

'A kind of bliss, a closing eyelid, a tiny fainting spell': *Zama* and the lapse into colour

Thirty minutes before the end of Martel's *Zama*, there is a 'stunning, almost blinding' cut which has been compared to the iconic cut 'from stone age to space age' of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.¹ *Zama* cuts from the eponymous protagonist's interview with the latest Governor, tightly framed against the backdrop of a brownish-grey rock, to a wide open panoramic shot of bright green vegetation in intense sunlight against a turquoise sky (see fig. 1), the first time either of these colours have featured in the palette of the film, which in its first part has been dominated by faded ochres and pinks, and in a middle section by nocturnal sequences, browns and greys. It is not only that different, brighter and more intense colours are used here and in the final third of the film, but also that the use of colour itself becomes much more noticeable. The cut signals a temporal and spatial shift, and the beginning of the third and final section of the film which takes the protagonist and a band of men, led by Capitán Parrilla, into the hot, swampy forests of the Chaco and away from the relative predictability of life on the outskirts of the colonial city. The way the colour palette shifts over the course of the film echoes Diego de Zama's psychological development, from the relative stability given by his status in the early part (muted ochres, dusty reds, the deep blue of the interiors of aristocratic dwellings), to increased depression, confusion and delirium brought about by his gradual exclusion from power in the middle part (greys, blacks, browns, nocturnal sequences). In the final third, intense and bright colour evokes a new stage of delirium, as Diego de Zama, dispossessed of his former position of *Corregidor* (magistrate) and its trappings, is left no choice but to join Parrilla's expedition into the wilderness of the Chaco. Charged by the authorities with capturing a legendary bandit, its members also represent the crazed mentality of those who, here on the extreme periphery of empire, still ventured in vain pursuit of riches.

This chapter argues that a consideration of the use and meaning of colour is vital to the analysis of *Zama*, a film in which intense colour is used to challenge the subjective and corporeal boundaries of the white, male colonial position, as well as to inflect its enunciatory position with a subaltern voice. Colour is a neglected area in film theory and criticism, as has been noted by scholars who, from the mid 2000s, have begun to correct this tendency.² Everett argues that colour is excluded from the 'process of meaning making' or ignored in a series of canonical and field-defining studies in film theory and semiotics,³ whilst Peacock suggests this theoretical and critical neglect may be due to the fact that colour is 'non-representational' or that it 'resists critical classification'.⁴ Colour is part of the imagistic, excessive or aesthetic aspect of the image which has traditionally been viewed as separate from or antagonistic to the realms of ideas and meaning by Marxist-influenced film theories

¹ The quotation in the title of this essay is from Barthes, R. (1986), 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper', in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 157-76, p. 166. References in this sentence are to Gemünden, G. and S. Spitta. (2018), 'I was never afraid: an interview with Lucrecia Martel'. *Film Quarterly*, 71: 4, pp. 33-40, p.35. In *Zama* the cut in question occurs at 1: 19: 14.

² See Dalle Vacche, A. and B. Price (2006), *Color: The Film Reader*, New York: Routledge; Everett, W. (2007), *Questions of Colour in Cinema: From Paintbrush to Pixel*, Oxford: Peter Lang; Peacock, S. (2010), *Colour*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; and Brown, S. et. al. (2013), *Colour and the Moving Image: History, Theory, Aesthetics, Archive*, New York: Routledge.

³ Everett, W. (2007), *Questions of Colour in Cinema: From Paintbrush to Pixel*, Oxford: Peter Lang, p. 17.

⁴ Peacock, pp. 2-3.

which have tended to align ‘the potential to speak philosophically or socially’ with visual austerity, and thus to neglect colour, amongst other ‘decorative’ elements.⁵ As Galt argues, these tendencies in film theory echo the *disegno-colore* debates in art history, in which line is associated with the intellect and colour with emotion, and with ‘the troubling sensuality of the image’.⁶ In his book *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor argues that the opposition between line and colour encodes and conceals many other oppositions.⁷ Tracing the prejudice against colour through Western philosophy, art history and cultural theory, he shows how Western culture is characterised by a fear of the corrupting or contaminating potential of colour, how the preoccupation with the containment of colour by line and form is expressive of social and cultural anxieties about race, gender and sexuality, and how colour’s association with Otherness – feminine, queer, oriental, primitive – is accompanied by a tendency to devalue or diminish its significance through its association with the cosmetic and the superficial.⁸ On the one hand, ‘colour is regarded as alien and therefore dangerous’, on the other ‘it is perceived merely as a secondary quality of experience, and thus unworthy of serious consideration’.⁹ Perhaps it is a little embarrassing to give serious thought to something as seemingly trivial, as cosmetic, as colour?

