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MEXICO: THE ARTIST IS A WOMAN

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Sandra Berler, Elena Gascón-Vera, Laura Riesco,
and Margo Glantz

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Preface

Mexico is more than economics. Yet we seem to hear little more than talk about trade, jobs, and comparative productivity.

Mexico is also about women. Thanks to Professor Regina Cortina, the associate director of Brown's Center for Latin American Studies, we were treated to a stimulating symposium on "Mexico: The Artist Is a Woman" along with an intriguing exhibition of work by Mexican women photographers. In the symposium we learned much more about the outstanding Mexican women (native and naturalized) who reveal through their artistry a new understanding of twentieth century Mexico.

Fortunately the professions of photographer, writer, and cinematographer were open to women before such roles as politician and entrepreneur. These women magnificently produced a counterpoint to the all too familiar and predominant doctrine of machismo.

They chose as their subjects the human side of Mexico, including the artifacts that predated the arrival of the Spanish in the fifteenth century. They were thereby pioneers in the mold of the "plotting women" made familiar to us by the literary critic Jean Franco.

The essays which follow are an introduction to this rich world. The center is honored to have been involved in presenting this important dimension of Mexico to Brown and New England.

Thomas E. Skidmore
Director, Center for Latin American Studies

Introduction

The present volume includes essays presented March 4, 1994 at the symposium "Mexico: The Artist Is a Woman" at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. The event commemorated the work of Latin American women in film, photography, and literature. The contributions of these artists in their respective fields reveal the originality and diversity of contemporary Mexican art. Each of the participants has an outstanding artistic career.

The Photographers

Mariana Yampolsky is a leading photographer of Mexico. Through her lenses, she documents the Mexican indigenous culture. Her photographs express the beauty and mystery of Mexico's feasts, clothing, rituals, and dwellings. Without her work as a photographer, segments of daily life in rural Mexico would not have been recorded.

Graciela Iturbide was unable to attend the symposium, but her art was presented by Mexican writer Carmen Boullosa. Iturbide's contribution to Mexican photography focuses on the documentation of rituals in remote Mexican villages. Her work combines rituals with magic, ceremonies of love, and shadows.

The Writers

Margo Glantz, a leading writer and cultural critic in Mexico, offers her own perspective on the work of Mexican filmmaker Maria Novarro and her film "Danzón." Glantz writes about how Novarro's film depicts the liberating effects of dance in the routine life of a Mexican worker.

Carmen Boullosa, one of Mexico's most promising younger writers, experiments with fiction that has created new paths in Mexican literature. Her essay for the symposium also examines the photography of Graciela Iturbide. She is especially interested in Iturbide's focus on the symbolic and the imaginary, as well as the importance of rituals and celebration in Mexican folk life.

The Cinematographers

Bussi Cortés ranks among Mexico's finest young filmmakers. She based her film *El Secreto de Romelia* on the short novel *El Viudo Román* by Mexico's best known woman writer, Rosario Castellanos. The film uses lyrical beauty to portray women's subordination to men, their fears, and their hopes of liberation.

Maria Novarro also was unable to attend the symposium. However, writer Margo Glantz and literary critic Elena Gascón Vera both look at Novarro's film *Danzón*, which portrays for the first time in Mexican cinema the life of a working-class woman. In the film, Novarro's protagonist, a telephone operator named Julia, manifests her passion for life through dancing.

Another highlight of the symposium was the participation of writers from other countries in Latin America—Peru, Chile, Argentina—and Spain. The purpose was to view the artistic accomplishments of Mexican women from a broader perspective. Their participation encouraged dialogue between those from outside and within Mexico. Moreover, the symposium offered an opportunity for the Mexican writers to see the international impact of their work.

From Chile, poet Marjorie Agosín addresses the photography of Mariana Yampolsky and how it respects the subject and never intrudes. From Peru, novelist Laura Riesco talks about Busi Cortés's film, *El Secreto de Romelia*, and how it departs from Castellano's narrative and shifts to the voices of women thinking and speaking about love. From Spain, cultural critic Elena Gascón-Vera interprets modern Mexican cinema by focusing on the films *Doña Herlinda and Her Son* and *Danzón*. In looking at *Danzón*, Gascón-Vera addresses women's quest for freedom and autonomy.

Photography critic Sandra Berler and art historian Lucretia Giese examine the artistic and technical importance of the work of the photographers. Berler, owner of the Sandra Berler Gallery in Washington, D.C., also served as a curator for the photo exhibition that was held at the List Art Center of Brown

University in conjunction with the symposium.

The exhibition comprised a collection of photographs by Mexican artist Mariana Yampolsky. Berler also analyzed in a presentation the technical mastery of Yampolsky's photography. Juan Mandelbaum showed a film about Jesúsa Rodriguez, who, through her stage performances, has become a leading critic of the lack of political participation and personal autonomy of Mexican women. To bring historical context to the contribution of these contemporary photographers, Lucretia Guise presented a historical essay of women's participation in photography.

Regina Cortina of Brown University conceptualized and coordinated the symposium. Marjorie Agosín helped define the program and was crucial in bringing the participation and support of the Department of Spanish at Wellesley College. An innovative aspect of this symposium was the participation of Wellesley College undergraduates, under the direction of Professor Joy Renjilian Burgy and the sponsorship of Mellon Minority Undergraduate Fellowships. Several Wellesley students helped translate the essays into English. They included Carolina Cruz, Monica Bruno Galmozzi, Nancy Abraham Hall, Patricia Pacheco, Tracy Pilguin, Janet Quesada, and Joy Styles.

Among the other sponsors, we would like to thank the Rhode Island School of Design and Mexico's Loteria Nacional para la Asistencia Pública, which provided funds to bring the Mexican artists to Providence, Rhode Island. We also want to acknowledge the sponsors at Brown University: The Center for Latin American Studies; the Department of Visual Arts; and the C.V. Starr Foundation Lectureship Fund.

We hope that the creativity of women artists and their unique vision of the world around them will challenge the readers of this volume. Brown University and Wellesley College are committed to continuing efforts to expand knowledge about the contributions to art by women from Latin America.

Regina Cortina, Joy Renjilian Burgy, and Marjorie Agosín
Providence, November 1994.

Women Photographers in Mexico

Lucretia H. Giese

In *Plotting Women* (1989), her study of gender and its representation in Mexico, Jean Franco identifies three broad "master narratives" or symbolic systems that she believes "plotted" women's lives in Mexico. These broad systems—religion, nationalism, and modernization—"cemented society" and placed women "differentially into the social text." Her time frame begins with the seventeenth century, religion's "most powerful moment," and extends into modern times.[1] For Franco, the period of "nationalism," in which the construction of a national identity occurred, encompasses more than one hundred years, from the independence movement of the early nineteenth century to the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1920, and beyond. "Modernization" for Franco had its start during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), a period of relative political stability and the achievement of broader economic and social benefits for Mexico's diverse population. This is also when the Frente Único Pro Derechos de la Mujer (FUPDM) was formed.[2] But her time boundaries are not rigid. In fact, in the years immediately following the cataclysmic decade of the 1910 to 1920 Mexican Revolution, nationalism or "*Mexicanidad*" surged.

Franco's "narrative" of nationalism may be a useful tool in understanding photography by Mexican women in the first few decades of the twentieth century. It was in those decades that the work of women photographers, especially Tina Modotti and Lola Alvarez Bravo, attracted notice in Mexico. My objective here is to explore the accomplishments of these two women and to place them in historical context; any examination of women photographers in Mexico must begin with them. My focus will be on the first half of this century, particularly the 1920s and 1930s.

Photography was practiced in Mexico before the Mexican Revolution by Mexican artists and others from many countries. The earliest evidence comes from photographs made in the 1850s, evidently intended to document ancient ruins. By

the 1860s, photographers documented other aspects of Mexico. For example, François Aubert photographed landscapes and the activities of the court of the French-imposed Austrian Emperor Maximilian, while Teobert Maler primarily concentrated on village life. Perhaps the most prominent nineteenth-century Mexican photographer was Agustín Casasola, recorder of the Porfirio Diaz "court" and the urban scene. During the Mexican Revolution, Casasola recorded such key events as the meeting of Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and Pablo Montaño in Mexico City in 1914. After the Mexican Revolution Casasola took on the official responsibility of photographing the activities of various government offices.

German-born photographers Hugo Brehme and Guillermo Kahlo were active in Mexico in the early twentieth century. The latter is best known today as the father of Frida Kahlo. Brehme settled in Mexico City in 1910, just in time to be on hand to photograph the Mexican Revolution and events in Mexico City. His work ranged from *A typical hacienda in the State of Morelos* about 1908, to *Zapatistas* in 1914. Kahlo's work included portraiture and an extensive commission to document Mexican architecture, which he completed shortly before the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution.[3]

It seems safe to assume that there were no women photographers in Mexico during the nineteenth century. Religious convention and long-established custom restrained and regulated women's lives. Franco and Octavio Paz, among others, have written about this.[4] Women's role in the construction of national identity was "ambiguous" at best, to use Franco's word. How could it be otherwise? Based upon perceptions of the historical figure of La Malinche (Hernán Cortés's guide, interpreter, and lover) and the legendary figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Mexican woman in popular culture has been simultaneously reviled as deceiver and traitor and revered as nurturer and helper.[5] Women's role in all social strata was proscribed. But during the Mexican Revolution, which disrupted most patterns of behavior, women participated and assumed nontraditional roles. These ranged from spy to *soldadera*, which involved nursing as well as providing sexual comfort. Women's emergence during that conflict is not surprising since the Mexican Revolution involved peoples who

up to that time had been marginalized. Afterward, the position of women in social and cultural arenas changed, however slowly. One direct improvement was the increased educational opportunities for women, since there was generally greater access to schools for everyone.

Minister of Education José Vasconcelos, who served from 1920 under President Alvaro Obregón, promoted a revalidation of Mexican cultural heritage. As Paz eloquently put it, the revolution "gave us eyes to see," and helped cause Mexico's heritage (and hopes for its future) to be pictured on government walls.[6] Several male painters were invited to participate in this enterprise. In 1923, the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors was organized. David Alfaro Siqueiros, a prominent member, wrote the syndicate's manifesto. It spelled out the muralists' anti-bourgeois, pro-indigenous position, and their identification with the worker.[7] In the hands of muralists such as José Clemente Orozco, Jean Charlot, Diego Rivera, Xavier Guerrero, and Roberto Montenegro, indigenous cultural and historical heritage became the national glue, and a didactic tool used by the government, at least for a time. Muralism dominated visual expression in Mexico in the 1920s.

This was when Tina Modotti entered the world of the muralists. Although Italian-born, Modotti has been described as the "first woman photographer in Mexico."[8] Her family settled in San Francisco, where she met the North American photographer Edward Weston. She became a favorite subject for his camera work. Imogene Cunningham also was practicing in the San Francisco Bay area. Modotti became acquainted with Cunningham on her return to San Francisco in 1924, when her father died. Photographers Cunningham, Dorothea Lange, and Consuelo Kanaga helped Modotti greatly at this time.[9]

Modotti, however, did not begin to pursue photography herself until she went to Mexico with Weston in 1923. There she forged strong connections with various members of the Mexican mural movement. She photographed Rivera's and Orozco's murals and also took pictures of the two working on their murals at the National Preparatory School and the Ministry of Education in Mexico City. Both Rivera and Siqueiros

praised her work when it was exhibited in Mexico City and Guadalajara. In addition, she modeled for Rivera's Chapingo murals.

Rivera and Charlot served as art editors for Frances Toor's magazine *Mexican Folkways*, for which Modotti became the principle photographer and, in 1927, a contributing editor. About that time Modotti also became Guerrero's lover and political comrade. As part of the leftist bloc in Mexico City, Modotti joined the Mexican Communist Party in 1927. She submitted photographs for the party's periodical *El Machete*. The newspaper itself served on more than one occasion as her subject matter. One such photograph is *Mexican peasant reading El Machete* in 1927. Modotti's revolutionary activity was acknowledged by Rivera in his 1928 mural *The Distribution of Arms* in the Court of Fiestas at the Education Ministry. Modotti appears with other participants, including Cuban Communist and journalist Julio Antonio Mella, Siqueiros, and Frida Kahlo, whom Hayden Herrera and Laura Mulvey claim Rivera met through Modotti.[10]

Modotti's early work exhibits the influence of Weston's formalism (and perhaps Cunningham's as well). Examples include Modotti's elegant but spare study of two *Calla Lilies* around 1925; Cunningham's *Magnolia Bud* in the 1920s; and Weston's *Palm Cuernavaca II* in 1925; or, Modotti's architectural study *Interior of Church Tower, Tepotzotlán* in 1924; Cunningham's *Mills College Amphitheatre*, about 1920; and Weston's *Pyramid of the Sun* in 1923. The consistency of Modotti's and Weston's work at this time is apparent in their illustrations for Anita Brenner's book on Mexican art and culture, *Idols behind Altars*, published in 1929.

But Modotti's politics had an increasing effect on her work. In 1926, Rivera described Modotti as Weston's pupil, yet her work, he said, "flowers perfectly in Mexico and harmonizes exactly with our passions."[11] Whether this statement was partly tongue-in-cheek is uncertain, but judging from her work that year "passions" also encompassed politics. In several photographs during this period, Modotti artfully composed emblems of the Mexican Revolution into ideological statements, as in *Hands of Worker with Shovel* and *Sickle, Cartridge-Belt and Guitar*, both of which appeared about 1928.

Modotti's work also included numerous informal portraits of her friends (both politically motivated and otherwise) and documentary shots, such as *Frida and Rivera at a demonstration of the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors* of 1929 and *Demonstrations by Campesinos*, about 1928.

