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CHAPTER TWO

Lourdes Portillo's Development of a Chicana Feminist Film Aesthetic: *After the Earthquake*, *Las Madres*, and *Señorita Extraviada*

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In relation to Chicano cinema, film director Lourdes Portillo has broken with traditional works filmed mostly by men and has developed instead a new female perspective—one that is internationalist and questions male hegemony. In the near past, traditional cinema never gave Chicanas the roles they deserved. This was in part because Chicano filmmakers produced works that centered on the 1960s Chicano Power Movement. These Chicano male films used “forms of cultural production resolutely connected to the social and political activism of the Chicano Movement. Chicano films, for the first time ever, interjected onto the social/cultural imagination Chicano counter visions of history, identity, social reality, and resistance politics” (Fregoso *Bronze Screen* xiv).

Unfortunately, they gave the viewer a predominately male view, like the video *I Am Joaquin* (1975) made by El Teatro Campesino. Although this early cinema was in opposition to the hegemonic society, it focused on a patriarchal discourse that dramatized conflicts needing to be fought by Chicano men. In this cinema, women were not taken into consideration

or plainly excluded; generally, the Chicana was portrayed as depending on the man to fulfill their citizenship role in society.

The present research examines and analyzes three films in which the main themes deal with political questions, and at the same time, focuses on a female environment. Through her films, Lourdes Portillo establishes a new cinematographic aesthetic that presents an active consciousness which questions itself and emerges from within the female genre (Millán Moncayo, 1993, 123). Taking into account that Portillo began and has developed primarily as a movie director, I believe that she developed the following three elements in her films and she uses them with certain specificity: 1) cinematography markings (viewpoint, gender, the receptor—the textual receptor or the historic receptor), 2) narrative and dialogic language, and 3) domestic contextual differences. These elements are clearly delineated in the films *After the Earthquake* (1979), *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (1986), and *Señorita Extraviada* (2001). Basing ourselves in the theoretical perspectives held by Margara Millán Moncayo (1998), B. Ruby Rich (1998), Amalia Mesa-Bains (2003), and Rosa Linda Fregoso (1993; 2001; 2003), we will be able to understand and analyze the films by Lourdes Portillo.

A FEMININE FILM AESTHETIC

In her article “Toward a Feminine Film Aesthetic?” Millán Moncayo (1998) clarifies the significance of aesthetics and the use of the female perspective in cinema. She discusses four main aspects in this perspective: feminine aesthetic, language, aesthetic intention, and sensibility of selection. She defends her position by stating that in order to establish a feminine aesthetic when creating films, there must be a definition of the political-ideological aspects:

Feminine cinema would be interested in discussing the women and the world from a woman's viewpoint. The spatial-temporal priorities are what determines this feminine view of the world, of thing, of feelings and relationships; alternating the order of the dominant representation a process of deconstruction of a certain cinematographic language. Cinema made by women should have first won that space; the

female-director should have confronted that difficult almost impossible task of saying “me” first in recognition of the female in the world of cinematographic creation. As in other fields, the history of feminism has had to first win the right to equality to be able to expand to the right of differences in this manner also the order of representation; another aspect is the deconstruction of the dominant idea of what it means to be feminine (125).

Furthermore, Millán Moncayo claims a polyvalent aspect in filmmaking, which has several levels and even its own language. She states:

In the specificity of the feminine cinematographic making one will first assume the polyvalence of being feminine in order to establish the first problem that of identity in regards to language, in this case cinematographic language. We propose that feminine identity is the determinant in relationship to the object produced as long as that identity is considered to be established in each particular case (122).

The article by Rich (1998), “An/Other View of New Latin American Cinema,” discusses the different stages that Latin American cinema has undergone and its impact on contemporary filmmaking. In its initial stage, “[i]t was an oppositional cinema at every level, self-consciously searching for new forms to embody new sentiments of a Latin American reality just being uncovered. It was a cinema dedicated to decolonizing, at every level, including, frequently, that of cinematic language. A cinema of necessity, it was different things in different countries” (Rich 130). This type of cinema was necessary because it dedicated itself to portraying the inhumane conditions in which people lived and whose lives had never been taken into consideration. It portrayed the other reality of Latin American society.

Rich discusses three films that were fundamental to this new type of cinema in Latin America and which impacted Lourdes Portillo and other Chicana filmmakers. First, Rich begins with the re-inversion of the Mexican revolutionary code by Matilde Landeta. In her 1949 film *La negra Angustias*, “[s]he laid the groundwork for the Latin American women’s films of the 1980’s, which began to incorporate women’s strug-

gles for identity and autonomy as a necessary part of truly contemporary New Latin American Cinema” (131). In this film, the daughter of a famous revolutionary is signaled out because she does not want to get married and maintains her *manly* ways past adolescence.

Second, in Landeta’s 1974 film *One Way or Another*, Sara Gómez criticizes the Latin American *machismo* attitude by presenting challenges through the use of psychological, experimental, and ideological terms, and by taking into consideration their sociological suppositions. This is the first time that we see a Latin American female openly criticize the contemporary Cuban patriarchal society.