Michael Taussig’s discussion in *What Colour is the Sacred?* echoes Batchelor’s main contentions, in particular the idea that ‘Chromophobia is a “habit” of Western society’, and one which ‘maintains itself through [...] techniques of the body’.¹⁰ He delves in particular into the case for colour as a ‘colonial subject’:¹¹ bright colours are associated with the tropics – he notes the evocative similarity between ‘color’/ ‘colour’ and ‘calor’/ ‘heat’ –¹² as well as with colonised peoples, and with modes of being – childlike, primitive, quick-spirited – associated with those peoples by colonial power and Eurocentric discourses.¹³ He cites the discourse on colour in Goethe, who wrote that ‘men in a state of nature [...] uncivilised nations and children have a fondness for colours in their utmost brightness’, whilst (European and North American) ‘people of refinement had a disinclination to colours’.¹⁴ Taussig is particularly concerned with the ways in which colour operates to break down subjective and corporeal boundaries, and especially the boundaries of the masculine, white, colonial subject, a subject which, as Richard Dyer has argued, is characterised by a sense of *boundedness*, clear boundaries being, for Dyer ‘characteristic of things white’.¹⁵ Taussig is interested in colour as a potential means of overcoming/undoing these boundaries, and thus a source of both anxiety and potential pleasure. Colour acts as a magical ‘agent of metamorphosis’¹⁶ and is associated with narcotic effects, with pleasure, sensuality, and loss of control. For William Burroughs, in the *Yagé* state: ‘all defences fall, everything is free to enter or go out, a beautiful blue substance flows into me. You come face to face with reality shorn of these lovely categories with which culture

⁵ Galt, R. (2011), *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 183.

⁶ Galt, *Pretty*, p.183.

⁷ Batchelor, p.29.

⁸ Batchelor, p. 23.

⁹ Batchelor, p. 23.

¹⁰ Taussig, M. (2009), *What Colour is the Sacred?*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, p. 12.

¹¹ Taussig, p. 159.

¹² Taussig, p. 5.

¹³ Taussig, p.5.

¹⁴ Cit. Taussig, p.3.

¹⁵ Dyer, R. (1988), ‘White’, *Screen*, 29: 4, pp. 44-65, p. 51.

¹⁶ Taussig, p.8.

so conveniently provides us for thinking straight and being straight'.¹⁷ In his book *Chroma*, Derek Jarman notes that 'In antiquity, colour was considered a drug (*pharmakon*)',¹⁸ whilst for Barthes intense colour is akin to '[A] kind of bliss [...] like a closing eyelid, a tiny fainting spell'.¹⁹ As Batchelor argues the movement into colour is often imagined as a fall, a descent, as in perhaps the most famous passage from black and white to colour in the history of cinema, Dorothy's fall into technicolour in *The Wizard of Oz*.^{20 21} As the insistent Shepard tones of its soundtrack remind us, *Zama* is also the story of a fall, of 'una conciencia que se abisma'²² and with the protagonist's repeated attempts to resist his inevitable fall.

Taussig studies the diaries of Malinowski in New Guinea, showing how he 'found in colour [...] an escape from the prison of Standard Western Subjectivity'²³ a means of 'opening up [...] the bodily unconscious' but also pursued strategies for 'keeping the sense of the white body intact, no matter how hot and humid the meltdown, no matter how wonderfully disorienting the light', as a means of maintaining colonial authority.²⁴ The more muted colour palette in the early part of *Zama* parallels the protagonist's and colonial administration's more successful attempts to shore up that authority. In the 18th century in this region, attempts to protect ethnic boundaries – to keep the 'white' body intact – included 'repeated efforts [...] to assign each racial subgroup to specific occupations and a fixed rank', while 'intermarriage among the castes was frequently forbidden'.²⁵ Shoring up colonial authority was all the more urgent for *americanos* like Diego de Zama, born not in Spain but in the New World, whose claim to superiority and power was thus more tenuous. For Walter Mignolo, this group, when it surfaced, was 'already outside of history', placed 'between the limits of humanity (Indians and Africans) and humanity proper (Europeans)'.²⁶ The repeated commercial and financial crises of the 17th and 18th centuries in this relatively backward corner of the Spanish Empire led to a reduction in size of the white ruling caste, which increasingly shed whites of lower social status or those who lost political battles.²⁷