In 1930 Modotti was expelled from Mexico primarily for political reasons. An assassination attempt on the newly elected Mexican President Pascual Ortis Rubio precipitated the government's action against her. The previous year, Modotti also had been implicated in her lover Mella's murder, which had been linked to the dictatorial regime of General Gerardo Machado of Cuba. She had been branded a "fascist spy" and condemned for unconventional behavior. Ever since the presidency of Plutarco Calles in 1924, the Mexican government had taken a virulently anti-communist position.[12] Because of this climate, "*los tres grandes*," as Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros were called, also had left or were about to leave Mexico—Orozco in 1927, Rivera with Kahlo in 1930, and Siqueiros in 1932.

Another woman photographer emerged during the shifting political and artistic decade of the 1920s. Lola Alvarez Bravo grew up in Mexico City, and she took her first photographs in 1926, the year after her marriage to the photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo. The Alvarez Bravos moved as a couple in the Modotti / muralist circle. From 1930 to 1935, Lola Alvarez Bravo was her husband's assistant in their workshop, but they separated in 1934 and were divorced in 1949.[13]

By his own account, Manuel Alvarez Bravo was influenced by the work of Hugo Brehme, and had seen Modotti's and Weston's work as early as 1925.[14] Two examples, among many, suggest possible this influence—Manual Alvarez Bravo's formalistic pairing of *Squash and Snail* in 1929, and the fragmented textured shapes in *Wooden Horse* in 1928. It appears that Modotti's work (and perhaps equally the unconventional woman's role that Modotti played) also influenced Lola Alvarez Bravo.[15] Bravo once disingenuously asserted that she photographed "only what life placed in front of me."[16] The compositional care of her work belies that oversimplification, although more spontaneous examples also can be found. Modotti similarly acknowledged the effect of life's experiences on her

art, but in her case they often got in the way. She found it difficult "to detach myself from life so as to be able to devote myself completely to art." [17]

Present-day Mexico and its inhabitants' environment and habits, whether in documentary or arranged images, fascinated and compelled Modotti. Lola Alvarez Bravo also claimed similar interests. Her work includes a stunning "portrait" of Mexico's intelligentsia, with such figures as Luis Cardoza y Aragón, Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, Olga Costa, Antonio Ruiz, David Alfavo Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, Juan O'Gorman, the North American muralist Marion Greenwood, Rufino Tamayo, and both Rivera and Kahlo, whom Lola Alvarez Bravo is said to have met as early as 1922.[18] Moreover, there are photographs of the urban and rural poor.

But Lola Alvarez Bravo's repertoire was broader than Modotti's. She photographed landscapes, including views of Palenque and Tula, pictorial patterns created by architecture or various materials, folk art, images of death using skeletal remains, and so on. And there are photographs of women seemingly "empowered by their bodies," to borrow a phrase from Edward Sullivan.[19] These include the portrait of Lola Alvarez Bravo's friend, painter María Izquierdo (whom Octavio Paz has described as looking like "a pre-Hispanic goddess" and praised for her authentic relationship to Mexican popular art), positioned before her own painting in *The Cupboard* in 1952.[20] Among other photographs of women are those comprising the *Triptych of Martyrdom*, which portrays three unidentified women whose strong bodies suggest their internal strength.

Lola Alvarez Bravo's career grew through the 1930s. She collaborated with Frances Toor for *Mexican Folkways* and other periodicals, notably *El Maestro Rural*, the journal of the Ministry of Public Education. She worked for this ministry for a time in the Department of Periodicals and Publications. By the 1940s, she had held several professorial positions and became part of the department of what is now the Instituto Nacional de Belles Artes. She continued to practice long after Modotti's death in 1942. Modotti had returned to Mexico in 1939, but she essentially had separated herself from photography. However, her work reappeared in the retrospective held at the Inés

Amor Gallery the year of her death. Fifty photographs gathered together from private collections received a tribute from Manuel Alvarez Bravo in the exhibition catalogue.[21] Two years later, in 1944, Lola Alvarez Bravo was given her first solo show at the Palacio de Bellas Artes; in later years her work was often included in group exhibitions and discussed in many publications. She died in 1993.

What did these women achieve? In their hands, photography became a personalized and intimate vehicle of self-expression. Neither Modotti nor Lola Alvarez Bravo resorted to a display of virtuoso technique or provocative perspective, as did Manual Alvarez Bravo. His image of a woman with loosened hair gazing into a mirror, *Portrait of the Eternal*, in 1935, uses conventional emblems of feminine beauty and self-absorption. In contrast, Modotti's *Woman with Flag, Mexico*, taken about 1928, shows a resolute woman in profile carrying a huge unfurled banner that seems to symbolize her commitment and political activism. Lola Alvarez Bravo's *Anatomy* offers viewers a sensual but not erotic male nude.

Nor did these two women photographers play with the fantastic, as did Manuel Alvarez Bravo in his *Box of Visions* in 1935. In this photograph, the head of a woman emerges seemingly disembodied, as if an apparition, in the opening between the lower portion of the box-like structure and its peaked top. In contrast, Modotti's 1929 photo, *Woman of Tehuantepec*, neither sentimentalizes nor surrealizes a woman carrying a decorative basket on her head; she comes from a region of Mexico whose society is known for its matriarchal structure.[22] Nor does Lola Alvarez Bravo transform two women, one pregnant, embracing in a courtyard doorway in *La Visitacion*. Although the photograph's title has biblical connotation, the subject appears to be no more than a human interaction.

Neither Modotti nor Lola Alvarez Bravo adopted the occasional inflated didacticism and ideological abstraction of the muralists' work. Art was a weapon, Rivera had claimed. His intentionally graceful, even picturesque, portrayal of the proletariat in the 1926 mural *The Night of the Poor*, in the Court of Fiestas of the Education Ministry, has an ideological objective. Siqueiros pushed for a revolutionary art expressed through

revolutionary techniques. In the *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, done in 1939-1940 in the staircase of the Electrical Workers' Union building, Siqueiros combined a charged indictment of capitalism and several political systems with a radically formal method. And for Orozco, the human condition warranted pessimism and satire above all, as expressed in his 1937-1938 image of *Hidalgo and National Independence* in the main staircase of the Palace of Government in Guadalajara. The terrifying conviction of Hidalgo, initiator of the Independence Movement, and the horrors of the conflict he unleashed are pictured there.

In contrast, in their photographic portrait of Mexican "things" and life, Modotti and Lola Alvarez Bravo avoided both the overt rhetoric and occasional gratuitous picturesqueness of their contemporaries, the muralists. At the same time they avoided the earlier photographers' documentary detachment. Casasola posed boys in 1922 with their equipment in *Boarding School spinning and weaving workshop*, and exhausted boys huddled together in *Town Criers*, but these images elicit only objective curiosity. In *Two Children*, taken in 1927 by Modotti, two boys cling to each other as if to ward off life's blows. In Lola Alvarez Bravo's *The Dream of the Poor*, a sleeping child "displayed" on the ground becomes as much a good for sale as the surrounding sandals. Modotti's and Lola Alvarez Bravo's intention seems not to teach, document, or appeal to our aesthetic sensibilities, but to involve us.

To return to Franco's theory of master narratives, did nationalism "plot" the lives and careers of women photographers during the period under discussion? Certainly Modotti was persecuted because of her behavior and politics. Yet both she and Lola Alvarez Bravo benefited from the fact that the Mexican Revolution made apparent Mexico's wider constituency, women included. Nevertheless, in the artistic world, the effort to construct and consolidate a national identity after the Mexican Revolution emphasized the male-dominated field of muralism. The government sanctioned the technique of mural painting, and valorized "national" subject matter, which ironically imposed constraints on participating artists.

By the 1930s, the so-called national cult of muralism tended toward formulaic repetitions or tired messages. (Some

work of course cannot be included within these generalizations.) Perhaps one can argue, as has Octavio Paz, that muralism under these circumstances closed rather than opened artistic doors because it impeded change, especially for second-generation muralists who were largely, though not exclusively, male.[23] Photography, in contrast, was a somewhat noncanonical medium, and it tended to operate through private channels available to women, by women (for example, the publisher Frances Toor and writer Anita Brenner), and for women (such as gallery owners Carolina and Inés Amor). In addition, women writers such as Alma Reed and Katherine Anne Porter commented upon photography.[24] The nationalism that permeates the photographs of Tina Modotti and Lola Alvarez Bravo is no longer simply a male construction but one linked with women, indeed with all Mexicans.[25] In a sense, Tina Modotti and Lola Alvarez Bravo "used" nationalism; they had a part in constructing a post-revolution sense of national identity. Nationalism offered them subject matter and even a *raison d'être*. Through their photographic images of Mexico, they "wrote" their own and others' individual and collective narratives.

Notes

[1]Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989): XII.

[2]*Ibid.*, XX.

[3]The republished edition of some of Kahlo's photographs compiled by Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo) and Manuel Toussaint under the title *Las Igelsias de México* (1924-27) is in the Rockefeller Library at Brown University.

[4]Octavio Paz, "The Sons of La Malinche," *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, 1985): 65-88.

[5]Franco, *Plotting Women*, XVIII-XIX.

[6]*Ibid.*

[7]See Dawn Ades (ed.), *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980* (London: The Hayward Gallery, 1989): Appendix 7.2, 323-324.

[8]Edward Sullivan, *Women in Mexico* (Mexico: Fundacíon Cultural Televisa: Centro Cultural / Arte Contemporáneo, 1990): LXXV.

[9]Margaret Hooks, *Tina Modotti: Photographer and Revolutionary* (London and San Francisco: Pandora, c. 1993): 117-118.

[10]Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, "Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti," in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989): 98. Hayden Herrera, *Frida, A Biogra-*

phy of Frida Kahlo (New York: Harper & Row, 1983): 80.

[11]Mildred Constantine, *Tina Modotti: A Fragile Life* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993): 80.

[12]Modotti complained to Weston in a letter written after her arrest in 1930 that she "didn't see what 'prettiness' [applied to her appearance] had to do with the revolutionary movement and with the expulsion of Communists—but evidently here women are gauged by a single standard." Quoted in Maria Caronia and Vittorio Vidali, *Tina Modotti Photographs* (New York: Idea Editions & Belmark Book Company, 1981): 29.

[13]"Cronología Biográfica Complementaria," *Lola Alvarez Bravo, fotografías selectas 1934-1985* (Mexico: Fundacíon Cultural Televisa: Centro Cultural / Arte Contemporáneo, 1992): 425-435; all biographical information on the photographer comes from this compilation, unless otherwise cited.

[14]Erika Billeter, "Photographers who documented history," in *Images of Mexico: The Contribution of Mexico to 20th Century Art* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1988): 374; Constantine, *Tina Modotti*, 96-97.

[15]Mulvey, "Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti," 101.

[16]"Acknowledgements," in *Lola Alvarez Bravo: The Frida Kahlo Photographs* (Dallas: Society of Friends of the Mexican Culture, 1991).

[17]Tina Modotti quoted in Hooks, *Tina Modotti*, 104.

[18]Salomon Grimberg, "Introduction," in *Lola Alvarez Bravo: The Frida Kahlo Photographs*.

[19]Sullivan, *Women in Mexico*, LXXIX.

[20]Octavio Paz, "María Izquierdo, Seen in Her Surroundings," *Essays on Mexican Art*, trans. Helen Lane (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993): 249, 259.

[21]*Ibid*., 254.

[22]See *Del istmo y sus mujeres: tehuanas en el arte mexicano*, exhibition catalogue, Museo Nacional de Arte, Ciudad de México, 1992.

[23]Octavio Paz, "Social Realism in Mexico: The murals of Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros," *Artscanada* 232 / 233 (December 1979 / January 1980), 64.

[24]Franco in *Plotting Women* (175) discusses "noncanonical genres." Sullivan, *Women in Mexico*, XXXVI-XXXVII.

[25]Franco, *Plotting Women*, 131.

ITURBIDE EVANGELICA, GRACIELA IN THE LIGHT OF SAINT LUKE

CARMEN BOULLOSA

Graciela Iturbide, A Fatherly Mother

Those who have seen Graciela Iturbide's photographs can hardly forget them; first because of their capacity to become accomplices to a world alien to that of the camera, but much more so because of the attitude of the fatherly mother. There is no indiscriminate permissiveness on the mother's part, like she who gives in to all her son's requests, but there is a link of piety and complicity.

She works with parties, drunkenness, and sacrifice. She is a witness and does not demand a mother's retributions. She pays with a magnanimous eye, cold observation, and collaboration that pretend to be impartial. She manages to be an accomplice to both the object she photographs and to those who see the photographs. She achieves the translation of someone who accedes to the other, of one who knows that others exist. Her photographs speak at least two languages: that of the people and things she photographs and that of the observer of the images on paper. Her photographs are pure language.

She is both mother and father. She forces the cruel law of the world to be carried out and yet she knows piety and complicity. The unconditional mother, the virgin, untouched by man, she exerts the power of femininity indiscriminately over others, without accepting the truth of that which exists outside of her body (not even her own son). She is the first to be sacrificed through the giving of herself, through a devotion that gives in to her son's will. Her existence is self-denial, giving of herself to a monster that respects no one, not even himself (if any of his wishes show him this). Even the suicidal man pampered by his mother does not want to recognize the inflexibility of death; he wants to force death's arrival on his terms.

On one hand, there is tenderness and its burning condescension. On the other, there is the hard inflexibility of the

existence of an ungovernable, harsh, and intolerant reality. On one hand, the mother gives in to all. On the other, the father says "no," and teaches the son with one syllable that others exist. The body ends where one's skin ends; the mother's body is not an extension of one's own. The son is torn from the father's seed and personified in the mother's depersonalized persona. To satisfy his desires and avoid ever being marked by frustration and to avoid "no" entering his life, he refuses to recognize the existence of others or his collectivity with them. He refuses to respect them; recognize that they are different from him; that there are others; and that his individual law must yield in order to carry out the collective law.

The myth of man begotten by woman without the intervention of the father's seed, that is, the son of the Virgin untouched by the power of the father. It is the myth of the man who belongs to the mother and not the father; it is also the myth of the man who will never be torn from her apron strings. His mother, the Virgin, who pleases all, who says "no" to nothing, sustains her son's miraculous reality. For him there will never be the "no" of the father that would confront him with the world's power since the son's wishes will prevail over the truth of others.

