is meant by beneficial or detrimental. Can we conclude that the period was beneficial if the directors were able to continue to make films? Or should we be more specific and look at what kinds of films they were able to direct?

The implementation of NAFTA in 1994 represented the culmination of a substantial economic and political shift in Latin America. Beginning in the 1980s, as García Canclini writes, with the international economic crisis and the internal difficulties of the region's democratic governments, developmentalist proposals begin to fade and are substituted by neo-conservative ones.<sup>99</sup> As he predicted, this shift has had important implications for cultural policy. The economic measures that went into effect in cinema in the mid-1990s reduced the amount of

money invested in culture, subjected the production of cultural goods to the laws of the market, and reduced the state's responsibility in cultural matters. Whereas in the period covered by these interviews the primary role of state cinema was to intervene in the symbolic field and produce cultural products that questioned and elaborated on social structures, the production of cultural goods now began to be looked at with a free market philosophy, in which cultural areas that do not render revenues tend to be reduced or eliminated. Efforts were concentrated in cultural products and events for large mainstream audiences, such as television, while experiments in the arts--and especially those with limited audiences--were not funded.<sup>100</sup>

In 2003, the government of President Vicente Fox proposed to dissolve and liquidate the state's apparatus for cinema, including IMCINE, Estudios Churubusco Azteca and the CCC.<sup>101</sup> The film community reacted strongly against Fox's proposal; in an article entitled "Fox's Threat," Carlos Vargas argued that Mexico needs a national cinema.<sup>102</sup> While the state apparatus was not dismantled in 2003, there has been a strong tendency towards the privatization of the symbolic field, paired up with the accumulation and concentration of capital in monopolies and in transnational investments.<sup>103</sup> It would be misleading, however, to stress the role of privatization without specifying the type of privatization that has taken place from 1995 to the

---

<sup>99</sup> García Canclini, "Políticas culturales y crisis socioeconómica" 38-46.

<sup>100</sup> According to García Canclini, "Según las nuevas leyes monetaristas, se suprimen las acciones no rentables y los eventos que no se autofinancien como el teatro, la música y las artes plásticas, especialmente en su parte más experimental. Se concentra la producción cultural en los grandes eventos de interés masivo" (45).

<sup>101</sup> This proposal appeared in the Fox administration's budget proposal for 2004, announced on November 7, 2003.

<sup>102</sup> Vargas, "La amenaza foxista."

present. From the 1940s to the 1990s, traditional private producers made numerous low-budget films geared toward a low-income national audience; in fact, private producers represented the majority of the Mexican film industry.<sup>104</sup> Today's neo-liberal private producers, represented by production houses such as Altavista, play a different role in that they make high-budget films designed to compete with Hollywood films in a free market economy, and are geared primarily toward an international middle-class audience. Traditional private producers still exist, but women filmmakers in general, and specifically the filmmakers that I have interviewed, do not work with them. They do however work with neo-liberal private producers, who in their majority endorse the mainstream values of the market. Under these conditions, filmmakers can produce films with mainstream values, but they have limited opportunities to continue with the challenging work of 1989-1994.

Despite the decrease in the production of Mexican films after the sale of Películas Nacionales and COTSA and the 1994 devaluation of the peso, whose effects lasted for several years, the women interviewed in this book have each produced at least one feature since 2000. In 2000, Maria Novaro made *Sin dejar huella* (Without a Trace), a road movie about Aurelia, a maquiladora worker and mother of two, and Ana, a Spanish art dealer specialized in Mayan art. In this film Novaro uses the genre of the road movie to present an overview of Mexico in the twenty-first century, with its maquiladoras at the border, indigenous insurgents in Mayan

---

<sup>103</sup> According to García Canclini: "'Para enfrentar la crisis, las corrientes neoconservadoras reorganizan el modelo de acumulación, eliminan las áreas ineficientes del capital (las estatales y las privadas más débiles) y buscan una recuperación de la tasa de ganancia mediante la concentración monopólica de la producción y su adecuación al capital financiero transnacional" (39).

<sup>104</sup> See the interview with Joscowicz in chapter one.

Yucatán and mega-tourist complexes in Cancún. At the same time, she explores a relationship between two women whose complexities include self-interest and treason.

The next year, Guita Schyfter made *Las caras de la luna* (The Faces of the Moon, 2001), a comedy about five women who meet in Mexico City in the 1990s to be jurors at the Third Annual Latin American Film Festival. Schyfter uses the international women film festival as a space through which to highlight the diversity among women's experiences during the 1970s; Argentinean Shosh (who lost her family during the Dirty War) and Uruguayan Julia (who spend 13 years in jail for being a militant) lived through periods of severe state repression, while US feminist and film theoretician Joan did not. Schyfter thus proposes that these diverse backgrounds, which in her view are often not taken into consideration, were an important part of women's identities in the 1990s.