Attempts by Zama to reinforce his elite status give the film some of its comic moments, such as when he waxes lyrical to Luciana Piñares de Luenga, the wife of the Ministro de la Real Hacienda (Treasury Minister) and object of Zama's romantic attention, on the subject of Russian furs, carpets and princesses, only to be told curtly that 'Europe is best remembered by those who were never there' ('Recuerda más Europa el que nunca estuvo'). Zama and others attempt continually to shore up his position in the colonial administration with excessive, anxious repetitions of his title, 'el Corregidor' (for example to announce his arrival

¹⁷ Cit. Taussig, p. 62.

¹⁸ Jarman, D. (1994) *Chroma: A Book of Colour*. London: Vintage, p. 38.

¹⁹ Barthes, R. (1986), 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper', in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical essays on Music, Art and Representation*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 157-76. 166

²⁰ Batchelor, p. 39.

²¹ Fleming, V., dir. (1939), *The Wizard of Oz*, USA: MGM.

²² Bernini, E. (2017), 'El hundimiento: a propósito de *Zama* de Lucrecia Martel', *Kilómetro III*, 14-15. Available at: <http://mariaclaradiez.com/km111/el-hundimiento/>. Accessed 2 April 2020.

²³ Taussig, p. 92.

²⁴ Taussig, p.94.

²⁵ Rock, D. (1987), *Argentina 1516-1987: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, p.59.

²⁶ Mignolo, W. (2005), *The Idea of Latin America*, Oxford: Blackwell, p.4.

²⁷ Rock, p.38.

or entry), recalling the stylings of the theatre of the absurd.²⁸ Just as the authority of men and other dominant groups is mocked in Martel's earlier work,²⁹ Zama is continually mocked by those around him, including women, indigenous people and slaves, and sees his subordinates and rivals succeed in obtaining or usurping the power and positions he views as his. Even animals, it seems, can upstage Diego de Zama, as in the much-commented moment in which his receipt of the devastating news of his rival's transfer to his own desired location, the city of Lerma, is interrupted by a stray llama wandering into the frame.³⁰

As these moments of mocking and contestation of Zama's authority suggest, the project of shoring up his elite status and colonial power is ultimately unsuccessful; indeed, the film as a whole as well as Zama's personal trajectory are best read as means to demonstrate the extent to which (colonial) domination and submission are never complete. Whilst the film ostensibly references 'the narrative structures that belong to the continuing saga of the white man's search for identity' which, as Jean Franco argues,³¹ tend to underlie narrative fiction films depicting the colonial era – such as those she examines, including *The Mission* (1986)³² which is also set around the Paraguay/Argentina border – in fact, the positing of Diego de Zama as a protagonist should itself be understood as part of the joke, since the film ultimately effects, through its narrative and aesthetics, an overturning or deconstruction of (his) white male colonial power and hegemony, as well as of his protagonism. The expedition Parrilla leads in the third part of the film takes the men far from colonial settlement and into the wilderness, where they are captured by an indigenous group. Colour, composition and mise-en-scène shift radically here, with the advent of vivid greens already mentioned, which, when the Indians appear, are punctuated with the bright reddish-orange of their painted bodies, another colour thus far missing from the film's palette (fig. 2). Red-orange and green, which provide a strong contrast to one another, are the dominant colours in the last part of the film. Here, the relationship between ground and figure shifts, too, as human bodies which have in the previous parts of the film been separate from bodies of water (this occurs in exemplary fashion in the film's opening shot, in which Diego de Zama stands erect, proprietorial, on the banks of the River Paraguay, and cuts a figure reminiscent of Friedrich's *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog* (1818), thus evoking 'high' European culture and that painting's combination of mastery of the landscape and Kantian self-reflection) (fig. 3) now merge into the swamps through which they wade (see fig. 1). The white soldiers' bodies first begin to merge with the landscape, and are then captured by the red-painted Indians who use colour and painting to instigate a further challenge to the boundaries of white bodies, in a strange, enigmatic and highly sensorial sequence which is crucial to the challenging of colonial power, the dissolution of colonial corporeality, the creation of the film's decolonial voice.