The son's miracles and power will be based on the fact that he was never exposed to anything that went against his judgment or will. The father has never said to him "what is yours is not worth anything" or "face the world, either try to control it or submit to it." The fatherless son will have before him, day after day, his mother opening the doors so he will never experience any obstacle in his path or any impediment to his wishes. All that surrounds him will be his.

The father, if he is a carpenter, will have no power other than that of resignation. On the other hand, the anger of the father-king will be great upon seeing, in his bastard son, the birth of the monster that will devour him and all that inhabits the world, for he knows that the son belongs to the mother alone, and that he shall know no limit other than his own appetite. He will fear, in his wisdom, the destructive cruelty of this human appetite. The anger of the father-king will be so great that he will order all children under two years of age assassinated because he is unable to identify the child who is

not his son, but who lives within his kingdom's territory. Then, the virgin mother will defend the child and he will survive the massacre of the innocents.

One day, the fatherless child will grow up; he will stop being a child and the mother will demand that he repay the wishes and favors granted. Through the years he has demonstrated miracles at home, for his wishes have all been fulfilled, one after another, without the virgin mother ever saying "no." Now the moment comes in which he shall repay his mother's unconditional self-denial; he must demonstrate that he is miraculous in front of others and make public the power of his wishes. And it is precisely in a tantrum that he first demonstrates his power. The law of reality, the existence of others, the finite quality of all things, the property of others, and one's own limitations will be overcome in the turning of water into wine. The necessary and the frugal will become personal pleasure, taste, and excess. And the wine into which the water has been transformed will be the best of wines. The host of the party will be reprimanded for waiting until the end to bring out the best wine. His only mistake was to allow the initial wine to run out before the party was over, before leading everybody to intoxication, the moment in which difficulty and the inflexibility of reality dissolve in drunkenness.

When drunk, everyone will feel, like the virgin's son, that everything is possible; that the strong do not eat the weak, and that the law of human nature is conquered because all is pleasure. And he seems to escape the party when all is rough, difficult, inflexible.

Then, the father-God, assuming paternity, will demand the death of the son who has no human father since so much permissiveness must eventually lead to sacrifice. The virgin's son will die when the intoxication disappears.

At the moment of sacrifice, at the time when the permissive virgin mother, condescending, loses all power, when the laws of fantasy are sacrificed before a divine and cruel law, Graciela Iturbide goes to work. Born in Mexico City in 1942, a student of the *Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos* (University Center of Cinematographic Studies), and a pupil of Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Iturbide, the fatherly mother, takes the camera, presses down on the shutter release, and captures

her photographs.

What follows is the ritual in sacrifice that remains fixed by the eye of her camera. In the photograph *In the Name of the Father,* whole herds are sacrificed. Everything is ceremony, for something must appease the anger of the father-god.

In an interview with Marcia Torresasia, Graciela Iturbide says:

> Generally, I try to capture the instant, but there must be a complicity between the subject and the photographer, and many times, when I am shooting, people want to be shot 'just so.' In Madagascar, for example, I ran into a teacher that went back for his tools; I call him the 'geometry teacher.' He went back for his rulers and compasses and then came over and sat down in his little chair. There, between the two of us, we made the photograph. Or, for example, in Juchitán, they'll call you and say: 'Look, there's an abduction going on, come, why don't you come and photograph it?' They called me at the moment when the women come to place flowers on the 'kidnapped' as they see she is a virgin. Next, the girl stays in bed four or five days, I believe, and then she gets married. When I took the photograph, it was the ritual moment: they had placed flowers and red confetti around her, then they celebrated with music. Then, yes, I do take some posed photographs, of course.

Again, Graciela Iturbide is a fatherly mother. From this perspective, she takes photographs that are not ethnic, but rather complicit, hard, and austere. Her images come from the vision of a fatherly mother: the Chicano with the Virgin of Guadalupe tattooed on his back; the girls from Juchiteca with their unusual adornments; the one she called *Angel Woman*—an Indian witch aided by a transistor radio, ready to fly over the desert, pulling on a string that hangs from we know not where, with the unbound hair of a witch, the skirt of an Indian

woman, and a wristwatch.

If the mother, who surrenders to all, makes her son turn water into wine to inebriate us, then the other mother, the fatherly mother who accepts that her skin is not hers but her son's, is the one who accepts the separation and the existence of that different being. She is separate from herself and the being that has left her empty—her son. She turns all senses into touch, a response to external happening, and transforms the wine of confusion and drunkenness into clear water, while capturing the image of the sacrifice on paper so that we can observe it.

Graciela Iturbide's photographs impiously observe others who are not she and who are different. She does not observe them without seeing them, like the father-god when he sees in his creation that which his work has accomplished, nor like the mother who, overwhelmed with tenderness, does not understand that what she sees is not hers. In her photographs, Iturbide achieves not only a merciless and synergistic fixedness, but also a gaze that is the dialogue and the skin of the fatherly mother. The fatherly mother is dialogue and skin, but for the son subjected to the mother, there is no possibility of consenting to the skin, the dialogue, or the eroticism. There is no space for him. It is not that his eroticism does not exist; it will be a hungry wolf that lurks in the woods; it will be the man-eating tiger that hides in the bushes bordering the village; it will be the lioness whose cubs have been snatched away from her.

The prostitutes approach to bathe his feet and he will convince them to abandon the ways of the flesh and submit to his order, an order without skin, an order that does not permit strangers' caresses, an impudent order (for skin is learned, it is known through contact with others). The order proposed by the virgin's son is the order in which the other does not exist. There are no vehicles to approach the others, nor is there skin or dialogue.

The fatherly mother (language and skin) is the one who shows the existence of the other in her eyes. That is why there is an intertwining of mercilessness and tenderness in her photographs. Above all, there is the power of a gaze that accepts difference and succeeds in capturing it sculpture-like

in the photographic image. These images are not abstractions or pure light, but masses and things—living and immobile sculptures that mock those who look at them because, although confined by the rigidity they are immersed in, under their invisible skin flows calm and plentiful blood. That blood is pumped by a heart that recognizes difference between the Seri, the Zapoteca, the Juchiteca, in the exacerbated moment of the ceremony. And there are instances (as in her series of photos entitled *In the Name of the Father*) where blood crosses through the image, flowing unrestrained in front of the camera in broad daylight.

In *The Ascension*, four naked feet protrude from an Indian skirt, comprising the entire body of the portrait and seem to be going to heaven. In the *Little Mexican Angel*, a costumed child is both a parody and a ceremony. The *Powerful Hands* portrays two women (a girl and an old woman) holding up two hands carved in wood for the camera to photograph; the live hands are the landscape and the carved ones are the faces of the portrait. Goat skins and the open goat hides co-inhabit in a ritual way with the living, participating in the indecipherable mystery that links life to death.

In the Light of Saint Luke

In the Gospel according to Saint Luke, the story of the arrival of the son of man begins at the moment when men and women lose power over their bodies. Zachariah is upset, he is afraid of the angel that has come to announce his control over the most intimate parts of their bodies and when he tries to compose himself by arguing that "*For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years*" [Luke 1:18], the angel punishes him, making him mute.

The elderly couple conceive an impossible son, and six months later, the Angel Gabriel visits Mary to announce the fatherless conception that will take place in her body, the upcoming birth of a son that is not engendered by male seed, a son that is to be born in a body neither possessed by man nor dominated or possessed by woman, but in the dispossessed body of Mary.

> How shall this be, since I have no husband? And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.' [Luke 1:36]

Graciela Iturbide uses the light of Saint Luke to pursue rituals, ceremonies, and parties. She photographs them, trying to capture in them the bodies that do not understand the light of Saint Luke, those who are punished by the angel with muteness. Iturbide, in her search for the sacrifice sent by the father-god, fuels the lens and this, with an open appetite, leads her to photograph more rites.

> I think that in all human beings, ritual is implicit in one way or another. We get up, listen to music; we have certain rituals in all social classes and in all cultures, but in Mexico, especially, there is the tradition of parties—now very stylized—that comes to us from pre-Hispanic times. I feel that Mexico is a culture of many rituals, many parties, many traditions and, well, in some way that has always interested me. Going to photograph all this is also a way of getting to know my country. You go, for example, to the North of Mexico with the Seris and their rituals; their customs have nothing to do with the Zapotecas or with other cultures.

Saint Luke's light illuminates Iturbide's gaze of an irreverent beast, an avid, blood-thirsty creature that chases self-possessed bodies, and escapes the laws of the dispossession of bodies in ceremonies. Muted by the angel that delivers the son to the virgin, they speak; they are pure skin when the sacrifice indicated by the father overcomes them. Her photographs are

skin, body, the male seed that introduces a stranger to the spectator, the image of the other, the image of that which we cannot control, and of that which we find very much alive in the photograph. Iturbide travels, searching for the object to photograph with the condition that this object must always be possessed by its own body, alien to the law of Saint Luke. She does not want dispossessed bodies in the light of Saint Luke, nor does she want Isaiah's law thus cited to rule in a place where difference reigns:

> Every valley shall be lifted up,
> and every mountain and hill be made low;
> the uneven ground shall become level,
> and the rough places a plain [Isaiah 40:4]

True life is in the possessed body, in the deep valleys, the high mountains, the uneven and the rough. And Graciela Iturbide is determined to photograph it, not in her landscapes, but in her human representations. She photographs that which is different, the rough and the uneven. She finds this in the ritual, in the ceremonial, and in the parties:

"I want to continue," Iturbide says,

> working with this type of ritual related to parties and death....I am especially interested in working here in Mexico. The people dress up in costumes, they put on death's skulls, they eat little skulls made of sugar, they slaughter animals, maybe in a violent manner, but always with a ritual, praying. Because of this, my latest book is called *In the Name of the Father*, because before slaying the lamb, people pray, they dance to the goat, and they surround it with flowers before the slaughter.

Photographing sacrifice is where the vitality of bodies blossoms and escape the laws of Saint Luke. In the cruel slaughter, the tenderness, the skin, and in the blood, there is living flesh. That which is photographed in Mexico is that which escapes Saint Luke's law—the cultures that survive

after almost five hundred years, the darkness of Saint Luke's light.

Notes

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Reading the Gaze

Marjorie Agosín

When she greets you in person, Mariana Yampolsky's gaze matches her photographic images. It is precise and delicate, never subjugating nor strident. She is like her photography—direct and real, with cadences, silences, and an essential laughter. Her visions and revisions of images are born of the direct experience with the faces and habitats of the Mexican people, their houses, rustic haciendas, abandoned monuments, and memory, which speaks for itself. She photographs what is absent, but that which can be recovered by the eye that does not try to possess.

It is difficult to generalize about Yampolsky's exhaustive output, but her importance to Mexican photography is clear. Her latest exhibit, shown from February to August 1994 at the prestigious Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, included an extensive selection of approximately fifty photographs of Mexican architecture. She has shown her photographs in Europe, and will soon edit in London a book about Mexican architecture.

Since the 1940s, Yampolsky has been one of the most prolific figures in the field of Mexican engravings and photography. It is fitting to stress her training as a member from 1945 to 1958 of the Popular Graphics Workshop, a memorable group of artists dedicated to promoting art for the people. This stage set the pattern for the visual commitment and integrity manifested in Yampolsky's work; all of her photographs and books are highly ethical and socially conscious. According to Elena Poniatowska:

> Endowed with a deep sense of political responsibility, Mariana is one of those who renounces self in order to serve whichever cause seems most compelling to her at the moment. It becomes necessary for her to take care of other people's needs, and to put off her own work. To be more than a photographer, to not

> live from photography, to share, to give, and to not avoid commitment or social demands.[1]

It is not necessarily anachronistic to speak of the ethical nature of her work. Recent Mexican photography has come under postmodern and capitalistic pressure from the United States market. This market seeks to hoard the vision of the photographed object to own the amorphous and ambiguous image, to define the identity of the exotic and the other. Photographs for export, which appeal to the eyes of foreigners, include, for example, the works of Graciela Iturbide, Weston, and the paintings of Frida Kahlo, which are certainly extraordinary works of art. But these also have become icons of the mass market. Yampolsky does not fit into this category.

Yampolsky's photographs represent an alternative body of work within contemporary Mexican photography. From her earliest images in beautiful books such as *La casa que canta* (*The House That Sings*) and *Haciendas poblanas* (*Haciendas of Puebla*), to those of her most recent book, *Mazahua*, she demonstrates the visionary gaze of the photographer who loves what she sees and the people she portrays. Her photography does not judge or keep guard; nor does she interrupt ceremonies of memory or ancestral rites. Hers is a vision that has empathy and compassion for the photographed object, and that allows the object to speak authentically and autonomously, whether it is a threshold or a ball of wool.

It is not surprising that much of Yampolsky's work has been published with commentary by Elena Poniatowska, the distinguished Mexican writer and journalist. I refer to that vital and obvious collaboration since both women have devoted their work, words, and images to those who are invisible, voiceless, and marginalized by society. Yampolsky and Poniatowska are the legacy and the voice of Latin American muteness, forging alliances between images and words. Poniatowska reflects on Yampolsky's photographs: "With an infinite respect, Mariana registers popular expressions. She is not like photographers who wait in ambush to record violent emotions. She does not want to be sent to the front, to the action. She fights a different war, one that is very profound."[2]

It is extraordinarily difficult to discuss, record, and narrate poverty without resorting to the metaphors of paternalism. However, Yampolsky manages to do so, and this is her most extraordinary achievement. In *La casa que canta*, one of her fundamental texts, she approaches the image in a subtle way, never trying to possess or dominate the subject. Yampolsky draws near with her old and always visible camera to photograph the dwellings of her country. The prologue to this edition describes how across history and centuries the Mexican peasant:

> ...has lived here silently observing the rising of the sun, the moon, and the glow of the darkness. The house rises like a temple on a small, pyramid-shaped base. Front steps lead to a single, windowless room. There is a notable austerity in the houses of both the nobility and the common people.[3]

Yampolsky has managed to portray in *La casa que canta*, with her gentle point of view, the memory of what has been left behind, such as the pre-Hispanic buildings of the people. A determined look at this singular work also allows her interlocutor to pause and consider the materials that otherwise would be lost. Yampolsky details the rigorous rhythm of stone, sand, moss, and the structure of the earth itself that has molded the human landscape and taken even deeper roots in it, because she chooses the slow and tense time of the Mexican countryside, the tolling of the bells, the tomatoes on a ledge next to the Christ Child of Atocha, the garlic and the onions, the portable stoves, and the girl who bathes in the middle of the river.[4]

I asked her why she devotes so much time to architecture. She told me that she is moved by man, his essence, his nature, and that she likes to photograph houses because they represent an extension of her vision and her camera. She says she could never be separated from her camera.