Overcoming seven years of obstacles, Dana Rotberg directed *Otilia Rauda* (also called *La mujer del pueblo*) in 2001. Rotberg adapted Sergio Galindo's homonymous novel and made a film about a woman whose body attracts men but whose disfigured face repels them. As a way of containing Otilia's appeal, her father marries her off to a police officer who despises and verbally abuses her. Rotberg uses the abusive emotional environment in which Otilia lives as a platform from which to understand her obsessive love and projection on bandit Rubén Lazcano. *Otilia Rauda* is a reflection on love and idealization that questions whether love is, after all, but a projection.

In 2002, Eva López-Sánchez directed the melo-thriller *Francisca*<sup>105</sup> about a deserting East European secret agent who searches for refuge in Mexico in the aftermath of the 1968

Tlatelolco massacre. López-Sánchez's film uses the life of the secret agent as a way to explore moral decisions in political situations.<sup>106</sup> Helmut Busch has to choose between his life or the loyalty to the students he teaches at the UNAM. Coincidentally, *Francisca*'s release took place at a time in which the disclosure of classified materials about Tlatelolco implicated former president Luis Echeverría in the massacre. In this light, Busch's moral choices can be seen as a way to indirectly discuss the choices members of the 1968 government took about Tlatelolco.

Finally, in December 2004, Busi Cortés began filming *Las Buenrostro*, an extension of her 1979 student film *Las Buenromero*. The Buenrostro family--a grandmother, three daughters and a grandchild-- runs a nursing home in a desolated provincial town in northern Mexico. The three generations have survived by killing residents of the nursing home and falsifying their documents so as to inherit their money. One of the daughters lives in Mexico City, where she takes care of the financial side of the "business." Cortés recreates a world run exclusively by women in which women have created their own laws. At the same time, the film contrasts quiet provincial life with the bustling life of Mexico City.<sup>107</sup>

Unlike many of the directors' previous films, these films are well distributed on video and DVD and can be easily purchased. The internet has made available not only the films, but also information about the filmmakers, enabling them to reach a wider international audience. Yet at the same time, the possibilities of using film as a medium through which to discuss

<sup>105</sup> In an interview with López-Sánchez by the author in 2003, the director referred to her film as melo-thriller, a combination of melodrama and thriller. *Francisca* is also known as *¿De qué lado estás?* (*Which Side Are You On?*).

<sup>106</sup> Brought up in a presidential family, López-Sánchez has always been interested in politics and political decisions, as shown by her critical documentary about president Carlos Salinas de Gortari, *El hombre que quiso ser rey* (*The Man Who Wanted to Be King*, 1999).

<sup>107</sup> This description is tentative since, at the time of writing, *Las Buenrostro* is still in postproduction.

national or gendered identity have decreased, when compared with the films produced during 1988-1994. According to film critic Jorge Molina Merino, for example, the typical film of 2001 “does not propose new things, isn’t transcendent, and is especially out of touch with the social reality of the country.”<sup>108</sup> Molina Merino concludes his review by saying that the cinema is no longer fulfilling its role, which he relates to the discussion of Mexico’s social reality. As García Canclini fears, in private hands the arts become a medium through which to repeat an elitist or folklorized version of national identity. With García Canclini, I believe that withdrawal of the state from funding cultural projects represents a threat to the autonomy of the symbolic field.<sup>109</sup>

The privatization of funding for film production directly affects filmmakers, who lose ground in terms of deciding the way in which to approach their topics. The transnational, privatized industry of today has little space for authorial perspectives and reduced interest in producing films that challenge stereotypes. The conflicts that Dana Rotberg had with her producer during the making of *Otilia Rauda*, although anecdotal, illustrate the conditions under which women made films during this period. Rotberg had strong disagreements with producer Alfredo Ripstein over the editing and length of her film, and sued Ripstein for not acknowledging her as co-script writer. In protest of what she considered to be a loss of her decision-making power as a director, Rotberg refused the prize the film won at the Muestra de

---

<sup>108</sup> Referring to recent cinema in general, Molina Merino says: “Ciertamente, el cine mexicano está viviendo un nuevo momento en su historia, una especie de resurgimiento que se caracteriza por una buena factura y un gran potencial comercial que, sin embargo, también padece de cierta ligereza, con algunas honrosas excepciones . . . Este nuevo cine mexicano, en su afán de ser productivo, olvida ser propositivo, trascendente, y sobre todo, comprometido con la realidad social del país; sin duda, una de las grandes responsabilidades que el cine, como todo arte, debe de tener” (“Nadie te oye” 12).