²⁸ Although 'corregidor' may be translated as 'magistrate' for the purposes of describing Zama's role in the colonial administration at the moment of the film's setting, it refers also to his prior military role as 'corregidor de indios', that is, a commander who enforced colonial power structures onto indigenous populations.

²⁹ Martin, D. (2016a), *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 16.

³⁰ Reviews and academic work on the film frequently discuss this moment. See, for example, Gemünden and Spitta, p.34; and Galt, R. (2019), 'Learning from a llama and other fishy tales: anticolonial aesthetics in Lucrecia Martel's *Zama*', in C. Grant and T. Cox-Stanton (eds.) *The Cine-Files*, 14, 'Beast Fables', <http://www.thecine-files.com/issue14>. Accessed 2 April 2020. pp. 5-7.

³¹ Franco, J. (1993), 'High-tech primitivism: the representation of tribal societies in feature films', in J. King, A.M. López and M. Alvarado (eds.) *Mediating Two Worlds. Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, London: BFI Publishing, pp. 81–94, p. 83.

³² Joffé, R., dir. (1986), *The Mission*, UK, France: Warner Bros.

After the sequence in which they are captured by the Indians, we cut to a dungeon-like, dark, enclosed space, in which Parrilla's men appear to be interrogated by the tribe.³³ The nature – function, layout – of the interior space in this sequence is highly ambiguous, and much of what little information we do obtain comes from sound, especially since the naked red bodies of the captives and the Indians are tightly framed and take up most of the frame, blocking much of our view of the space, and suffusing the frame with red. We hear the sound of trickling water, and the movement of bodies seems to generate the sound of wading, whilst the naked bodies of both groups appear to be wet. This dampness and liquidity is a common motif in Martel's work, signifying mutability and the transgression of boundaries.³⁴ Esther Allen calls this sequence the 'steam bath',³⁵ and remarks on the 'straight walls and heavy, clanging doors',³⁶ while Bernini identifies the sound of a guillotine.³⁷ Martel's work frequently aims to create such a lack of certainty about what we are seeing and hearing, a technique she borrows from horror. Fear and threat, but also sensual pleasure, are suggested here; as well as the threats associated with interrogation, there are allusions to ritual, ceremony, and eroticism, as the damp and wet bodies of the white men are painted red, daubed, pummeled and massaged by the indigenous people. One soldier, Gaspar Toledo, lies back in seeming ecstasy under their touch as his body is painted red. His engulfment by colour seems to be experienced as intense pleasure, recalling the 'insidious non-Western sensuality' which Batchelor argues is associated with intense colour in Western thought and art theory.³⁸ It is Gaspar Toledo, a shapeshifting and ambiguous character who speaks in both Spanish and Portuguese, and who later announces himself as Vicuña Porto, the very bandit the troupe of soldiers is charged with finding, to whom the reddish hue clings the longest; after the soldiers are released, the colour wears off most of them, but Toledo/Porto remains red-hued until the end.

The 'steam bath' sequence presents, then, a scene of active and obvious colouring, of painting, as if the film were meditating on its own status as coloured, or would-be coloured artefact. Like some earlier sequences in the film, it lends itself to interpretation as a dream or hallucination, the culmination of the many threats to the protagonist's psychic, and now physical, integrity: uncanny confusions of self and other, reality and imagination. The low lighting, and profusion, confusion and layering of the red-painted bodies of both groups in the background and foreground of the frame creates a composition in which the boundaries between bodies are indistinct. The indigenous, who have until this point often been seen nearer to the edges of the frame, here overtake the image, and this overtaking is accompanied by the engulfing of the frame by the red colour of their bodies (see fig. 3), which alludes to colour's potential to overwhelm or annihilate, and which happens at no other point in the film. This moment is Zama's (and *Zama's*) ultimate descent into colour – a dream,

³³ The sequence in question runs from 1: 29: 46 to 1: 31: 18.

³⁴ See Martin, *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel*, pp. 106-121.

³⁵ Allen referred to the sequence in this way in an interview as part of 'The Film Comment Podcast', published by Film at Lincoln Center. Available at: <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/film-comment-podcast-lucrecia-martels-zama-2/>. Accessed 17 March 2020.