Critics consider Yampolsky one of the most renowned photographers of pre-Hispanic and popular architecture in

Latin America. Her constant preoccupation with buildings and their materials, doors, and thresholds responds to that union wherein man and his habitat become entwined with the essence of life itself, the ordinary, and the magical. That is what Yampolsky traces with her simple and profound camera.

In *La casa que canta*, we see that the house of the Mexican peasant is also the seat of honor for sacred ceremonies. It is here one loves, eats, sleeps, and offers gifts to the holy spirits. Earth and matter are unified, and the frontages of the buildings almost match the faces that inhabit them.

Although I have stressed the works involving popular architecture, I also find enormously influential her collection of photographs depicting the dream-like and forgotten seventeenth-century haciendas in the state of Puebla. It is important to point out that Yampolsky never photographs a peasant divorced from the context of his culture, his hands, and his precarious art. All of Yampolsky's architectural photography speaks of man within nature, within the ceremonies of the sun and the darkness, rooting him firmly in his essential traditions, never extracting him from his culture.

More than any Mexican photographer, Yampolsky possesses a great sense of morality and respect for what her eye captures but does not imprison. In our conversations she affirmed that she is incapable of photographing misfortune. Her lens cannot witness an intense and private funeral, so she will not approach it. She will relinquish the silence, the time, and the privacy of the individual. That is why Yampolsky's photography is full of those silent and secret zones where the camera does not manipulate the images, but rather allows her to capture a vision with subtlety and caution, as if the camera were independent of the subject. At the same time, she always presents Mexico as open and illuminated.

Doorways and windows, tested by time and memory, thresholds and desolate, uninhabited walls remain perpetual and solitary, forming the essence of Yampolsky's photography. The photographed space is delineated by both ample and simple lines, as if behind the first eye there is a second one—the secret and intimate one—the one that lasts. The memorable thing about her photography is that rather than portray what is Mexican, it seeks to penetrate those invisible zones and

times, such as the peasant ceremonies, in their purest form. Yet, Yampolsky appears to approach these countenances head on, hiding neither her face or her camera. As Elena Poniatowska writes: "Mariana lives life as an essential task, she belongs to the human community. The destiny of mankind is her responsibility. Mariana is essentially a responsible person."[5]

Her photographs show memorable scenes because they rescue the zones and spaces of silence, because they never disguise the face of the Mexican or his dwelling.

The book *Las estaciones del olvido* includes unified and translucent photographs of landscapes, stairs that gaze ceremoniously toward the sky, and peasants submerged in the celebration and the pain of working the earth.

Every photograph implies a settling into the future, a desire to exercise memory, and to endure. In Yampolsky's case, the majority of the scenes she has shot not only approaches memory and its vestiges, but also rescues it and its image of the future. The texts of *La casa que canta*, *Haciendas poblanas*, and *Mazahua* point to a recuperation of memory, not in a lineal or historical way, but in a way that is also linked to the age of the circular calendar of the sun, harvest time, seasons, light, and day, which invoke the Mexico of Mesoamerica. Yampolsky's photographs are removed from an institutional framework and do not pretend to embody any kind of destiny. Instead, they appear open in all their splendid and simple magnitude: a woman stroking her horse; a policeman and an anonymous woman looking at one other as if they were at once strangers and acquaintances. These images appear mobilized through her lens. They are beings threatened by the urgency to survive, marked by a futureless time, yet full of memories such as their houses, the sacred tatoos of recollection.

Through her numerous exhibits and her field work, Yampolsky possesses the most complete collection of photographs dealing with Mexican popular architecture. She travels through the extensive territory of Mexican memory; her heart, like her camera, pauses in the zones of the invisible, remote, and essential. Mexico is her country, and she loves it despite having grown up in Chicago, Illinois.

Her latest book is a history of marginality and dizzying pain. It is the story of the Mazahua people, the chronicle of a community's endless struggle for political, religious, and cultural freedom. As Elena Poniatowska writes in the introduction, it is true that Yampolsky ranks among the very few individuals who have been able to depict native peoples with the appropriate view point—above all in regard to their own identity as groups left to wither in the zones of the forgotten.

Over many years, Yampolsky has come to know this native community, but once again her vision is subtle, not sensationalistic. The Indians are not cast as figures with feathers and magic pots, who have been endowed with, then stripped of, desirable virtues by the Western eye. Rather, we glimpse their innocence, shyness, and anger. More than creating a portrait, the photography describes their ceremonies and open and closed spaces. Sketched on their faces are expressions disfigured by sadness and farewell-to-life scenes that depict women submerged in a vast whiteness. She photographs both daily and sacred rituals, but does not use them as part of her personal story. Instead she allows her eye to accompany the Mazahuas in their experiences and rituals, and to seemingly speak for these indigenous communities of the states of Michoacán and Querétaro. She photographs immense and desolate valleys in all their grandeur, rivers, and the faces of the children at play—their expressions full of the most elemental sweetness. In this way, landscape and face become part of the image as if they were a single text or a single vision.

Despite being the daughter of Europeans and spending many years in Chicago, Yampolsky loves Mexico, and maintains that she is never taken for a *gringa*, that she is Mexican. When I ask her to share her personal experiences with me, to tell me about her work, she modestly states that she does not wish to speak about her photography, that it is simply ridiculous to talk about herself. She says that the word *artist* annoys her. "When I see a photograph that moves me, I don't ask whether it is art. Rather, I wonder how the people, so brilliantly captured by Carter Bresson or Eugene Smith, live. I don't ask myself whether it is document, myth, or some sort of obligation to society."[6]

Yampolsky's gaze likens a transparent figure that lies somewhere between luminous and solid. According to Poniatowska, she fell in love with Mexico when she first saw bougainvillaea. Yampolsky loves the Mexico of street vendors, drunken *zócalos*, clay pitchers, and of women who wear red petticoats and are what they are. For her there is no distinction between appearance and portrait. She wishes to capture all the strands and everything that vibrates and is.

We spoke a long while, and I feel that there is an act of faith in what she says and does. We repeatedly spoke of respect for what photography is, for what an image is unable to say, and of respect toward others. Yampolsky always seems to be thinking aloud, as if her words were seeking the echo of the interlocutor. Her speech reminded me of the way she takes pictures—with desire and humility. Her discreet camera pauses in the regions of despair, extreme poverty, and yet despite it all, she allows her subjects to project humility and faith.

Mexico has seduced an endless number of brilliant individuals, from André Breton, who declared the country the most magical place on earth, to Neruda, who loved its colorful markets and described them beautifully in his poems. I place Yampolsky in this company because, more than any other Mexican photographer, she has been moved by the secrets of her country, and has traveled in search of the vast land, the desolate wilderness that still blankets the seats of honor from which the amazing can be viewed. She has given a voice to houses, doors, thresholds, dancing women, and women with deep and powerful gazes. She has photographed the ephemeral, the popular, the ceremonies of the people, and above all, the life experience of a community of artists. Yampolsky always leaves something of herself in her work, taking care not to transform the material image into a dream of her own.

She says that her camera is a physical extension of herself, and that is why we see her take it everywhere, as if it were her hand or her gaze. When she speaks about her camera she hides nothing, she is merely a woman who looks, and when she sees herself, feels pity, creates distances, but then erases them, approaches cautiously, and asks if she can photograph a wall, a horse, an hacienda. And in that permission lies all the generosity, the adventure of her instrument, and her light. Her

camera is small. She carries it in a white handbag, disassembling all prior assumptions about the immense and devouring apparatus. No one accompanies her to carry her equipment. She walks alone, quietly, surrounded by magic.

Yampolsky cannot catalog her photographs. They are too varied, and they bear witness to the forgotten, to the memory of the lost communities of Mexico. I am impressed when she photographs the *maguey*, the *copal*, because through her lens these sacred plants acquire an unusual beauty, a distance that approximates the millenary history of these silent communities.

Moreover, Yampolsky's photography draws us toward intimacy, toward what is mortal and sacred, the face of a little girl illuminated by the sky, women alone, white petticoats, and a time when things are no longer fertile and where everything is history. "We are Mazahua women, the ones who used to own deer, and now do not even have men. They all went off to work in construction, they left for the big cities, far away with bricklayers, they come once a month and then not at all. We never see them again."[7]

In sum, Yampolsky guides us toward the history of the people and Mexico, the massacred territory and the women who remove the corn from the cobs, the ones who sell beans, and she photographs luminous bougainvillaea, too. But she also takes us to summertime, the heart of the corn and the day, the thresher and the truces, and to the open and desolate landscape. She is like a gaze that doesn't stand guard, only loves. She likes to photograph corn and pregnant women. Her camera always selects the black and the white and divines by lots. It is an open history and a devoted reader of her gaze.

Notes

[1]Elena Poniatowska, "Prologue" in *La raíz y el camino* (*The Root and the Road*) (Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989): 7.

[2]Poniatowska, "Prologue."

[3]Mariana Yampolsky, *La casa que canta* (Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987): 14.

[4]Poniatowska, *La raíz y el camino*, 2.

[5]*La raíz y el camino*, 5.

[6]*La raíz y el camino*, 7.

[7]Elena Poniatowska, "Prologue," in Mariana Yampolsky, *Mazahua* (Toluca: Gobierno ddel Estado de Mexico, 1993).

Mariana Yampolsky: An Artistic Commitment

Sandra Berler

The figure is centered with her back to the camera. Her head is covered in a rough white triangular cloth. Barefoot, she steps away from the viewer across the cobblestones of her village. A rural stillness emanates from the picture; intense light and shadow wash the image. In this picture, *Huipil de Tapar* (a simple cotton garment used as a head covering), photographer Mariana Yampolsky captures a native woman against the foothills and architecture of rural Mexico. It is a timeless Mexican scene, and it invites us to share the photographer's commitment to her adopted country.

Yampolsky, born in 1925 in Chicago and now a Mexican citizen, is a distinguished artist with a long career as an engraver, illustrator, editor, curator, and photographer. Her photography continues her early work as a muralist and graphic artist who combines social and political issues through artistic media. Yampolsky seeks to create art that can be seen and shared by a broad population.

She grew up on her grandfather's 123-acre farm in rural Crystal Lake, Illinois, but her family life was enriched by the presence of artists, scientists, and anthropologists, whose collected artifacts introduced her to primitive cultures. It was a free-thinking intellectual environment where great value was placed on independence, tolerance, education, and ideas. This stimulating childhood created a lifelong passion for books and reading. She had her own library, enlarged with contributions from her German grandmother, who sent children's books from Germany. She attended public elementary school and two years of public High School in Crystal Lake. As a child, Yampolsky attended classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, remarkable at that time for its use of nude models. By the age of twelve she was drawing and engraving in every spare moment.

Yampolsky's father, Oscar Yampolsky, a sculptor, introduced her to photography by allowing her to help develop the family portraits he made with an enormous Speed Graflex. She remembers "watching with fascination as the images ap-

peared like magic in the trays and this sense of amazement is still with me."[1]

Around 1940, Yampolsky entered the University of Chicago, from where she graduated in 1944 with a bachelor of arts degree in the humanities. At that time, the University of Chicago was one of the most exciting yet serious places for education in the United States. Mortimer Adler's "100 Great Books" course was inaugurated under Robert Maynard Hutchins' tenure as president of the University. Football was banned and there were no sororities and fraternities. Students who chose to be there were dedicated to bettering society. Yampolsky's personal and artistic development was shaped by the university atmosphere and by the events of her time, including the Great Depression, social turmoil, war, and displacement of people.

It was in Chicago that she saw John Steinbeck's film about Mexico, *The Forgotten Village*. She says she "listened entranced" a few weeks later as Max Kahn and Eleanor Coen, two lithographers, described the Mexican mural movement and their experiences at the Taller de Gráfica Popular (The Workshop for Popular Graphic Art) in Mexico City. These two events determined her future; in 1944 she left for Mexico.

Yampolsky joined the stream of artists who by the mid-1940s had been inspired to live and work in post-revolutionary Mexico. The atmosphere of social and economic reform, the inexpensive cost of living, and the nearness of anthropology, art, and folklore attracted both expatriate Americans and refugees from World War II. Many people settled in Mexico out of a desire to leave behind an increasingly materialistic society, to escape militarism and fascism, and to lead a less complex way of life.

In the 1920s, intellectuals, writers, and artists began shifting away from the heavy European influence that had pervaded Mexico's culture since the arrival of European conquerors. Under Minister of Education José Vasconcelos, the Mexican government supported the creation of Mexican art that would unify social sectors that had been fragmented by the Mexican revolution.[2] Ideas of art for the populace were openly propagandistic. The government supported the monumental public murals executed by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco,

and David Alfaro Siqueiros. The government's goal was to promote art that would address Mexico's historical legacy as well as its current social problems. The intent of this art was to encourage awareness and pride in the people; emphasis was on the identity of a Mexican nation.