<sup>109</sup> García Canclini 44.

Cine Mexicano en Guadalajara in 2002.<sup>110</sup> Rotberg's struggle is symptomatic of a context in which the director's authorial role is increasingly subservient to the demands of the producers, with their eyes on the bottom line.

In a context in which the role of film as entertainment has increased, dependence on the market becomes an obstacle to critical perspectives. Nevertheless, filmmakers have used different strategies to overcome such limitations. In a way that shares similarities with periods of strong political censorship, filmmakers sometimes disguise challenging issues as a marginal subtext. For example, in *Sin dejar huella*, under an apparently innocuous and funny road narrative Novaro brings in the murders of women in Ciudad Juarez (in a short sequence when Aurelia is watching TV) and the EZLN insurgency in Chiapas (when Aurelia says that her boyfriend is Subcomandante Marcos). Alternatively, some filmmakers have avoided the expensive productions which create a dependence on the values of private producers, and instead make films in the "free lunch" style of the late 1980s and early 1990s. With *Perfume de violeta* (Violet Perfume, 2000) Marisa Sistach was able to create a challenging film by working within a reduced budget, using a small crew and shooting in 16mm. The varied strategies used to enter the film industry, the challenging work of these filmmakers during 1988-1994, as well as their more recent efforts to work under adverse cultural conditions, suggests that Mexican women directors will continue to find ways to make films that raise issues of gender and that keep in touch with Mexico's changing social reality.

---

<sup>110</sup> Columba Vértiz cites a letter written by Rotberg in which she explains that she refused the prize as a protest of the violation of her rights as autor: "Desafortunadamente no puedo suscribir la película que han premiado, debido a los múltiples atropellos de los que hemos sido objetos tanto la película misma, y en primer lugar, así como yo en calidad de autora y directora de la misma por parte de los productores así como de las instituciones oficiales que



---

supuestamente debieran regir la honorabilidad de la producción cinematográfica en Mexico”  
(Vértiz 71).

# List of Terms and Abbreviations

---

*ACE* A prize awarded by New York's Asociación de Cronistas de Espectáculos (Association of Entertainment Reporters).

*Ariel* A prize awarded annually by the Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes Cinematográficas (the Mexican Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences).

*BNC* Banco Nacional Cinematográfico (National Film Bank). A government-sponsored bank that provided loans to the film industry, created in 1942 and liquidated in 1979. It was a holding corporation of production, distribution, and exhibition companies.

*CCC* Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica (Film Training Center). A film school belonging to IMCINE. Located at the National Art Center in Mexico City. Founded in 1975; still in existence.

*CONACITE* Corporación Nacional Cinematográfica de Trabajadores y Estado I y II (National Film Corporation of Workers and the State, I and II). State-run production companies

created during the Echeverría sexenio. CONCITE I was closed down in 1977 and CONACITE II in 1990.

*CONACULTA* Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (National Arts and Culture Council). Government agency overseeing the arts and cultural production. IMCINE is part of CONACULTA.

*CCC* Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica. A film school that is part of IMCINE. Created in 1975 and existing at present.

*COTSA* Compañía Operadora de Teatros, Sociedad Anónima (Theater Operator Company, Inc.). One of the largest exhibitors of commercial Mexican films. Founded in 1947, COTSA at one time controlled half of the exhibition market. It was bought by the state during the Echeverría sexenio, then sold to private producers in 1993.

*CUEC* Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (University Center for Film Studies). An independent film school belonging to the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City. Founded in 1963; still in existence.

*Diosa de Plata* (Silver Goddess). A prize awarded by PECIME, the Asociación de Periodistas Cinematográficos Mexicanos (Association of Mexican Film Journalists).

*FECIMEX* Fideicomiso de Estímulo al Cine Mexicano (Fund for the Encouragement of Mexican Cinema). An organization whose members include the STPC and IMCINE. Awards cash prizes to filmmakers, including Eva López-Sánchez for *Dama de noche* in 1993.

*FFCC* Fondo de Fomento a la Calidad Cinematográfica (Fund for the Promotion of Film Quality). A government institution founded in 1986 to promote quality cinema. The FFCC functions by loaning money to producers (or often, to producer-directors), and was especially important during the Salinas sexenio. Still in existence.

*FONCA* Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (National Fund for Culture and the Arts). A state agency that supports the arts, including cinema.