³⁶ Allen, E. (2018), 'The Crazy Euphoria of Lucrecia Martel's *Zama*', *New York Review of Books*, April 14. Available at: <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/04/14/the-crazy-euphoria-of-lucrecia-martels-zama/>. Accessed 2 April 2020.

³⁷ Bernini (2017).

³⁸ Gage, cit. Batchelor, p.29.

nightmare, lapse, undoing or uprooting of self, a fall into the space and the body of the other, the native, the non-white. As line and form become more difficult to discern, as the subordination of colour to the rule of line is overturned, so is the intactness of the white male colonial body, and so are the colonial project's imperatives to contain, demarcate and control.

Paraguayan art critic and ethnographer Ticio Escobar writes of the 'obsession with colors'³⁹ of the Chamacoco indigenous of Paraguay, who frequently paint their bodies a number of colours, including using hematite to produce a bright red.⁴⁰ As Martel has made clear, the film does not aspire to historical accuracy, including in relation to representing the indigenous past, since this would mean representing the accounts written by Europeans of cultures wiped out by colonisation.⁴¹ Instead, she favours a playful, inventive and anachronistic approach to the representation of the past, one aspect of which might be the incorporation of contemporary indigenous body-painting and colour ceremonies into the representation of the indigenous in the final third of the film.⁴² Escobar has written extensively on aspects such as body painting in contemporary Paraguayan indigenous cultures. For the Chamacoco, 'colours illuminate the backdrop of myths and set the body alight during ceremonies', colours 'force the object to release hidden meanings, [gesturing] to truths that remain otherwise concealed'.⁴³ This group uses the practice of body painting as a means of negotiating difference, of 'address[ing] the thorny question that troubles and drives the course of culture: that which confronts the self/same and the other, that which tries to define the frontier of identity and separate the alien'.⁴⁴ Colour can shield the wearer from harm or confer power on the wearer. It is also used as a means of identifying with, for example, animals or gods, including 'to imitate the designs on the skins of the gods they killed and whose place they have usurped'.⁴⁵ The use of colour and body-painting in the 'steam-bath' sequence alludes to these properties and practices of colour(ing) in indigenous cultures, suggesting the usurping of white power by the indigenous, figuring colour as a magical agent of metamorphosis and mimesis.

³⁹ Escobar, T. (2007), *The Curse of Nemur: In Search of the Art, Myth and Ritual of the Ishir*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, p. 66.

⁴⁰ Escobar, p. 125.

⁴¹ As Mignolo writes: 'Colonization of being is nothing else than producing the idea that certain people do not belong to history – that they are non-beings. Thus, lurking beneath the European story of discovery are the histories, experiences and silenced conceptual narratives of those who were disqualified as human beings, as historical actors, as capable of thinking and understanding. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the "wretched of the earth" [...] were Indians and African slaves. That is why missionaries and men of letters appointed themselves to write the histories they thought Incas and Aztecs did not have, and to write the grammar of Kechua/Kichua and Nahuatl with Latin as the model' (2005, p. 4).

⁴² Martel has commented: 'The natives are Guaraní, Qom-lek, and Pilagá; and working with them was very interesting because everything was an invention—their haircuts, the clothes, the feathers, the colors. Initially, they assumed that they should play themselves, but I explained to them that they should act as if they were somebody else, somebody fictitious [...]'. [...] 'Those red-painted natives you see are supposed to be Guaycuru, but they speak Qom. The Guaycuru language, spoken by the natives who attacked in the eighteenth century, is extinct. Nothing of what you hear is real; it is completely anachronistic. No one spoke in that manner at the time. I wanted to capture the beauty of a diverse world. [...] The film is not a serious depiction of the past but pure invention. We aimed for a tone that was not too serious, sometimes even slightly parodic' in Gemünden and Spitta, 2018, p.37.

⁴³ Taussig, p.6.

⁴⁴ Escobar, p. 118.

⁴⁵ Escobar p. 138.