In the 1930s, graphic artists who were not necessarily sponsored by the government began to record the economic and social plight of the workers and farming people, and to capture a way of life that was authentically Mexican and not tainted by foreign influences. During this decade, few foreign photographers were interested in looking beyond the picturesque or idealized Indian. Two prominent exceptions to this were photographers Anton Bruehl and Paul Strand, who took a more intimate look at the people of Mexico. Bruehl mainly photographed individuals removed from their historical cultural context. Strand viewed Mexican peasants, ancient walls, and churches with a more critical eye. He also made a politically motivated film titled *The Wave*, which was sponsored by the Mexican government and dealt with social injustice in a Gulf Coast fishing village. Mexican muralist and graphic artist David Alfaro Siqueiros continued the attack upon naïve and folkloric depictions of the Mexican Indian that had made their way into American art and the murals of Rivera. Other American painters, like Pablo O'Higgins and Marion Greenwood, undertook mural commissions of workers and political events. Photographer Edward Weston also lived and worked in Mexico during the 1920s. Although he made abstractions of Mexican folk objects and landscapes, he preferred to focus on classical forms, shapes, and textures. Wilson was much admired, but his works show little interest in the cultural and social problems of Mexico that Yampolsky would focus upon.[3]

When Yampolsky arrived in Mexico in the mid-1940s she enrolled in the Escuela de Pintura y Escultura (The School of Painting and Sculpture), popularly known as "La Esmeralda." The atmosphere at the school was relaxed, and students were left alone to work. In contrast to the more academic or disciplined tradition of teaching, it was an open system.

The most meaningful influence on Yampolsky in Mexico was her participation in the Taller de Gráfica Popular, a cooperative workshop of painters and graphic artists in Mexico

City dedicated to social and political issues. It was founded in 1937 by Leopoldo Mendez, Pablo O'Higgins, Luis Arenal, and encouraged by David Alfaro Siqueiros.

> The workshop took a strong anti-fascist stand during the Second World War. Its most active years were part of a tremendously intense period of political ferment in Mexico in which artists played a participatory role. The workshop's heart was shaped by a desire to put its members' creative capacity at the service of the people.[4]

Among her mentors at the Taller was Leopoldo Mendez, whose graphic art illustrates "customs and past times of common folk, re-creation of scenes from the revolution, and acrid caricaturesque denunciation of contemporary political events."[5] O'Higgins, the painter, who became her lifelong friend, was committed to using his skills as a muralist and printmaker to illustrate social injustice and to advance the cause of labor and the working class.

Using black and white graphics, woodcuts, and linoleum cuts, artists produced posters, pamphlets, leaflets, and illustrations for labor and teachers' unions and farmers' organizations. The aesthetic of the graphic artist was shaped by the muralists, by the expressionist lithographs of George Grosz, Kathe Kollwitz, and master lithographer Jesus Arteaga, and by social realism as a vehicle of political expression. This aesthetic combined political propaganda and artistic expression, a philosophy that continues to be important to Yampolsky. After a six-month apprenticeship, she was accepted as the first woman member of Taller de Gráfica Popular. While working there, she earned her living teaching English literature to high school students, and she went on to teach in the initial Foreign Language program of the National Polytechnical Institute in Mexico City.

The standards were very high at the Taller and the work was exacting. Each print had to be approved by all the members. As Yampolsky recalls, "The collective nature also extended to our social role as artists. We were more interested in

El mandil (*The Apron*) 1988
Marianna Yampolsky

others than in ourselves."[6]

In 1949, Swiss architect Hannes Mayer, the former director of the Bauhaus, asked Yampolsky to photograph the younger members of the Taller for a book, *The Workshop for Popular Graphic Art; A Record of Twelve Years of Collective Work.* Although she had just begun experimenting with photography, this medium became increasingly important to her work. Mariana was mainly self-taught in photography. While at the Taller she took a short photography course with Lola Alvarez Bravo in the Academy of San Carlos, UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México). Bravo may have introduced Yampolsky to a certain vision, a straightforward formal way of constructing a picture within the lens. Bravo observed painters' technical concerns and photographed the way muralists painted.[7] Bravo encouraged a focus on strong light and shadow, on orderly, elegant shapes, on figures framed in doorways and against walls and other architecture, always with reference to Mexico's historical and natural settings. It was nonconfrontational photography. From making black and white engravings, Yampolsky understood the great importance of light, volume, and composition.

At the Taller, Yampolsky served as an engraver, and she was appointed the first female member of the executive committee. As curator of exhibitions, she organized and sent collective exhibits throughout Mexico, the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Within Mexico, Yampolsky was designer and curator of the twentieth anniversary retrospective exhibition of the Taller's works. This was held in Mexico City in 1956 at the Palace of Fine Arts under the title "Gran Muestra de la Obra del TGP." She was illustrator for the magazine *Construyamos Escuelas* (*Let's Build Schools*), and she designed a poster for the film *Memorias de un Mexicano,* which was among the first documentaries on the Mexican Revolution. She won prizes for a poster in 1952, and for several years was an illustrator in Mexico City for the newspapers *El Nacional* in 1956, *Excelsior* in 1958, and *El Dia* in 1962. In 1966, she exhibited in the thirtieth anniversary show of the Taller at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City.

In 1959, two events marked a turning point in Yampolsky's career. There was a schism in the workshop and she left the

Angel exterminador (*Angel Exterminator*) 1991
Marianna Yampolsky

organization with most of the members. She was invited to assist Leopoldo Mendez in editing art books for the Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana, a publishing house that he had founded. She assisted him with a book on the great Mexican illustrator J. G. Posada and was coeditor and photographer for another book, *Lo Efimero y Eterno del Arte Popular Mexicano* (*The Ephemeral and the Eternal of Mexican Popular Art*), later published in 1970 by El Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana. To produce this two-volume book that described traditional Mexican dances, ceremonies, and objects of folk art, she traveled all over Mexico for three years, visiting collections of popular art. This was the first professional publication of her photographs. But before the book was published, Mendez died and Yampolsky gave up engraving to become a full-time photographer.

At this point, Yampolsky was able to combine all of her interests—editing, curating, and photography—to encourage the production of popular art in the provinces. Under Mexico's Secretariat of Education, she directed graphic design and photography for natural science textbooks used in grade schools. She created and edited a weekly publication for children called *Colibrí*, using the talents of the foremost writers and painters of Mexico. This gave rise to a radio series that she also directed. Over the years, Yampolsky edited some art books, including *Diego Rivera's Murals in the Secretariat of Education*, *Children* (children pictured in art from the pre-Colombian period to the present), *The Imagination of Indigenous Children*, and *Mexican Toys*. She was coordinator of art books on Francisco Toledo, the contemporary painter from Oaxaca, and Pablo O'Higgins, the well-known Mexican painter, lithographer, and muralist.

Experts consider Yampolsky a brilliant curator, and she is widely respected for the exhibitions she has put together throughout the years.[8] The most recent shows she has curated include an international exhibition of Mexican photography for the 150th Anniversary of Photography, *Memoria del Tiempo* (*Memory of Time*) in 1989 for the Mexican Museum of Modern Art, and a retrospective of the work of photographer Enrique Díaz for the Mexican National Archives.

The photographers that Yampolsky most identifies with, for enlarging her knowledge of the world and for their concern with aesthetics and social issues are Doreathea Lange, Paul Strand, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Brassaï, Andre Kertesz, and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Yampolsky says she does not believe women photographers have a distinctive point of view; she believes that Cartier-Bresson's picture of a father and child, for example, is no less poignant than such a photograph would be if it were taken by a woman. She says that being a woman was never an obstacle within the intellectual and artistic community of Mexico.

In the 1930s and 1940s, women artists, painters, writers, and photographers such as Lola Alvarez Bravo, Frida Kahlo, Maria Izquirdo, and Lupe Marin (Diego Rivera's first wife) were well-known and respected. Women were considered equals to men in this world. She believes Frida Kahlo's growing popularity abroad has helped Mexican women photographers become better known. She cannot recall ever being discriminated against for being a woman artist. On the contrary, she says she has been encouraged and befriended by men such as Pablo O'Higgins, Leopoldo Mendez, and art historian Francisco Reyes Palma.

The progression of Yampolsky's work from the medium of engraving to the medium of black-and-white photography shows her earnest devotion to the idea of making art accessible to many people. Both media allow the artist to make many black-and-white prints. This is important because the relatively inexpensive reproduction of these media takes art out of the hands of the elite and makes it more accessible to the larger public. Yampolsky says she is disturbed by the practice of numbering prints and restricted editions in photography because this makes them too rare and defeats the potential egalitarianism of these media.

Like many talented artists, Yampolsky uses her camera almost as a personal appendage that is always ready to enhance her efforts at writing, editing, publishing, and recording Mexican anthropology and folk customs. Her books convey themes and references to history, ancient traditions, and changing culture.

La Casa en la Tierra (*The House of the Earth*), written by Elena Poniatowska in 1981, and *La Casa que Canta* (*The House that Sings*), and the forthcoming *Traditional Architecture of Mexico*, written by Chloe Sayer in 1982 and 1993 respectively, are about homes and storage areas of rural Mexico. *Tlacotlalpan*, written by Elena Poniatowska in 1987, is a collection of images of a town in Veracruz. *La Raiz y el Camino* (*The Road and Roots*), written by Poniatowska in 1985, is a selection of her photographs. *The Forgotten Estates* and *Haciendas of Puebla* explore the old plantation system. *Mazahua* documents a village where the women are left behind as the men go off to work in the cities. *Thinking About Mexico* is a retrospective book of Yampolsky's work published in 1993, with text by Erika Billeter. These publications celebrate Mexico, using Yampolsky's own images or those of others. She is responsible for monographs on Romualdo Garcia, a turn of the century studio photographer, and the early twentieth century photographer Enrique Díaz.

Throughout her career as a photographer and artist, Yampolsky has been invited to participate in many solo and group exhibitions. In 1976 she exhibited in the first Latin American Photography Colloquium—a significant event that helped create a place for Latin American photographers in the world of photography. Yampolsky recalls the tough juries and high standards for admission to the exhibitions of the colloquiums. She exhibited in the second colloquium exhibition, *Hecho in Latino America* in Mexico City at the Palace of Fine Arts, and again in 1985 at the third Latin American Colloquium.

Yampolsky's forays into the countryside are reminiscent of the nineteenth century itinerant photographers who wandered from town to village, taking portraits and creating images as if by magic for special occasions. And her work in the countryside continues the tradition of the photojournalist who documented the revolutionary struggle. She records the present day events that are rapidly changing the cultural identity of Mexico.

Yampolsky is at ease with rural people and the countryside setting, perhaps because of her childhood on a farm. She says country people are less likely than city people to mask their feelings. She approaches all rural people, from the child

Caricia (*The Caress*) 1989
Marianna Yampolsky

to the worker in the field, with respect, concern, and gentility. Elena Poniatowska, the Mexican poet and frequent collaborator with Yampolsky, says when Yampolsky travels the countryside, "she walks with her hands on her hips like the handles on a clay jar,"[9] carrying her camera, a Hasselblad with a normal lens, passing quietly among the people. Yampolsky says, "Although I try to be unobtrusive, it is not always possible to pass unnoticed. It pleases me when I am taken for an itinerant photographer and not as an intruder utilizing others for my own ends."[10]

She photographs simply and directly and does not manipulate the image. Her subjects fill the lens. She makes large prints that are rich and dense with detail; they are printed by Alicia Ahumada, who, Yampolsky says, "does it better."[11]

In one of her early pictures, *Puesto de Narajas, Axochipan, Morelos,* taken in the 1960s during a two-week trip by foot from the coast of Pinotepa through the mountains, the viewer senses Yampolsky's responsible approach, and her identification and sympathy with the common man. A close view of a child sleeping against a man's leg—with the man's coarse hand on the child's head, the rough-textured clothes, the barest glimpse of oranges at their feet, the harache, grass, and wall—all give us a sense of the man's place in his world. The figures and objects are not exotic or strange, but are identifiable not only as a Mexican worker; the image is a universal, human one. Certainly this picture reflects in detail what she says interests her most in photography, which is the "people and everything the human hand touches."[12]

Each photograph is like a short narrative sentence, sharp, composed and tightly focused. In *La Passion, Valle de Oaxaca* from 1991, the viewer first sees in the foreground an ancient religious scene, country women with their heads covered with rough cloth, gathered near a man portraying Christ on the cross. An automobile intrudes in the background, jarring the viewer back to the present.

Her photographs evoke emotion by her use of intense light and rich black. In *Christo Encarcelado* (Christ in Jail), the closely focused figure glows with life, illuminates the black space, and creates a tension that recalls the complex ties and conflicting emotions that religion has evoked throughout Mexican history.

The mother and child in *Caricia* (The Caress) from 1990 becomes in an instant a poem of the past, the present, and the future.

When asked if her work reflects Mexico today, Yampolsky replies enigmatically that the moment she presses the shutter button it becomes yesterday's. She continues to be imbued with the social conscious of the Taller, and remains a conduit for many people in Mexico who have needed public visibility. She has employed photography to record Mexican history and traditions, to photograph with honesty and sincerity the struggle for the well-being of the child, the elderly, the artisan, and the people. As an artist she works side by side with the farmer, the women of Mazahua, who have seen that the artist can be useful and has a worthwhile career. She has collaborated with the people over many years to produce identifiable pieces of a grand photomural of Mexico that gently combines the poetic and political.

She has participated in many major international group exhibitions in Mexico City and throughout the world, beginning in Mexico City with a collective exhibit for the International Year of the Woman in 1975.

Mariana Yampolsky's photographs are in the permanent collections of The Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.; the Southwestern Writers Collection at Southwest Texas State University, Austin, Texas; and in private collections. She is married to engineer and agronomist Arjen van der Sluis and has lived in Mexico for fifty years.

Notes

[1]Personal communication with artist, October 1993.

[2]*Ibid.*

[3]For a greater discussion of this idea, see James Oles, *South of the Border, Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914-1947*, from an essay by James Oles, *American Artists in Mexico, 1914-1947* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993): 89.

[4]Personal communication with artist, October 1993.

[5]James Oles, *South of the Border, Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914-1947*, from an essay by Karen Cordero Reiman, *Constructing a Modern Mexican Art, 1910-1940* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993): 43.

[6]Personal communication with artist, October 1993.

[7]Essays by Amy Conger and Elena Poniantowska, *Women Photograph Women* (Riverside: University of California, 1990): 47.