Third, Rich argues that because of new democratic expression in Latin America, cinema has gone from being strictly revolutionary to revealing the human condition. In other words, Latin American cinema began revealing realities and truths that before had been silenced by military or revolutionary governments.

Amalia Mesa-Bains’ (2003) article, “Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquachismo,” discusses space and the selection of domestic objects in the female environment. She stresses that “for the Chicana artist, the position of the underdog and the strategy of making so is situated in the domestic. She employs the material of the domestic as she contests the power relations located within it. The visual production emerges from the everyday practices of women’s lives with style and humor” (302). The domestic space which Chicanas dwell is full of “home embellishments, home altar maintenance, healing traditions, and personal feminine pose and style” (302). This practice of feminine *rasquachismo* is used as an affirmation of the domestic practices in which the use of the altar signifies a certain type of power in the community.

In the article “Reproduction and Miscegenation on the Borderlands: Mapping the Maternal Body of Tejanas”, Rosa Linda Fregoso (2003) states that “in feminist film criticism, questions regarding female representation revolve around the cinematic mechanism of spectatorship and identification. There are two, often conflated notions of spectatorship relevant to [her] analysis of the white patriarchal gaze in the cinematic discourse of *Lone Star* [the film analyzed in this article]” (337).

Fregoso defines the first notion as dealing with what the feminist critics of cinematography title “the *hypothetical* or *textual* spectator, which is a concept used to refer to the textually inscribed position in the text, the position that the film offers as its ideal viewing position. The second notion of spectatorship is often called the “historical” or “empirical” spectator, that is, the spectator as an “actual” social subject who views the film at a particular moment in history” (337). In viewing Portillo’s films, we will apply this last notion of spectatorship.

AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE: TRADITIONAL VS. LIBERAL VALUES

In the film *After the Earthquake* (Portillo, 1979), the main theme is the conflict between home country traditional values and the liberal values of American society. Lourdes Portillo centers the plot of the film on Irene, the protagonist. In doing so, she accomplishes what Millán Moncayo (1998) states, that a new feminine cinema proposes to be different from ideological displacement and should be a feminine cinema, not a feminist one. It should channel the peculiar way of the feminine being more than a cinema intended to divulge feminism (123). The new cinema made by Chicanas no longer uses the traditional stereotype of the self-sacrificing woman, prostitute, manipulator or defenseless victim, and instead proposes a new feminine discourse.

This is exactly what Portillo does by portraying Irene in a new female role. Irene is a young woman that cleans homes in order to send her family money because they are still in Nicaragua. She lives in San Francisco in an immigrant community along with her aunts who still follow the traditional Latin American roles prescribed by patriarchal society. In one of the scenes, the aunts have placed a saint upside down so as to help Irene find a man to marry.

However, the aunts themselves are not married which means they themselves did not follow the traditional role assigned to women in their home country. Established through continuities of spiritual belief, pre-Hispanic in nature, the family altar functions for women “as a counterpoint to male-dominated rituals in Catholicism” (Mesa-Bains 302). From

her Chicana perspective and new feminine subjectivity, Portillo criticizes the roles prescribed to women which make her a prisoner. We see what Mesa-Bains classifies under the term *domesticana*: “the charge of subversion, interrogation, and deconstruction” (302).

In the first film scene we see Irene buying a television. This purchase is symbolic because it signifies that she has assimilated into a materialistic American society. At the same time, however, Portillo leads us to believe that this purchase is a form of independent thinking. That is, Irene has decided on her own to buy the television without an outside influence, proving to herself that she does not need anyone’s permission.

Furthermore, the film shows the conflict between immigrants already established here in the U.S. and recent incoming immigrants. Julio is Irene’s boyfriend, but she has not seen him for a couple of years. He was involved in political issues back in Nicaragua, which is why he had to come to the U.S. as a political exile. His arrival causes problems for Irene because she has to decide whether to marry him or continue her independent lifestyle. She has learned to cherish such a lifestyle and appreciate her independence and autonomy.

It is important to mention the fact that when Julio and Irene see each other after being apart for three years, the first thing out of Julio’s mouth is to ask why she cut her hair. This is significant because in this scene Portillo shows the extent of control by man over women. Irene’s new haircut is symbolic because it is another way of signaling her independence and that the female has the right to make her own choices. In these scenes we see that Portillo opts for a new feminist discourse in which the woman lives her own life and makes her own choices without the pressure of the society to which she belongs.

LAS MADRES AND SEÑORITA EXTRA VIADA: NEOREALISM THROUGH TESTIMONIALS

The film *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Portillo and Muñoz, 1986) is divided into various segments: 1) the mothers’ testimonies, 2) the testimonies of some of the disappeared that were returned,

and 3) the testimony of one of the pilots. These testimonies reveal the secrets of an oppressed society which was ruled by a military government. The format of the film is based on interviews of the people involved. These disappearances took place in Argentina during the takeover of the government by the military. Yet, the most powerful images are those of the photographs of the disappeared themselves. These young men and women were kidnapped because of their outspoken challenges against the government and the social injustices inflicted upon Argentinean society by the government. Their acts were considered subversive and the military government felt they had to be stopped before they got out of control and overthrew the government.