This mimesis occurs not only between the different groups of bodies represented onscreen, which increasingly resemble one another through colour; in addition, the use of colour and other elements discussed brings about, particularly in this sequence, a mimetic relation between viewer and film. I have written elsewhere that Martel's cinema can be understood as motivated by the desire to 'overcome the solitude of the body',⁴⁶ and shown how, as here, haptic and tactile images of rubbing, of skin, and haptic sounds are used as means of eliciting an embodied spectatorship, of inviting an embodied response.⁴⁷ Such moments have prominence throughout *Zama*, from early images of women by the river applying mud to their skin, and later ones of Zama's body being washed by servants. This tendency of the film reaches its culmination in the 'steam bath' sequence, in which colour becomes a further means of overcoming corporeal boundaries between spectator and film, and of inviting a mimetic and embodied form of spectatorship. In this sense, the use of colour here brings to mind the 'absorbent' properties of colour, as discussed by Gilles Deleuze, as well as by Taussig. For Deleuze, who directly discusses colour in film, the colour-image has an 'absorbent characteristic' which 'does not refer to a particular object, but absorbs all it can: it is the power which seizes all that happens within its range, or the quality common to completely different objects'.⁴⁸ Pure colour can be used to transcend the spatial and temporal dimensions of the frame.⁴⁹ Taussig writes of colour's capacity for inviting absorption into the image, for making vision 'less a retinal and more a total bodily activity to the [...] extent that in looking at something we may even pass into the image'.⁵⁰ As he writes:

[C]olour dissolves the visual modality so as to become more creaturely and close, so close in fact that the image – or what was the image – becomes something that can absorb the onlooker. [...] The same sensation that Nietzsche described for the Dionysian, meaning absorption into the very being of the Other, as with music, dance and ritual, as contrasted with the Apollonian, meaning controlled vision that holds the Other at arm's length.⁵¹

Colour in the 'steam bath' sequence 'absorbs' what is around it and what is outside it, both within and outside the cinematic image; red suffuses the frame, and threatens or encroaches on the edges of on-screen bodies, yet through its powerful absorbent properties, as well as the host of other haptic and tactile, wild and Dionysian elements with which it is combined in this sequence, it also functions to reconfigure the viewer's relationship to the image, inducing mimesis, eliciting embodied spectatorship, and overturning visual regimes which associate vision with mastery and separation.

The extent to which colour dominates line and form in this sequence also means that – to a greater extent than elsewhere in the film – there is a shift away from representation, narrative and figuration, and towards abstraction. This use of colour recalls the much more extreme and explicit project of Derek Jarman's *Blue*, which consists visually of a single shot of blue colour filling the screen for its 79-minute duration.⁵² *Blue* emphasises the screen as

⁴⁶ Martin, *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel*, p. 125.

⁴⁷ Martin, *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel*, *passim*.

⁴⁸ Deleuze, G. (1986), *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, London: The Athlone Press, p. 121.

⁴⁹ Everett, p. 109.

⁵⁰ Taussig, p. 6.

⁵¹ Taussig, p. 19.

⁵² Jarman, D., dir. (1993), *Blue*, UK, Japan: Channel 4 Television.

surface, and situates colour as non-narrative. As Parsons argues, his film embodies what Julia Kristeva, in her discussion of the blue on the ceiling of the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, sees as 'colour's ability to pulverize, [...] multipl[y], [and...] shatter' meaning.⁵³ A shift away from representation and narrative and towards abstraction, surface and touch can be observed in earlier works by Martel, including in *The Holy Girl*, a film which makes important use of colour. That film's final sequence, which as I have written, functions as a 'tactile and aquatic space-beyond-narrative',⁵⁴ is dominated by the colour blue, and uses a shade similar to that of Jarman's *Blue*. Blue in *The Holy Girl*, too, shifts our attention away from narrative and towards the screen as surface, even whilst enveloping the young protagonist Amalia in its meanings: holiness and mysticism, the blue of the Virgin Mary, the precious and the infinite.⁵⁵ These meanings are not to be understood in simple terms but as part of the complex and wry subversion of religious ideology which the film undertakes, in which desire, sensuality, and subversion are shown always to inhere in what purports to be pure and holy.⁵⁶ Further sequences of *The Holy Girl*, set in Amalia's mother's bedroom, employ a contrasting palette of dark reds, suggesting an interior and womb-like space, a palette and space which strongly prefigures (in aesthetic, rather than narrative terms) the dissolution of boundaries both within the image, and between image and viewer, characterising the 'steam bath' of *Zama*.