[8]Personal communication with author curator James Oles, November 1993.

[9]Elena Poniantowska, "Prologue," in Mariana Yampolsky, *La Casa Que Canta* (Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987).

[10]Elizabeth Ferrer, "Encountering Differences," *Photography Center Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (June 1992), 24.

[11]Personal communication with the artist, October 1993.

[12] *Ibid.*

Follow What Makes You Happy:* The Visionary Gaze of Women in Mexican Cinema

Elena Gascón-Vera

> The ideal reader must be an intelligent person, cultured, slightly skeptical, slightly mocking, passionately curious and argumentative.... Intelligence is the aptitude to organize behaviors, discover values, invent projects, sustain them, be capable of freeing him or herself from the determinism of the situation, solve problems, present them....
>
> José Antonio Marina
> *Theory of the creative intelligence*[1]

Women are constant objects of cinematographic fantasy and also are paradoxically portrayed through a male-derived icon system dominated by masculine concepts of what a woman should or shouldn't be, wants or doesn't want, can or can't be.[2]

Mexican cinema has a long history of skewed iconographic development. Male portrayals of women include at one extreme the deviant icons of the *Malinche*[3]—the treacherous whore and her offshoots, and like the cabaret entertainer, she is a marginal woman who is sexually aware, kind, and generous. At the other extreme is *Llorona*, or the Weeper, the abused and abandoned mother who kills her sons and weeps, lamenting her early inaction, then her actions, her losses, and her fate.[4]

Offsetting these negative icons are the equally limiting idealized maternal icons like the mother-protector who generously enslaves herself for the well-being of her husband, children, and extended family, and who strives to shield them from the truths of which she is so painfully aware.[5] Another one is the impossible icon of woman as virginal mother, embodied in the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose complex paradox is central to Mexican identity.[6]

Until recently, filmmakers have not shown the more balanced icons of the woman who embraces her own sexuality and independence, searches for deep loving relationships, nurtures those dear to her, and at the same time defines and defends her own hopes and aspirations. This is the woman's woman.

Happily, in the past few years, a series of films have brought the icon of the woman's woman to life.[7] Whether these films are directed by women, like *Danzón* (1991) by María Novarro[8] and *Doña Herlinda and Her Son* (1986) by Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, or by men, such as *Like Water for Chocolate* (1993) by Alfonso Arau, they mark the emergence of a modern Mexican mentality on the screen.

In these movies we see the evolution of a mature cinema that is influenced by such distinguished antecedents as Eisenstein, Emilio Fernández Buñuel, and Alcoriza.[9] They also mirror the evolution of Mexican society. The movies deal with the preoccupations of present-day Mexico within the framework of the complex developments of the modern world. They address a panorama of cultural and social biases such as the abnegated mother, the value of virginity and matrimony, the taboo of homosexuality, and the potential threat of independent and autonomous women to the fabric of traditional Mexican patriarchal social order. The originality of these movies is that they subvert and satirize these topics in a positive way.

From an ideological point of view, the maturity developed in these movies shows a rejection of traditional colonial hypocrisy. This is done by projecting an ironic, amiable dimension wedded to the style of Buñuel. In these movies anarchy and surrealist repetitions are annulled little by little. The point of view is moving toward a tranquil yet demanding and critical utopia of new forms of social, ethical, and moral behavior. A new mentality is elaborated. This mentality challenges the patriarchal assumption of Mexican and Hispanic tradition.

Change is arriving in Mexico through its women.[10] The women are the protagonists and activists who have been catalyzed by social and economic trends.

The economic crisis of the 1980s caused massive migration, especially of young men, toward the north of Mexico and

into the United States. Mexican women were left behind, unmarried, with their families. The number of young women's groups increased. The migration of the men delayed marriage, reduced the birth rate, and slowed the rapid spiral of population increase and poverty endemic to developing countries.[11]

Along with this migration to the north, factories of multinational high tech companies such as Polaroid and Sony were established along the border with the United States.[12] These factories preferred to hire women, *maquiladoras*, who were considered adept at performing monotonous tasks with consistent precision. A new class of relatively independent women workers with relatively good salaries has emerged.[13] In Navarro's *Danzón*, Julia Solórzano and her receptionist friends represent this new social class of single, liberated, and economically independent women. These women live modestly and generate a steady income within the masculine patriarchal structure that allows them to be self-sufficient and to test traditional female role models.

During the earthquake in Mexico City in 1985, working women loyal to their employers watched in horror as these men focused rescue operations on saving machinery before saving the lives of workers.[14] This callousness to human crisis and tragedy also catalyzed the women. They began to form political affiliations within neighborhoods, to raise consciousness, and to voice demands for social and labor improvements.

The recent documentary by the Spanish journalist Carmen Sarmiento, *Latin American Women*, includes a segment on Mexico that illustrates these forces. In this film, groups of mothers denounce the denial of judicial rights, including the detention, torture, and occasional disappearance of young people at the hands of the state. Theater groups of young people, mostly women from marginal neighborhoods, write and perform plays in public plazas or in the midst of litter and dumpsters to denounce the subhuman conditions of homes in these neighborhoods without electricity, running water, schools, or hope for a better future. This documentary also includes groups of lesbians and gays promoting the need for tolerance and organizing to legitimize these sexual alternatives as they reveal the harsh realities of AIDS.

In each of these instances, women have emerged as active participants in shaping a new social order. The appearance of a new image of women in cinema mirrors this dynamic. Images of the passive, submissive, fallen, abused, but honest woman that appeared in traditional Mexican cinema is giving way to the woman's woman, whose life is a critique of the macho system. This woman chooses emancipation even if the price she eventually pays may be her sanity or her life.[15]

The women who appear in films such as *Danzón* and in *Doña Herlinda and Her Son* are no longer defined from without or from within as the unequivocal prototype of women. They are not culturally established women who, as Teresa de Laurentis said,[16] make reference to a fictional creation. They are not women distilled from the discourse that dominates Western patriarchal society: discourse that controls and determines critical, scientific, literary, and judicial levels of cultural reference. This masculine discourse sees woman as "that which is not man." Therefore, this masculine discourse sees women as "that which is an expression of nature" and its corollary, the *Mother* whose sexuality and masculine desire reside in her.

Woman is both a symbol and an object of male social exchange. As an object, she is the term that signifies the point of a relationship and the starting point of the fictitious speculation of how our culture describes itself. As a symbol, she is the question mark on the issues of the discourses in which these fictions are represented. That is to say, woman is the eternal engine of action, since "there would be no myth without a princess to marry or a witch to conquer, there would be no cinema without the attraction that the image exerts on the gaze, no desire without an object, no descendants without incest, no science without nature, no society without social differences."[17]

In these movies the women are no longer the object of a reference point. They are creators of feminine discourse that without confrontation or dissonance seek to create and recreate a self-sufficient and satisfactory world. In *Danzón* and in *Doña Herlinda and Her Son* there is no war of the sexes, no confrontations or roles or discourses. The women are not transformed into phallic symbols, nor do they usurp the roles

of men. These women are sufficiently independent to simply act in the interest of their own satisfaction, to explore and experiment with an open mind, to redefine themselves through a feminine voice that satisfies them.

The plot of *Danzón* seems to be a banal story. Julia Solórzano, a mature yet well-kept and attractive woman, has a passion for dance and especially for danzón. Every week for more than ten years she goes to the dance hall where she dances with Carmelo Benítez, her dance partner, a 50-year-old man, tall, dark, good-looking, with very good manners and a charming gaze and smile. Julia lives alone with her son Perla. As a mother, she initiates her son in the secret of telephones, a simply technology, but one full of meaning. They and their group of friends work as receptionists. This job, held mostly by females, is a metaphor linking the popular with the epic, the classical and the traditional. The voices of these isolated women in an exclusively feminine world transmit, through telephone cables, the archetype of sirens, of Penelope's woven and unwoven threads. These marine and classical reminiscences are more clearly manifested when Julia arrives in Veracruz looking for Carmelo, who has suddenly disappeared.

In *Danzón*, director Novarro constantly uses what Freud in his *Three Essays on Sexuality* calls scopophilia, one of the three most important components of sexuality. It is the pleasure derived from observing oneself and being observed. Through the gaze of the director, the movie viewer enjoys the charismatic beauty of the actress Maria Rojo. There is also a process of private scopophilia by the protagonist in her journey of personal initiation into the maturity in the lobby of menopause. The protagonist recognizes her own outer and inner beauty and uses it, without taboo, to decide to practice her own sexuality. Throughout, Julia Solórzano's fantastic voyage is analogous to knightly epics and their derivatives in love and chivalry. Here, however, the hero is not an armored gentleman, but a beautiful and mature woman in search of her desire, which is expressed in the sublime perfection of dance: sensual, popular, and absolutely serious. Through this personal quest, Julia discovers the sexuality that suits her, a sexuality grounded in her own free choice and void of taboo. This sexuality proves irresistible to each of the kind and

sheltering characters she encounters in Veracruz: sailors, transvestites, prostitutes, and dancers. Some are attractive and exotic men whom she mocks, like the Russian who attempts to hook up with her, or the workers at the pier who, like errant knights of yesteryear, stand by her, the princess, and follow her in a sign of homage with the heavy machinery that is the trademark of their jobs, bringing to mind dragons and fantastic animals of fairy tales. Her charismatic beauty is irresistible to all. Fictional characters and movie viewers alike are magnetized by her and her quest.

Pacified by the erotic tension subtly expressed through the structured ritual of the danzón every Sunday, Julia lives within the conscriptions of patriarchal order. She cannot endure Carmelo's disappearance, which denies her the subtle repressed and feminine eroticism that is created when she is held by the attractive body of her dance partner. Julia is driven to search for Carmelo, eventually arriving at the inn in Veracruz—her metaphorical island of sensuality.

Through the journey in search of a lost man who is a stranger to all but her body, she will install once again herself in a feminine world, parallel to the one she left behind in the capital city. This time, however, revelation doesn't come from the possibilities of economic freedom and autonomy that she derives through service to technology, the telephone. Here, she dares to explore a world in which she is faced with the ancient path to independence that women have followed since the origin of humanity—board and brothel.

In Veracruz, Julia penetrates the space formed by the inn and the pier to enter a world of love and erotic and sexual independence through which she will discover the true meaning of the freedom to choose and the power of women. In her quest for a practically unknown man, she will find herself, and will free her repressed sexuality by loving a young sailor who will rejuvenate her and will open her more to sensuality. At the same time, the sailor will open the abyss that exists between the affective needs that determine the difference between men and women. Her new friends will be the transvestites, the prostitutes, and an innkeeper who lives with a young man and plays the role of the Greek chorus, which repeatedly reminds her of women's lonely fate. These are women who, like Julia,

must enjoy love when it comes because no matter how many lovers, husbands, and sons they have, in the end they will be alone. In Veracruz, Julia allows herself to live. She does away with repression and she is happy. She frees herself from the affective and patriarchal ties that had bound her. Her search for Carmelo leads her to herself.

The plot of *Doña Herlinda and Her Son* is anything but a banal story. Rodolfo, a successful pediatrician in his mid-thirties, goes to visit his young lover, Moncho, a student, at the inn. The relationship between the two is interrupted by the visits and the noises made by Moncho's roommates.

Doña Herlinda, an attractive widow in her fifties, lives only to give love, well-being, and pleasure to her son, Rodolfo, and accepts his homosexual relationship without major problems or questions. Faced with the difficulties of getting together with Moncho, Rodolfo, with his mother's support, invites Moncho to live with them in their spacious chalet. The three of them visit Rodolfo's young girlfriend every Sunday, whom he will later marry and have children with. This does not disrupt Rodolfo's relationship with Moncho, or distance him from his home. In the end, Rodolfo, his wife, Moncho, and Doña Herlinda will live together and happily celebrate the birth of the child they will all raise together.

Whereas *Danzón* presents the world of the semi-skilled working woman, *Doña Herlinda and Her Son* presents a world of the middle-class ruled and sustained by women who are economically independent. From Doña Herlinda herself to the keepers of the inn where Moncho stays, the women in the latter film do not abandon their traditional roles as mothers, cooks, and servers. But these women also are solvent businesswomen and, more significantly, business owners. Their social and domestic organization and planning do not interfere with the lives of men. Moncho's parents illustrate this dynamic. Moncho's mother is the one who does the talking, the one who makes decisions. Moncho's father, on the other hand, is childish. While the women are planning Moncho's move with his lover, Moncho's father is listening to loud music through earphones with the young people. Here, the traditional father insulates himself from being an agent in his offspring's life decisions. This is the patriarchy that formerly sustained and

enforced the economic and social oppression of women. The women, and especially the mothers, are no longer *Lloronas* or *Malinches*. When they attain economic independence, as happens in these two movies, they control not only the home but also the very fabric of society. They are owners.

As we mentioned before, these movies demonstrate that Mexican women have found their independence and self-sufficiency, and they express it, not only through economic means, but also in their love and sexual relationships. For example, in the metaphor of the new sexual encounters represented in the dance hall and the dance itself, the women in *Danzón* sit around tables waiting for the men to ask them to dance.

At first sight, they still appear to remain within the traditional passive role of women, but by accepting or declining to dance, they determine the development of the action. Another example of this independence and resolve is the conversation between Julia Solórzano's woman friend and the friend's male dance partner, who is married to a third woman. Julia's friend is angered by her partner because he is in a hurry and tells him, indifferently, to go to his wife, who will be waiting for him with supper and a warm bed. This rebuke suggests that a married woman's destiny is to wait on her husband, serve him, and keep his bed warm.

For the independent woman of action, matrimony is portrayed as a dead end. When Julia returns from her maritime adventure, her woman friend has a younger and more attractive danzón partner, dedicated exclusively to her. This woman speaks up and gets what she wants. As an outspoken independent woman, she gets the younger, more attentive, and more gentlemanly man she desires as a partner.