The shot of the first scene is very powerful because it focuses on the mothers marching on the plaza and screaming for justice, wanting to know where their sons and daughters are. The women's voices are full of sorrow and pain because they do not know what happened to their children. Portillo gives the viewer a historical account of the political times in order to situate the spectator and allow us to understand the reasons behind the kidnappings. Her interview format makes the film more personal and realistic because we hear actual family testimonies. The recreation of the actual events makes the spectator understand the frustration that the family feels when their child was kidnapped. By revealing these secrets, the spectator is informed and conscious of the terrible wrongdoings on the part of the military government. It is very important to point out that this film is narrated by a woman and that such a technique validates and authenticates the mothers' cause.

Furthermore, the shot of the mothers marching and the police in vigilant alert is very powerful because it creates tension on the part of the spectator, causing one to feel what the mothers must have felt during those moments. The white handkerchiefs worn by the Argentinean mothers are very symbolic because the color white represents peace. It is a peace that never came to the Mothers' lives because no one took responsibility for kidnapping their sons and daughters. The use of white handkerchiefs recalls the phenomena described by Mesa-Bains as *domesticana*. By wearing these white handkerchiefs, the mothers create a personal environment since this object [the white handkerchief] is typically reserved for the

home environment, but here it is displayed publicly to create a connection between the spectator and the mothers.

All the shots from the film are very stunning and astonishing because they clearly portray the events of those years. The buildings, where the kidnapped were kept, were already in ruins when Portillo filmed the documentary *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*. Even more, the spectator is able to imagine the events that took place inside those walls where pregnant women gave birth to children that would later be given to military officials for adoption and where men and women suffered torture, among other atrocities. The film closes with shots of a new young generation asking for justice, just like their grandmothers did years before. At the very end, Portillo includes shots of mothers in other countries (El Salvador, Chile, Guatemala, Peru, Honduras, Lebanon) who ask for justice for their kidnapped sons and daughters. At this point, the spectator is transported to other countries that have suffered through such barbarities.

In *Señorita Extraviada* (2001), Portillo uses the same cinematographic technique developed in the film *Las Madres*. She interviews families and government officials to try to find the persons responsible for the kidnapping and murders of young Mexican women in Juarez, Mexico. In this film, Portillo deconstructs the official discourse of the Mexican government. This *machista* discourse blames women and denies the fact that, in reality, the young women are the victims of a patriarchal society that has ended their lives.

The desert shots are very significant because they point to the answers behind the killings. The girls' cadavers and clothing are found in these deserted fields. Portillo focuses on displaying shots of the shoes worn by these young women as a symbol that these young women are never coming home. In various scenes we see a young woman putting on a pair of shoes, and later we see a newspaper announcing the finding of another cadaver wearing the shoes previously shown in the film. Millán Moncayo describes this cinematographic technique in the following manner, "[T]he use of space, of the perspective, of colors, of the internal rhythm, of the sounds, of time and the contemplative vision and also of the takes and

shots are all part of the aesthetic of the specific work (126).” By taking into consideration this perspective, one can see the variation in the use of the aesthetic and how it is developed and defined. In this instance, we see Lourdes Portillo’s perspective.

The mothers of these young women question the government and local authorities regarding the murders of their daughters, but no one seems to care. Throughout the film, we see the photographs of the missing young women and the series creates a sense of desperation on the part of the spectator. We sense the ineptitude on part of the state and federal officials in charge of solving such murders. We become “the ‘historical’ or ‘empirical’ spectator, that is, the spectator as an ‘actual’ social subject who views the film at a particular moment in history” (337). One feels the uncertainty that the families feel through several shots of police cars: instead of feeling secure and confident, the victim’s families are afraid and fearful of these officials who are supposed to represent safety and security. Such feelings become more painful, especially after listening to the testimony of one woman who was raped in jail. She heard the police describing the kidnappings and also claims she saw photographs of the kidnapped women.

When describing the deaths and while taking shots of other young women, Portillo introduces background music of religious tones. This creates an aura of despair and a sensation that death is roaming the streets of Juarez. The use of this technique is important because as of today the murders of over 300 women have yet to be resolved and young women keep disappearing.

CONCLUSION

In these three films, Lourdes Portillo has created a new meaning to the creation of cinema. As a Chicana woman, she has contributed a different and renovating subjectivity to cinematography in the U.S. Her cinematic themes deal with political and social issues in and out of the U.S. In these films we clearly see the varying aesthetics used by this contemporary Chicana filmmaker.

We see that two of her films are neorealist because they portray the realities of two social groups through the use of the testimonial genre. Portillo is able to capture the realities of social and political issues in the use of testimonial interviews in *Señorita Extraviada* and *Las Madres*. In *After the Earthquake* she focuses on Irene, a young Hispanic woman with high aspirations and new perspectives who breaks away from the traditional female role. By portraying these varying aesthetics in her films, Portillo has been able to give voice to the female and has added a new perspective to the cinema traditionally written by men. She uses feminist discourses that are polyvalent and that authenticate the feminine aesthetic of the new Chicano cinema.

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