*Heraldo* A prize awarded by the Mexico City newspaper *El Heraldito de México*.

*ILCE* Instituto Latinoamericano de la Comunicación Educativa (Latin American Institute for Educational Communication). Created in Mexico City in 1956 as an organization to improve education through the use of technology and audiovisual media. In 1978, ILCE became an international organization when 12 other Latin American countries joined.

*INAH* Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (National Anthropology and History Institute). Government agency responsible for archeological sites, museums, research, and other activities in the fields of anthropology and history.

*IMCINE* Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (Mexican Film Institute). The most important institutional co-producer of quality cinema during the Salinas *sexenio*. Created in 1983 as part of the RTC; became part of CONACULTA in 1989. Still in existence.

*INBA* Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (National Fine Arts Institute). Governmental agency overseeing many facets of arts production, exhibition, and education, including museums, publishing, performing arts, and other activities.

*Muestra de Cine Mexicano in Guadalajara* An important festival showcasing Mexican film, held each year in March. Organized by the Centro de Investigación y Enseñanza Cinematográfica at the Universidad de Guadalajara.

*Opera prima* (first work) A director's first feature-length film, usually made in 35mm. Also the name of a program at the CCC in which graduates compete for the chance to make their *opera prima* at the school as a collaboration between students and union workers.

*Películas Nacionales* (National Films) A major private distribution house. During the Echeverría sexenio, the state bought ten percent of its stock. It went bankrupt in 1991 due to internal fraud.

*PRI* Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutionalized Revolutionary Party). Mexico's ruling political party, which controlled the presidency from its founding in 1946 until its electoral defeat in 2000.

*RTC* Dirección General de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía (General Directorate of Radio, Television and Film) The agency that regulates mass media. IMCINE (see above) was part of the RTC between 1983 and 1989.

*SEP* Secretaría de Educación Pública (Secretary of Public Education).

*Sexenio* The six-year presidential term in Mexico.

*STIC* Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Cinematográfica (Film Industry Workers Union). Between 1919 and 1945, a union which represented all workers in the film industry. In 1945 the union split, and the STIC came to represent only people making shorts and documentaries.

*STPC* Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica (Film Production Workers Union). After the STIC (see above) split in 1945, this union represented people making feature-length films.

*UNAM* Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico). Mexico's largest university, located in Mexico City.

*UTEC* Unidad de Televisión Educativa y Cultural (Educational and Cultural Televisión Unit). Television production company belonging to the SEP.

# Filmography

---

## Guita Schyfter

1979-80: Television series *Telesecundaria*, Channel 4.

1980-81: Twenty documentaries on the history of Mexico for the National Archive.

1983-84: Documentary series about Mexican artists, *Los Nuestrros*, produced by UTEC and

Channel 11: “Rufino Tamayo,” “Vicente Rojo,” “Luis Cardoza y Aragón,” “Cavernario Galindo,” “Héctor Mendoza.”

1986: *Los caminos de Greene* (Greene’s Roads)

pr: State government of Tabasco, Department of Agriculture; d: Guita Schyfter; sc: Hugo Hiriart; ph: Mario Luna; m: Joaquín Gutiérrez Heras; s: Carlos Aguilar; a: Martín Aylett, Alejandro Parodi, Eduardo Caña, María Rojo.

1990: *Xochimilco: Historia de un paisaje*, (Xochimilco: History of a Landscape)

1991: Documentaries:

*La fiesta y la sombra, retrato de David Silveti*, (David Silveti, Portrait of a Bullfighter)

and *Tamayo a los 91 años* (Tamayo at 91)

1992: *Novia que te vea* (Bride to Be)

pr: IMCINE, FFCC, Arte Nuevo; d: Guita Schyfter; sc: Hugo Hiriart, Guita Schyfter; ph: Toni Kuhn; ed: Carlos Bolado; s: Salvador de la Fuente; a: Claudette Maille (Oshi), Maya Mishalska (Rifke), Ernesto Laguardia (Saavedra), Angélica Aragón (Oshi's mother), Verónica Langer (Rifke's mother), Mercedes Pascual (Grandmother Sol), Pedro Armendáriz, Jr. (Saavedra's father); du: 90 min. Color.