In *Doña Herlinda and Her Son*, the subversion of traditional matrimony is complete and absolute. Rodolfo marries, fulfilling the role that society prescribes for him while enlarging his family. He fulfills his matrimonial duties to society and to his wife. He fathers a child. At the same time he is also true to himself. He liberates his own male sexuality by continuing to be Moncho's lover, discretely, with the tacit understanding of all parties involved.

The young wife allies herself with Moncho in the love and satisfaction they all find in cohabitating harmoniously as a family. Instead of demonstrating jealousy and resentment for Moncho, she recognizes that she can fulfill her own needs. She studies in Europe to advance her career and shares the role of lover and companion with the young man. Without competitiveness, she treats Moncho as a confidant and friend. They take turns caring for the child. This open-eyed arrangement benefits the whole family, which does not need to be shielded or limited. It is open to family and behavioral alternatives and does not have to be shielded from the truths; it adjusts to them.

This opening and smoothness in the family's behavior is clearly expressed in two key scenes. Rodolfo's young wife, before telling anyone that she is pregnant, invites Moncho out for ice-cream. During their conversation, Moncho's standoffish and distrusting attitude disappears when faced with the candid and generous behavior of the young woman. From a cinematographic point of view, this change is portrayed when these two young people begin to eat each other's ice-cream.

Hermosillo shows us the possibility of sharing and of not becoming trapped in outdated roles and expectations that are ritualistic and limiting. The spectator empathizes with the family's dilemma, and at the same time, thinks of the benefits derived from the intelligent acceptance of the affective and social smoothness that could overcome the social and religious taboos. Another key moment that has to do with this same message is the last scene, captured in a photograph of the child's baptism.

Besides the topic of homosexuality, the second recurring topic in this movie is the role of the mother. Doña Herlinda is a mother, friend, counselor, and provider for all. Her actions and her tolerance make her the catalyst throughout the action. Unlike the traditional image in Mexican cinema of the mother that renounces all and sacrifices herself for the well-being of her sons, Doña Herlinda tolerates it all, provided she can be in the middle of things.

This new representation of the Mexican mother is confirmed when the other mother in the movie, Moncho's mother, comes to Guadalajara from another city. Moncho's father is

passive, almost bordering on stupid and childish. The father's deficiency is presented ironically and jokingly in the record store. The father browses with the young people throughout the store, listening with a dazed look to records through earphones while the two women understand each other with half words and decide the future of their sons. The mothers are the support, the fortitude, and the voice of the family.

The men stay on the sidelines, letting the women go about their business. The message is that there is an alternative social representation that responds to the current reality. In movies today and in Mexico, the women are responsible for their homes and families. In many cases where they live alone as widows, divorced or even single mothers, they are heads of the family.

The final scene of the movie clearly captures this message. Rodolfo stands next to Moncho and the young wife as they look at the child. In the foreground, in front of everyone, is Doña Herlinda with a fixed and stereotypical Mexican view of the mother on her throne. The background, though, shows a new acceptability, a new realism in the adaptation of traditional family and sexual roles. The woman is out front as the elder and the architect of modern compromise.

These movies explore a modern Mexican mentality that is clearly motivated by the change in the social, religious, and cultural attitudes that Mexico is experimenting with today on the road to a new self-consciousness. In these movies, we see the seed of what will be the great revolution of the twenty-first century: the elimination of privileges and differences between the sexes.

Notes

*The title refers to Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (Boston: Doubleday, 1988).

[1]José Antonio Marina, *Teoría de la inteligencia creadora* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1993).

[2]Patricia Erens, Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade. Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

[3]Adelaida R. del Castillo, "Malintzin Tenepal: A Preliminary Look into a New Perspective," in R. Sánchez and R. Martínez Cruz (eds.), *Essays on La Chicana* (Los Angeles: University of California

Press, 1976): 124-149.

[4]José Limón, "*La Llorona*, The Third Legend of Greater Mexico: Cultural Symbols, Women, and the Political Unconscious," *Renato Rosaldo Lecture Series Monograph* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1986): 59-93.

[5]Juana Armanda Alegría, *Sicologia las mexicanas* (Mexico: Diana, 1975); Carl J. Mora "Feminine Images in Mexican Cinema: The Family Melodrama; Sara García, 'The Mother of Mexico;' and the Prostitute," *Studies in Latin American Popular Literature* 4 (1985): 228-235.

[6]Jaques Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1513-1813* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1976).

[7]Charles Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude. A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967-1983* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).

[8]María Novarro graduated from the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos in 1985; shot her first film, *Lola,* in 1989; and won the Ariel prize for best movie. She also won several prizes in international festivals in Havana, New York, and Berlin. *Danzón* is her second film and it was selected for the Fifteen Creators of the Festival in Cannes in 1991.

[9]Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La aventura del cine mexicano* (Mexico: Era, 1968); "La búsqueda del cine mexicano" (1968-1972) 2 volumes *Cradernos de cine 22* (Mexico: Unam, Dirección General de Difusión Cultural, 1974). Miguel Contreras Torres, *A libro negro del cine mexicano* (Mexico: Hispano Continental Films, 1960); Alejandro Galindo, *Una radiografía del cine mexicano* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Popular, 1968); Emilio García Riera, *El cine mexicano* (Mexico: Era, 1963); *Historia Documental del cine mexicano* (Mexico: Era, 1969); María Isabel de la Fuente, *Indice bibliográfico del cine mexicano (1930-1965, 1966-1967)* (Mexico: America, 1967-68), 2 volumes; Francisco Pineda Alcalá, *La verídica historia del cine mexicano* (Mexico: 1965); David Ramón, et al., *80 años de cine en Mexico* (Mexico: Unam, 1977); and Carl J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema. Reflections of a Society 1896-1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

[10]Jane S. Jacquette (ed.), *The Women's Movements in Latin America: Feminism and the Transition to Democracy* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Elizabeth Jelin (ed.), *Women and Social Change in Latin America* (London: Zed Books, 1990); Giovanni Arrighi et al., *Antisystemic Movements* (London: Verso, 1989); Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); and Jean Franco, "Going Public: Re-inhabiting the Private," in George Yúdice, Jean Franco, and Juan Flores (eds.), *On Edge. The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

[11]Judith Adler Hellman, *Mexico in Crisis* (New York: Jolmes & Meier, 1983).

[12]See the movies of Mexican women.

[13]Hellman, *Mexico in Crisis*.

[14]Elena Poniatowska, *Nada, nadie. Las voces del temblor* (Mexico: Era, 1988).

[15]Movies such as *María de mi corazón* (1981) by Jaime Humberto Hermosillo; *La mujer perfecta* (1977) by Juan Manuel Torres; and *Retrato de una mujer casada* (1979) by Alberto Bohorquez show female protagonists that resist the system although this may lead them to death or insanity.

[16]Teresa de Laurentis, *Alicia ya no. Feminismo, Semiótica, Cine* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1992): 15.

[17]*Ibid*., 16.

El viudo Román and *El secreto de Romelia*: Two Voyages in Time

Laura Riesco

Rosario Castellanos, whose short novel, *El viudo Román*, is the basis of Busi Cortés's film, *El secreto de Romelia* (*The Secret of Romelia*), was one of Mexico's leading women writers. Castellanos died accidentally in 1974 at the age of 49, leaving a prolific assortment of literary work. She wrote poetry, short stories, two novels, a play, and many critical essays. Early in her career two subjects became prominent in her writing: women and Indians.

As a feminist she deplored the precarious position of her sisters in Mexican society; as the daughter of a prominent family in the conservative state of Chiapas, she deplored the poverty and ignorance among the Indians throughout her native region. Castellanos was Apollonian in her harmonious and balanced approach, allowing little margin for frenzied extremes or Dionysian madness. In her fiction and in her essays, Castellanos could be a cool and harsh critic of women. She was equally critical of romanticized or idealized versions of Indian life.

Except for her poetry, which is by its nature a transgression against the hegemony of orderly language, Castellanos was a traditional writer. Her narrative follows the basic premises of nineteenth century realism, and is above all mimetic and representative. The notions of *ethos* and *pathos* keep their places in the careful development of her characters and in the straight story line where they are allowed to act. The psychological, interior voyage of each character parallels the linear path of her plots. Castellanos saw objectivity and rationalism, which have been viewed with suspicion in this century, as key virtues.[1] She defended openly and vehemently this position in logically patterned arguments in her essays and through the voice of some of her characters. By the same token, she considered history and meaning to be sacred because she saw an inviolable relation between these concepts and that of truth.[2]

Although objectivity, rationalism, historical truth, and meaning were already questioned in her time, she remained

faithful to patriarchal order in reference to these virtues. Through one of her characters, an award-winning poet like herself, Castellanos attacked the Latin American writers of the 1960s who had dared to break the traditional linear pattern in their fiction.[3] In *Balún Canán*, her first novel, Castellanos herself shunted the narrative perspective and the story line off to the sidelines. Later on, in an interview, she regretted this audacious move.[4]

El viudo Román is a novella published in 1964 as part of *Los convidados de agosto*, a collection of four stories. The plot grows around the character of a widower, Don Carlos Román. The novel begins with a Machiavellian and cruel plan for vengeance and ends with its successful accomplishment. *El viudo Román* is a classic tale of honor and revenge. Castellanos travels back in time as she revives a theme ingrained in Spanish literary tradition since the Middle Ages. Unlike other contemporary writers, like Gabriel García Márquez in *Chronicle of a Death Announced*, she does not play, in the modern sense of the word, with the theme of honor; she recaptures it fully in its proverbial spirit. In the dialogues between the widower and the town priest the reader can appreciate Castellanos's sharp logical argumentation, and also her command of irony in the swift turns of expression. Although these well-constructed exchanges are presented in prose, they echo the rhetorical verse of Spanish Golden Age plays. This novella takes the reader backward in time not only through theme, but also through style.

After many years of seclusion following the death of his wife, during which his only human contact is his housekeeper, Cástula, a wealthy physician known as "the widower Román" decides to resume his medical practice. After an apparently genuine search for a bride, with the help of the town priest and by a process of elimination, Don Carlos Román decides to marry Romelia Orantes, the youngest daughter of a prominent family in Comitán. Castellanos does not spare any compassion in her description of the faults of the discarded bridal candidates. In describing Romelia's psychological background, the writer takes into account the traumas suffered by the character while growing up.

However, as with most of Castellanos's female protagonists, Romelia is anything but admirable. She is a self-centered, calculating adolescent, ready to take power in her privileged new role as the wife of the best catch in town. In an unexpected move, for her and for the reader, the morning after the wedding Don Carlos Román returns Romelia to her father's house. He says she has dishonored his good name because she was not a virgin. She protests vehemently, pointing out the evidence of the bloodstained sheets and begging her father to remember the monastical restrictions imposed on the females of the house.

But Romelia's older sister, Blanca, neurotic and sexually frustrated, accuses her of having had an incestuous relationship with their eldest and long-dead brother, Rafael. The accusation is unbelievable in the context of the story not only because of Romelia's young age at the time of her brother's death, but also because this aspect is neither developed nor stressed in the plot.

True, Romelia, who was much younger than her siblings, had been the spoiled brat of the family and Rafael's favorite sister. In spite of his daughter's repeated pleas of innocence, her father accepts Don Carlos's word. His decision is simply expressed: It is the word of an honorable man against that of a young woman, and Don Orantes's blind adherence to the male code of ethics dictates it as his only possible choice. Romelia's father takes her back, even at the expense of the shame that his family will have to endure.

In the last pages of the novel, the town priest, who is the widower's confidant, and the reader, discover the shocking truth: Don Carlos had been planning this cruel scenario since the death of his first bride, Estela. Many years earlier, on the night of his wedding, he had received several letters that Estela had recently written to a man. These letters were proof of a secret, all-consuming love affair. The lover himself had cowardly and anonymously sent Don Carlos this undeniable evidence of Estela's guilt. Estela's passion for her forbidden lover, her poignant disgust for Don Carlos, and her signature were clear, but the identity of her flame remained a mystery. Don Carlos had confronted her that same night with the proof

of her betrayal and without a trace of vanity (Estela being the one and only passion of his life), he had offered his forgiveness. True to her heart, Estela had died without ever divulging her lover's name.

Through a long process of logic and conjecture, Don Carlos had found out that it was Rafael Orantes who had dishonored his wife, and consequently also had dishonored Don Carlos's good name. Not being able to take a gentleman's revenge on him, since Rafael had suffered an unexpected death shortly after Estela's, Don Carlos's only course of action was to avenge himself on Rafael's family, and specifically on Rafael's most beloved sister. To make matters worse, Romelia had always worn around her neck the locket that her brother had offered her as a gift. Coincidentally, and the widower did not believe in coincidences, the innocuous message inside the locket—"May you enjoy these / *Que te hagan buen provecho*"—was the same that had been scribbled in the note that had accompanied the damning letters many years earlier. Ironically then, and beyond his initial plans, Don Carlos is certain that he is avenging his honor a second time. As the story ends Don Carlos Román retreats again into a total seclusion. There is not a word more about Romelia Orantes.

In this short and successful novel, Castellanos emphasizes some of her well-known views regarding the position of women in Mexico. First, she describes a staunch patriarchal society and, within its moral code, the unquestioned value of virginity for the woman and of honor and revenge for the man. Second, Castellanos presents a detailed account of the social victimization of Romelia and, by extension, of all women in the same set of social circumstances. Third, the writer underscores the hypocrisy, subtle at times, coarse at others, that women are forced to develop to survive in an absolute patriarchal hegemony. All of these points are carefully orchestrated within the psychology of the characters and through the richness of the descriptions. Unlike most of Castellanos's stories, which are usually very predictable, the end of *El viudo Román* takes the reader by surprise, and Romelia's locket becomes a doubly ironic element in the plot.

Busi Cortés's film adaptation, "El secreto de Romelia,"[5] departs freely from the original. A plot summary would be

impossible since linear continuity is constantly disrupted. The movie begins by breaking away from Don Carlos Román's reason for being, his need to avenge his lost honor. Before dying he murmurs, "One cannot be faithful to a vengeance forever." The old widower, seen very briefly and never facing the camera, leaves the screen and the stage of the living to make space for an aging Romelia, who returns to her hometown to claim the inheritance that her ephemeral and repentful husband left her.