I have suggested that colour figures in the meaning-construction of *Zama* in a way that undermines the colonial subject, and privileges the worldview and expressive tendencies of indigenous cultures. The final part of this chapter will address further ways in which the film speaks decolonially through colour. The first of these is the contribution made by colour and its use, to the film's general tendency towards anachronism, its refusal of the quest for historical accuracy and authenticity which usually conditions historical filmmaking. In her discussion of 'neo-indigenist' historical film, Franco refers to 'the problem of a historical film which is too faithful to history': summarising this as the fact that 'it cannot represent what has gone unrepresented'.⁵⁷ Acutely aware of this problem, Martel favours self-conscious fictionalising, invention, substitution and play, rather than any attempt at the 'authenticity' for which the conventional historical film would strive. Again, the steam bath sequence is itself a good example of this, with the straight walls and metal swing doors that feature in its mise-en-scène. These are outrageously fantastical elaborations on the kinds of structures likely to be producible or desirable by eighteenth-century indigenous peoples in tropical regions such as the Chaco, and seem more akin to twentieth or twenty-first century architecture. In addition to a refusal of historical accuracy or authenticity, the association of the indigenous in the steam bath sequence with contemporary architectural forms constitutes a refusal of the temporal othering or distancing to which Johannes Fabian argues indigenous cultures tend to be uniformly subject, their association with the past,⁵⁸ and can

⁵³ Cit. Parsons, A. (2018), 'A meditation on color and the body in Derek Jarman's *Chroma* and Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 33:2, pp. 375-393, p. 379.

⁵⁴ Martin, *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel*, p. 75.

⁵⁵ See Parsons, p. 377-8, where these meanings and connotations of blue, and their origins, are discussed at length.

⁵⁶ See Martin, *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel*, pp. 54-79.

⁵⁷ Franco, p. 82.

⁵⁸ Fabian, J. (1983), *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York: Columbia University Press.

be understood as part of a wider project in Martel's work to disrupt 'the discourse which construes the Other in terms of distance, spatial and temporal'.^{59 60}

Colour, too, plays an important part in *Zama's* tendency to anachronism and lack of respect for traditional aesthetic means of representing the past. In *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell proposes that colour in cinema is a means of invoking both futurity and fantasy: 'I have described certain uses of colour in film – as packaging, as unifying the worlds of make-believe and of fantasy, and as projecting a future'.⁶¹ As in *The Wizard of Oz*, shimmering colour does not announce to us the present or reality, but instead lures us into a world which is yet to come. The vivid greens, turquoises and oranges of the final third of *Zama*, recall the advent of technicolour and are used in the final third of *Zama* to create tropical tableaux accompanied by the extra-diegetic music of Los Indios Tabajaras – which is reminiscent of the Hapa Haole genre – recalling films such as *Blue Hawaii* (1961),⁶² and popular mid-century US representations of Polynesia and Oceania ('Tiki' culture). Indeed, Martel has commented that 1950s screen culture was one of her aesthetic references for *Zama*.⁶³ The representation of the 1790s through allusion to the mid-twentieth Century functions not only as a means of referencing the 1956 novel on which the film is based (as Esther Allen rightly argues)⁶⁴ but also acts as a further way of countering the expected and traditional mode of historical representation, and undermining dominant, Western understandings of linear time. The combined use of music and colour here create a hallucinatory reality which alludes both to time travel (Science Fiction, like horror, often haunts the edges of Martel's films), and to the polytemporality of indigenous cosmovisions. Typically for Martel's filmmaking, these allusions remain just that, and are not developed into fully elaborated symbolic systems.⁶⁵ However if, as Walsh and Mignolo argue, 'coexisting temporalities [are] kept hostage by the Western idea of time and the belief that there is one single temporality: Western imagined fictional temporality',⁶⁶ the polytemporality alluded to via music and mise-en-scène, including colour, functions to liberate these and thus to create a pluriversal vision of the past, which suggests the inclusion of other, subaltern worldviews, an amalgam of diverse layers of time.

In Martel's work, despite its sustained focus on the mechanisms of oppressive structures, there is always a sense in which the subversion of these structures flourishes, and in which that which they repress pervades and overturns them. Other, repressed or elided forms of knowledge and understanding pervade her films. This is the case, for example, with the perspective of the child in *The Swamp* and *The Holy Girl*, and with that of the indigenous or

⁵⁹ Fabian, p. xxxix.