1995: *Sucesos distantes* (Distant Events)

pr: IMCINE, Arte Nuevo, Cooperativa Conexión, Universidad de Guadalajara, Fondo de Fomento para la Cultura y las Artes; d: Guita Schyfter; sc: Hugo Hiriart, Guita Schyfter, Alejandro Lubezki; ph: Carlos Marcovich; ed: Sigfrido Barjau; m: Eduardo Gamboa; s: Salvador de la Fuente; a: Angélica Aragón (Irene), Fernando Balzaretti (Arturo), Emilio Echevarría (Viktor Fet), Abraham Stavans (Doctor Mazur), Martha Verduzco (theater director), Jesús Ochoa (Hércules), Jorge Zarate (Aburto), Claudette Maille (woman in factory); du: 99 min. Color.

## **Busi Cortés**

1979: *Las Buenromero* (The Buenromero Sisters)

pr: CCC; d: Busi Cortés; sc: Busi Cortés; ph: Fernando Pardo; ed: Fernando Pardo; m: José Amozurrutia; a: Eduardo López Rojas (political candidate Florentino López Lira), Alma Levy (Refugio), Rubén Cristiani (sexton), Cecilia Pérez Grovas (Josefina), Teresa Álvarez Malo (Matilde), Gonzalo Celorio (painter); du: 29 min. b/w.

1980: *Un frágil retorno* (A Fragile Return)

pr: CCC; d: Busi Cortés; sc: Busi Cortés, based on the story “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin; ph: Fernando Pardo; ed: Fernando Pardo; a: Julieta Egurrola (Elia), Ángeles Castro (Silvia), Luis Rábago (Luis); du: 20 min. b/w.

1981: *Hotel Villa Goerne*

pr: CCC; d: Busi Cortés; sc: Busi Cortés; ph: Antonio Díaz de la Serna; ed: Sonia Fritz; m: José Amozurrutia; a: Luis Rábago (Eligio), Rosa María Bianchi (Mina Márquez), Judith Arciniega (Argénida), María del Carmen Cárdenas (Fernanda); du: 50 min. Color.

1983-84: Television series *De la vida de las mujeres* (On Women’s Lives)

Script: “La cirquerita” (The Little Circus Performer”) and “Toña.” Direction: “Las rumberitas” (“The Little Rumba Dancers”), “Alfonsina,” “Amor de radio” (“Radio Love”), “La mujer de Nicolás” (“Nicolás’s Woman”), “Fuera máscaras” (“Masks Off”) and “La niña robada” (“The Abducted Girl”).

1984: *El lugar del corazón* (The Heart’s Place)

pr: CCC, Universidad Iberoamericana; d: Busi Cortés; sc: Consuelo Garrido, based on the story by Juan Tovar; ed: Fernando Pardo; m: José Amozurrutia; ph: Marcelo Iaccarino and Roberto Menéndez; a: María del Carmen Cárdenas (Nelly Chávez), Valentina Leduc (Cecilia Téllez), Berenice Manjarrez (Aurora Albornoz), Muni Lubezki (Guillermo Esponda); du: 30 min. Color.

1988: *El secreto de Romelia* (Romelia’s Secret)

pr: FFCC, CCC, Consejo de Radio y Televisión de Tlaxcala, Universidad de Guadalajara and Conacite II; d: Busi Cortés; sc: Busi Cortés, based on the novella *El viudo Román* by Rosario Castellanos; ph: Francisco Bojórquez; ed: Federico Landeros; m: José Amozurrutia; a: Diana Bracho (Dolores), Pedro Armendáriz, Jr. (Don Carlos), Dolores



Beristáin (Doña Romelia), Arcelia Ramírez (young Romelia), Nuria Montiel (Romi), Alina Amozurrutia (Aurelia), María del Carmen Cárdenas (María), Lumi Cavazos (Blanca), Alejandro Parodi (Don Rafael); du: 100 min. Color.

1991: *Serpientes y escaleras* (Snakes and Ladders)

pr: FFCC, IMCINE, Producciones Romelia; d: Busi Cortés; sc: Busi Cortés, Carmen Cortés, Alicia Molina; ph: Francisco Bojórquez; ed: Federico Landeros; m: José Amozurrutia; a: Héctor Bonilla (Gregorio), Diana Bracho (Adelaida), Arcelia Ramírez (Valentina), Lumi Cavazos (Rebeca), Bruno Bichir (Raúl); du: 90 min. Color.

## María Novaro

1981: *Lavaderos* (Wash-houses), *Sobre las olas* (Over the Waves), *De encaje y azúcar* (Of Lace and Sugar)

1982: *Conmigo lo pasarás muy bien* (You'll Have a Real Good Time with Me), *Querida Carmen* (Dear Carmen)

1983: *7 A.M.*

1984: *Una isla rodeada de agua* (An Island Surrounded by Water)

pr: CUEC; d: María Novaro; sc: María Novaro; ph: María Cristina Camus; ed: María Novaro; s: Silvia Otero, Luis Schroeder; a: Mara Chaves, Silvia Otero, Conchis Arroyo, Carolina, Yolanda Ocampo, Chenchá and Alejandro Marín; du: 28 min. Color.

1987: *Azul celeste* (Sky Blue)

pr: Dirección de Actividades Cinematográficas UNAM; d: María Novaro; sc: María Novaro; ph: Santiago Navarrete; ed: Luis Manuel Rodríguez Bermúdez; s: Claudia

Argüello; a: Gabriela Roel (Laureana), Cheli Godínez (Chelo), Carlos Chávez (man on truck), Gerardo Martínez (Edmundo Garza); du: 28 min. Color.

1989: *Lola*

pr: Macondo Cine-Video, Televisión Española, Conacite II, Cooperativa José Revueltas; d: María Novaro; sc: Beatriz Novaro, María Novaro; ph: Rodrigo García; ed: Sigfrido Barjau; m: Gabriel Romo; a: Leticia Huijara (Lola), Alejandra Vargas (Ana), Martha Navarro (grandmother Chelo), Roberto Sosa (Duende), Mauricio Rivera (Omar), Javier Torres Zaragoza (Mario), Cheli Godínez (Dora); du: 92 min. Color.

1991: *Danzón*

pr: Macondo Cine-Video, IMCINE, Televisión Española, FFCC, Tabasco Films, State government of Veracruz; d: María Novaro; sc: Beatriz Novaro, María Novaro; ph: Rodrigo García; ed: Nelson Rodríguez, María Novaro; m: Danzonera Dimas de los Hermanos Pérez, Pepe Luis y su Orquesta Universitaria, Danzonera Alma de Sotavento, Manzanilla y el Son 4, Marimba la Voz de Chiapas; a: María Rojo (Julia), Carmen Salinas (Doña Ti), Blanca Guerra (La Colorada), Tito Vasconcelos (Susy), Víctor Carpinteiro (Rubén); du: 96 min. Color.

1992: *Otoñal* (Autumnal)

pr: CONACULTA, IMCINE, DIDECINE; d: María Novaro; sc: Dharma Reyes; ph: Lucía Holguín; ed: Sigfrido Barjau; s: Antonio Diego; m: Adalberto Ayala Martínez; a: María Rojo, Miguel Ángel Rodríguez, Delia Casanova, Alicia del Lago; du: 6 min. Color.

1994: *El Jardín del Edén* (The Garden of Eden)

pr: Macondo Cine-Video, IMCINE, Verseau International, Universidad de Guadalajara, FFCC; d: María Novaro; sc: Beatriz Novaro, María Novaro; ph: Eric A. Edwards; ed:

Sigfrido Barjau; m: various; a: Renée Coleman (Jane), Bruno Bichir (Felipe), Gabriela Roel (Serena), Rosario Sagrav (Elisabeth), Alan Ciangherotti (Julián), Ana Ofelia Murguía (Juana), Joseph Culp (Frank); du: 104 min. Color.

## Dana Rotberg

1985: *Elvira Luz Cruz: pena máxima* (Elvira Luz Cruz: Maximum Sentence)

pr: CCC; d: Dana Rotberg, Ana Díez Díaz; sc: Dana Rotberg, Ana Díez Díaz; ph: Eduardo Herrera; ed: Dana Rotberg, Ana Díez Díaz; s: Juan Pablo Villaseñor; du: 46 min. Color.

1989: *Intimidad* (Intimacy)

pr: Producciones Metrópolis; d: Dana Rotberg; sc: Leonardo García Tsao, from the play by Hugo Hiriart; ph: Carlos Marcovich; ed: Oscar Figueroa; m: Gerardo Batiz; a: Emilio Echeverría (Luis), Lisa Owen (Tere), Ángeles González (Marta), Álvaro Guerrero (Pedro), Juan José Nebreda (Tony), Ana Ofelia Murguía (Mother Quintanilla); du: 100 min. Color.

1991: *Ángel de fuego* (Angel of Fire)

pr: IMCINE, Producciones Metrópolis, FFCC, Otra Productora Más; d: Dana Rotberg; sc: Dana Rotberg, Omar Alain Rodrigo; ph: Toni Kuhn; ed: Sigfrido Barjau; m: Ariel Guzik; s: Nerio Barberis; a: Evangelina Sosa (Alma), Lilia Aragón (Refugio), Roberto Sosa (Sacramento), Noé Montealegre (Noé), Mercedes Pascual (Josefina), Alejandro Parodi (Renato), Salvador Sánchez (Rito), Farnesio de Bernal (Lidio), Marta Aura (Marta), Gina Moret (Malena); du: 90 min. Color.