⁶⁰ See Martel's short film *Nueva Argirópolis* (2010) in which a strongly future-oriented indigenous activism circulates via Youtube videos; and Martin, D. (2016b), 'Lucrecia Martel's *Nueva Argirópolis: rivers, rumours and resistance*', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 25: 3, pp. 449-465, p. 456.

⁶¹ Cavell, S. (1979), *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, p. 95.

⁶² Taurog, N., dir. (1961), *Blue Hawaii*, USA: Hal Wallace Productions.

⁶³ Post-screening discussion, Portland International Film Festival, 11 March 2019.

⁶⁴ Allen, E. (2018), 'The Crazy Euphoria of Lucrecia Martel's *Zama*', *New York Review of Books*, April 14. Available at: <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/04/14/the-crazy-euphoria-of-lucrecia-martels-zama/>. Accessed 2 April 2020. Cita repetida

⁶⁵ On this tendency in Martel, see Page, J. (2009), *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*, Durham: Duke University Press, p.180-193.

⁶⁶ Walsh, C. and W. Mignolo, (2018), *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, Durham: Duke University Press, p.3.

mestizo underclass in *The Headless Woman* and *Nueva Argirópolis*. All Martel's films constitute aesthetic experiments in the incursion of these repressed or elided forms of knowledge into dominant reality; as is well-documented, sound is one aesthetic means by which, in all Martel's films, this takes place.⁶⁷ *Zama*, despite its ostensible focus on the coloniser, is suffused for its part by the subaltern voice, that of the slaves and indigenous people who gradually work their way towards the centre of the frame over the course of the film. The film as a whole constitutes an act of overturning of the colonial perspective, the embodied subjectivity of that perspective, an act which is performed in a number of ways, including through sound, but also through the use of colour, especially in the 'steam bath' sequence, in which the boundaries of paramount importance for the colonial endeavour are threatened and in which colour and redness makes tangible the eroding of those boundaries on-screen. Likewise, dominant, Eurocentric modes of writing, narrating and cinematically representing the indigenous and colonial pasts are challenged by the use of a bright mid-twentieth century aesthetic; a univocal and Eurocentric discourse which might at first seem to be associated with the subject and the protagonist of this film is queered or undermined; 'history' is imbued with fantasy, dream, time-travel and subaltern knowledge.

Emilio Bernini, in his excellent analysis of the film, argues that the subaltern speaking position is articulated from the outset of the film by its opening episode, in which we hear:

An oracle that seems to address itself to the colonial functionaries themselves, who listen to it, amazed, as if to an (allegorical) description of their own fate in the adverse conditions of the South American colony, delivered precisely by one of its subjects. The importance of this subject's voice, and of his utterance, is that it becomes the introduction to the film, the paradigm of the story about to be told.⁶⁸

In the final third of the film, in which the use of colour becomes more noticeable, in which colours are brighter, and in which the use of colour and corporeal painting in indigenous cultures is portrayed on screen, the extent to which meaning is organised through colour in this film becomes clear. If, as Taussig and Escobar discuss, colour functions in the thought of some indigenous groups living in the region in which this film is set as a significant means of expressing and ordering reality, and if, as these thinkers argues, colour stands for what is denied by Western culture, then to speak through colour is also to speak decolonially, to speak from the place of the subaltern. For the spectator, the hallucinatory use of colour in the film's final section acts as it does for the captured soldiers in the steam bath sequence, it acts as a drug, or *pharmakon*, inviting absorption by the image, as part of a broader aesthetic in this last part of the film of boundary dissolution, as bodies wade through swamps, and the white men take on the red hue of their indigenous counterparts. Through its elevation of colour to a primary mode of meaning-making, the film not only allows a subaltern worldview to encroach upon the colonial one, it also functions to reinvigorate the role of formalism, and in particular colour, in the service of a political cinema.

⁶⁷ On sound in Martel's work see Martin 2016, p.21, and *passim*; Greene, L. (2012), 'Swamped in Sound: The Sound Image in Lucrecia Martel's *La ciénaga/The Swamp*', *Printed Project* 15, pp.53-60; Russell, D. (2008), 'Lucrecia Martel: A Decidedly Polyphonic Cinema www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc50.2008/LMartelAudio/index.html'. *Jump Cut* 50. Accessed 20 April 2020.

⁶⁸ Bernini. My translation.