## Eva López-Sánchez

1988: *No se asombre sargento* (Don't Be Astonished, Sergeant)

pr: CCC; d: Eva López-Sánchez; sc: Eva López-Sánchez, based on the story by Eraclio Zepeda; ph: Rodrigo Prieto; ed: Eva López-Sánchez; m: José González Márquez, Ricardo Pérez Montfort; a: David Villalpando (Julián), Agustín Silva (Don Chon), Paco Rabell (doctor); du: 7 min. Color.

1989: *La venganza* (The Revenge)

pr: CCC; d: Eva López-Sánchez; sc: Eva López-Sánchez; ph: Rodrigo Prieto; ed: Eva López-Sánchez; a: Salvador Sánchez (Rafael "Yapo" Galeana), Adalberto Parra (Juan Osorio), Heriberto del Castillo (bartender); du: 7 min. Color.

1990: *Recuerdo de domingo* (A Sunday to Remember)

pr: CCC; d: Eva López-Sánchez; sc: Eva López-Sánchez; ph: Jorge Medina; ed: Eva López-Sánchez; a: Simón Guevara (Javier), Mariana Lecuona (Daniela), Delia Casanova (Daniela's mother), Marta Aura (Javier's mother), Emilio Ebergenenyi (Javier's father), David Villalpando (Juan); du: 27 min. Color.

1990: *Yapo Galeana*

pr: CCC; d: Eva López-Sánchez; ph: Rodrigo Prieto; ed: Eva López-Sánchez; s: Bruno Bichir; du: 17 min. Color.

1991: *Objetos perdidos* (Lost and Found)

pr: CCC, CONACULTA; d: Eva López-Sánchez; sc: Eva López-Sánchez, Jorge Medina; ph: Rodrigo Prieto; ed: Eva López-Sánchez; m: José Elorza; a: Cecilia Toussaint (Pilar), Daniel Giménez Cacho (Juan), Ana Ofelia Murguía (neighbor), Ernesto Gómez Cruz (Professor Robles); du: 27 min. Color.

1993: *Dama de noche* (Lady by Night)

pr: IMCINE, CCC; d: Eva López-Sánchez; sc: Eva López-Sánchez, based on the novel by David Martín del Campo; ph: Rodrigo Prieto; ed: Eva López-Sánchez, Hubert Barrero; m: José Elorza; a: Rafael Sánchez Navarro (Bruno), Cecilia Toussaint (Sofía), Miguel Córcega (Matute), Regina Orozco (Salomé), Salvador Sánchez (Diego), Boris Peguero (Elpidio), Abel Woolrich (fisherman poet), Bruno Bichir (veterinarian); du: 100 min. Color.

#### Abbreviations

a: Actors  
du: Duration  
d: Director  
ed: Editor  
m: Music  
ph: Photography  
pr: Producer  
s: Sound  
sc: Screenplay  
b/w Black and white

# Works Cited

---

## Books and Articles

- Arredondo, Isabel. "From Transparent to Translucid: Cuban Filmmakers in 1990." *Latin American Literary Review* 49 (1998): 25-38.
- . " 'Tenía bríos y, aún vieja, los sigo teniendo': Reflexiones y entrevista a Matilde Landeta." *Mexican Studies/ Estudios Mexicanos* (2002): 189-204.
- Ayala Blanco, Jorge. "La mirada femenina." *La disolvencia del cine mexicano entre lo popular y lo exquisito*. Mexico, D.F.: Grijalbo, 1991. 461-511.
- García Canclini, Néstor. "Políticas culturales y crisis socio-económica." *Políticas culturales en América Latina*. México, D.F.: Grijalbo, 1987. 23-53.
- García Riera, Emilio. *Historia documental del cine mexicano*. Mexico, D.F.: Era, 1969.
- Hershfield, Joanne , and David R. Maciel. "Women and Gender Representation in the Contemporary Cinema of Mexico." *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1999. 37-48.

- Iglesias Prieto, Norma, and Rosa Linda Fregoso, eds. *Miradas de mujer: Encuentro de cineastas y videoastas mexicanas y chicanas*. Tijuana and Davis, CA: Colegio de la Frontera Norte and Chicana/Latina Research Center, University of California at Davis, 1998.
- Maciel, David R. "Cinema and the state in contemporary Mexico, 1970-1999." *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1999. 193-97.
- Martín, Lucrecia, and Cecilia Pérez-Grovas. "En tierra de machos: Encuesta a las estudiantes de cine." *Cine* January-February 1980: 31-35.
- Millán, Margara. *Derivas de un cine femenino*. Mexico, D.F.: Programa Universitario de Estudios de Genero, 1999.
- Perez Turrent, Tomas. "Angel de Fuego y otros asuntos." *Dicine* 46 (1992): 5-7.
- Rashkin, Elissa. *Women Filmmakers in Mexico: The Country of Which We Dream*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001.
- Sipl, Diane. "Al Cine de Las Mexicanas: Lola in the Limelight." *Gender, Theory and Cinema in the Third World*. Ed. Diana Robing and Ira Jaffe. Albany: State University of New York, 1999. 33-66.
- Torres San Martın, Patricia. "La investigacion sobre el cine de mujeres en Mexico." *Horizontes del segundo siglo: Investigacion del cine mexicano, latinoamericano y chicano*. Ed. Patricia Torres, Julianne Burton-Carvajal, Angel Miquel. Guadalajara and Mexico, D.F.: Universidad de Guadalajara and IMCINE, 1998. 39-44.
- , ed. *Mujeres y cine en America Latina*. Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 2004.
- Trelles Plazaola, Luis. *Cine y mujer en America Latina: directoras de largometrajes de ficcion*. Rıo Piedras, Puerto Rico: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1991.

Vargas, Carlos. "La amenaza foxista." *El ojo que piensa: Revista Virtual de Cine*

*Iberoamericano* 4 August 2003 <<http://www.elojoquepiensa.com>>.

Vértiz, Columba. "Dana Rotberg y Alfredo Ripstein, en disputas legales: Las visicitudes del

filme 'La mujer del pueblo (Otilia Rauda).' " *Proceso* 7 July 2002: 70-71.

## Newspaper Reviews

AFP. "Danzón, de México, salva el honor del cine latino en Cannes." *La Afición* 12 May 1991:

26.

Albarrán, Jairo Calixto. "Lola (mas no la trailera)." *Excélsior* 26 November 1989: 4.

Ayala Blanco, Jorge. "María Novaro y la Dificultad de Ser a la Deriva." *El Financiero* 22

November 1989: 82.

Barbachano Ponce, Miguel. "Reflexiones sobre nueve películas." *Excélsior* 26 November 1989.

Barriga Chávez, Ezequiel. "Lola." *Excélsior* 30 November 1989: 59-A.

Bonfil, Carlos. "Lola." *La Jornada* 21 February 1991: 41.

Cato, Susana. "Y el vituperio de los críticos 'Lola' y 'Goitia' entre el elogio." *Proceso* 4

December 1989: 48-50.

Celín, Fernando. "Lola." *El Semanario* 3 December 1989.

Coria, José Felipe. "Lola." *unomásuno* 24 November 1989.

Feliciano, Enrique. "Surge la cuarta directora de películas." *Esto* 11 January 1989.

Gallegos, José Luis. "Ángel de Fuego es una obra importante en el cine latinoamericano

contemporáneo," *Excélsior* 24 April 1992.



Johnson Celorio, Rodrigo. "María Novaro demuestra con *Lola* la calidad." *El economista* 22

November 1989: 29.

Mam, Yehudit. "La semana en la muestra." *La Jornada Semanal* 10 December 1989: 6.

Marín Conde, Eduardo. "Lola." *El Nacional* 25 November 1989.

Martínez Diez, Luis Ángel. "María Novaro y el buen cine mexicano." *El Sol de México* 15 July

1990: Cultura 1.

Molina Merino, Jorge. "Nadie te oye." *Público* 22 June 2001: Ocio (supplement) 12.

Murúa, Sara. "Lola, la reivindicación femenina en filme mexicano." *El Nacional* 24 November

1989: Espectáculos 5.

Pérez Turrent, Tomás. "'Lola': retrato femenino de una estudiante del CUEC." *El Universal* 10

February 1991.

Pixel, Juan. "Lola (México)." *ESTO* 25 November 1989: 17+.

Rodríguez Pineda, Arturo. "El snobismo de la Muestra Internacional de Cine." *Excélsior* 26

November 1989: 4.

Vega, Patricia. "El filme *Lola* una propuesta emocional ante la depresión." *La Jornada* 11 April

1990: 27.

---. "Lola." *La Jornada* 24 November 1989: 41.

Velázquez, Carolina. "La idea de la película *Lola* es mostrar los lados oscuros de la maternidad,

indica su directora María Novaro." *El Financiero* 24 November 1989: 83.

Viñas, Moisés. "Lola." *El Universal* 26 November 1989: Espectáculos 1+.