She doesn't return alone: the child of her one night of married love, Dolores, comes with her, as do Dolores's three daughters. This time, the central character of the story is a woman, and she is retracing the paths of two generations into other and ever-changing perspectives on life. A few minutes into the film, Romelia's brutal and shameful separation from her husband is clearly contrasted against the free and willful separation of Dolores from her own spouse.

Love continues to be an important dimension in the movie. But love as Romelia knew it is constantly being stripped of its mythic quality by Dolores and her two adolescent granddaughters. The young sisters communicate with their mother and among themselves through an open dialogue, words spoken by women's voices and in women's rhythms. Trust, not hypocrisy, is inherent in their relationship. Bound to a past with rules and limits dictated by the male ego and designed to keep women in their place, Romelia has never been able to share this kind of trust with Dolores. She has trouble accepting the new notions that are affecting the way women seem to view life. By this time, virginity has long ceased to be an exchange commodity required for matrimony. Honor, an attribute of man's domain but guarded always by a woman's virtue, has lost its place of value.

Dolores tries to convince her mother that she had no need to save the bloodstained sheets of her wedding night. "Your virginity is yours, no one else's," she insists to her mother in vain. María, Dolores' oldest child, tells her grandmother that the best state for a woman is not marriage, but a living arrangement, "to see if it works," she pragmatically explains.

The film in no way romanticizes love. Dolores has more questions than answers in her search to understand herself

and her mother. It becomes obvious through the dialogue that if male and female relationships did not work during Romelia's time, Dolores still is not sure that marriage itself will guarantee that these relationships work in the present. Change, however, is still possible. Toward the end of the film, Dolores's new beau, a fellow student and old leftist who has turned conventional, takes his chances. *He* follows Dolores into the train, into movement and adventure. This contrasts sharply Romelia's lifetime of waiting passively for Don Carlos to come for her, erase her shame, and restore her place as his lawful wife.

In filming this story, what has Cortés kept of the original novel, which, after all, was centered primarily in a man's world? To start with, fragmented portions of dialogues that appear in the book enter artfully and unhindered into this altered film version. The film keeps few of the book's characters: besides the Orantes family, only Cástula, the widower's housekeeper, remains. However, the love affair of Don Carlos's first bride with Rafael Orantes, the letters, his suicide, Estela's (now called Elena) fidelity to her lover until her death are all there, as is Romelia's locket, the period of the engagement, her wedding, the ruthless gesture of her being returned home, her neurotic sister, the mother crazed with the grief of her only son's death, and, finally, the father's dismissal of her innocence. In the movie, Don Carlos appears to be much older than his counterpart in the novel. Busi Cortés seems to use this disparity in age to stress the ever-present power of the father figure in Mexican society.

What does the film change besides its own reinterpretation of the past, creating a present and foreshadowing a future? Cortés's modern approach allows her not only to invent a continuation to the novel, but also to integrate into her film elements of Castellanos's other works. In the movie version, the widower is depicted as a socialist Cardenista, while in the book there is no allusion to his political beliefs. The uneasy economical and political times of the 1930s, absent in *El viudo Román*, are very much present in *Balún Canán*, Castellanos's first novel. Entire lines from this earlier book pass smoothly into the dialogue of the film, as do several aspects of the plot.

Today in literature, we say that language never goes to reality itself, that it only can go to other texts and other words. Besides the intertextual references and the flashbacks that play with our notion of what is *real* in the tale or film, by means of specular device, Romelia's granddaughters, Dolores, and Romelia herself find the missing pieces of Romelia's story by going to another text—Don Carlos's diary and his story, which is nonexistent in the novel. By using the diary to mirror another text within the text itself, the characters in the movie *and* the viewers are reading Castellanos's novel, *El viudo Román*.

Symbols in the written version change possible interpretations in the film. The dark butterfly that clings to Romelia's wedding dress in the novel appears in a similar way in the movie, and reappears in Romelia's hospital bed. In the book, rumors designate it as an ill omen of Elena's soul; in the film, it seems to be connected to Rafael, with whom Romelia is accused of incest. In the novel, incest appears to be nothing but the bitter accusation of a fanatically religious and sexually frustrated older sister. In the movie, incest is indeed insinuated, not as a consummated act, but certainly as the love and sexual attraction that Romelia feels for her brother.

Cortés does not create this nuance in a mincing fashion. "We always want the same thing," says the most outspoken of the Orantes sisters to the other two. "First it was papa and then it was Rafael; let's face it, the three of us wanted, loved him."

Bound to provide exorbitant dowries and to marry within their own social class, isolated not only from healthy acquaintances with males, but from any contact whatsoever with them, the young women of conservative Comitán seem to have nothing on their minds but men. Men are the sole anchor that society offers them since marriage is the only way to save themselves from the very real disgrace of spinsterhood. In this social and psychological context, it is not preposterous to assume that for unmarried young and not-so-young women, the males in their own family could become a complex form of obsession.

In the film, Don Carlos Román writes shortly before he dies a cryptic note to Romelia: "I have kept your secret all this

time. You can return without fear. Forgive me if I have hurt you in any way." The title of the movie appears to be a reference to Romelia's love for Rafael, proven in the mind of the widower by the message that he took from Romelia's locket on their wedding night. The words and the handwriting on the locket match those heading the condemning letters he received the night of his first wedding to Estela / Elena. Rafael's memory and somber shadow follow the older Romelia through flashbacks and visions after her return to the place of her youth. Only after she reads her husband's diary does she realize that she was not the reason for her brother's death, that his suicide had not been caused by the guilt of their incestuous feelings for each other. Only then does she confront the fact that Rafael's selfishness had been at the root of Elena's, Don Carlos's, and her own misfortune.

Both men had been an enigma in her life, and in deciphering their motives, she ultimately understands her own role in the drama. Understanding this, Romelia becomes physically sick, but she frees herself from her own guilt. Rafael's ghost approaches her sickbed and she tries to hand him back the locket that had hung around her neck almost all her life: "*Ya no lo quiero,*" she whispers. In Spanish, this could be interpreted as "I no longer want it" or "I no longer want him."

On the one hand, convinced that he had found the truth about Romelia's relationship with her brother, Don Carlos had kept this as a secret all his life. On another, Romelia had also kept a secret from him. He died without ever knowing he had a daughter, and this wordless revenge, inflicted by Romelia's own pain and vanity, is sorely regretted by Dolores. Until she came to claim the inheritance and met Cástula, Dolores had thought that her father had died before she was born. Her heart, however, does not harbor rancor. She understands her mother's choice to keep her birth a secret after reading Don Carlos's dairy. The title *El secreto de Romelia* could suggest another dimension, that is, a power that stems solely from a woman's realm.

I have said nothing so far of Romelia's youngest granddaughter. Grandmother and child share the same place in a trilogy of sisters; they share the same name, an unmitigated love for each other—and most important—the same visions. If

we were to see the film from a realistic angle, the apparitions that Romelia sees and hears could be interpreted as the hallucinations of an overwhelmed and fatigued mind. Since little Romelia sees and hears the ghosts of her grandmother's past, we have no alternative but to throw realism out of the window.

How would Rosario Castellanos, a fierce defendant of clarity, have reacted to Cortés's film version of her novel? The film is fragmented, intertextually playful, irreverent to the veracity of history and story, and irreverent to the notion of representational reality. The film proves by the many introduced changes that *meaning* is not unique, but that it constantly shifts in the movement of the verb or the image.

All critics, of course, depart from their own perspective, and as such I speculate that Castellanos would have embraced this new Romelia—the Romelia who descends to the depths of hell both as an adolescent and as an old woman. She would have followed her down the long stairs (an image that is repeated in the film) leading to a world, now in ruins, in which women were held prisoners. She also would have understood that the empty locket bestowed by Romelia to her grandchild at the end of the movie would not lock this child in a fixed role, that it would not be a cursed amulet designed to impose confusion, guilt, and pain. I would like to believe that Castellanos would have been rewarded in seeing that women in Mexico can and will have other possibilities in their future. She might have even understood that women in the arts now freely question and sometimes dismantle the father's legacy of the continuous story line.

Notes

[1]Rosario Castellanos, "La corrupción intelectual," in *La corrupción: Los grandes problemas nacionales* (México: Ed. Nuestro Tiempo, 1969): see specially 30-31.

[2]Rosario Castellanos, "La mujer y su imagen," in *Mujer que sabe latín* (México: Ed. SepSetentas 83, 1973): 7.

[3]Rosario Castellanos, *Album de familia* (México: Ed. Juan Mortiz, 1986): 126.

[4]Elena Poniatowska, *Ay, vida no me mereces* (México: Ed. Juan Mortiz, 1985): 127.

[5]The video version of *El secreto de Romelia* is called *Herencia de sangre* and is available in the United States.

Danzón: The Feet of the Mexican Women

Margo Glantz

To understand the movie *Danzón*, it is important to think in terms of a ceremony that is built on definite, exact actions, executed one at a time, and following a hierarchical order. In this movie, the ceremony is carried out by hundreds of feet that glide over an immense floor to a slow rhythm in a ceremonial cadence. Men's feet, with two-toned or white patent leather, well-shined shoes spread wide and well-set on the floor, guide women's feet clad in open sandals, with narrow strips of leather strategically placed to leave fragments of exposed rosy skin to hug the ankles, to show toenails and toes, and to cover with fine transparent silk hosiery a foot teetering on incredibly high heels.

When a cinematographic discourse is dragged by its own force—in this case the feet dancing on the floor—there is only room for affirmation. But to carry out a positive action, it is necessary to go to a fragmented discourse.

The *danzón* is a popular dance, indispensable to visualizing the history of the Mexican capital since the 1920s. In the 1940s and 1950s, the danzón was immortalized by Mexican cinema, and placed in the history of another aesthetic and moral order. Later the danzón died out, partly because many ballrooms that people had once frequented closed.

However, the danzón is an almost archaic dance, normally danced by men and women over 60. A scene from the movie begins in Veracruz, where a completely senile couple are about to dance the danzón.

The danzón came from Havana and, long before that, from Africa. It was scorned and feared by nineteenth century writers, in that turn-of-the-century era in which the danzón was crossing the ocean and entering through Veracruz. José Tomás de Cuéllar, the Mexican writer of local customs and manners under Porfirio's regime, describes it in this way:

> The poor slaves of Cuba, burned by the sun, cracked by the whip and made dull by wretch-

> edness, wake up one day to the echoes of music, as the drowsy reptiles wake up from their sleep under a rock....The slave is in his or her right to dance on a burning sun, as is the lion to roar in the desert in search for the lioness. The girls' eyes were blindfolded and they did not understand anything about lion's roars, or black people's dances, and they really found the thought of carrying the beat with their little hands and feet an innovative and innocent thought, and they danced the *habanera* dance in front of the father.[1]

To link the danzón to barefoot and naked black slaves is to assert its popular origin, its subversive nature. A forerunner to the danzón, the *cuchumbé*, was prohibited around 1776 by the Inquisition because its "verses, which were immensely scandalous, obscene and offensive to chaste ears...and the dance itself, no less scandalous and obscene due to its moves, demonstrations and dishonest motions, provoking lasciviousness and manifestly contrary to the mandates" of the Church. This dance by "mixed color" people was barely tolerated and almost always persecuted.[2]

In his dictionary of symbols, Eduardo Cirlot defines dance like this:

> Corporeal image of a process, event or occurrence...appears with this meaning in Hindu doctrine, the dance of Shiva in its role of Nataraja (king of cosmic dance, union of space and time in evolution). Universal belief that, rhythmic art is symbolic of the act of creation. Because of this, dance is part of the ancient forms of magic. All dance is a pantomime of metamorphosis....Therefore, it has a cosmic function. Dance incarnates eternal energy...the dances of intertwined people symbolize the cosmic matrimony, the union of sky and of earth, and therefore, facilitate the meetings between males and females.

Dance has a ritual nature, symbolic and cosmic; it is a sexual encounter. This is undoubtedly the case with the danzón. It originates from a degraded race of slaves, broken, and brought to America by the conquest. Its parenthood is the islands, animals, and the maritime tradition. It enters as counterfeit, it is practiced in brothels, it comes out of the shadows, and reaches the ill-reputed dance halls. While it gets used to a country, it is almost the exclusive property of the lower classes, dirty, smelly, and rough sounding. From his upper-class position, encrusted in the dictatorial government, Federico Gamboa contemptuously describes the inauguration of Tívoli in the year 1900:

> From the ceiling hangs a sign 'Danzón' and around one thirty—the hall is already too full—the danzón explodes with the racket of a tropical storm, the cymbals and the drums make the glass panes rattle in the windows, struggling to break them and go bother the peaceful passerbys who stop and grimace, dilate their noses and smile, conquered by what those wandering and lubricated harmonies promise.[3]

And yet, despite the racket, the "tropical storm," the trembling of the window panes, the cliché "to burst a danzón," this dance must be performed very slowly, on top of a small perimeter, with an imperceptible movement of hips and shoulders, with the arms well raised, the absent look, and various proper pauses, carried out religiously and perfectly by the performers. That is how Jesusa Palancares perceives it in the book by Elena Poniatowska *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (*Until we don't meet anymore, my Jesus*):

> I was dancing, but not like one does now by shaking the whole body from side to side. We didn't use to jump and spread our legs. Then, dancing was for real, not like now when everything hangs out from shaking it too much. We danced evenly and no one stepped out of

> their square. I danced danzones still, very still, paying attention. I only moved the smallest fraction, not like today with these sudden moves that make it seem like they are having a seizure. And tangos, and waltzes and the dances that were carried out down the length of the hall following the music. Now there are no more good dances! It's all nonsense![4]

From a primitive dance, a savage, ferociously sexual, and undignified dance we move onto a refined dance, reiterative, elegant.

Now we enter the scene that cinematographer María Novarro makes her protagonists dance. Julia Solórzano—receptionist, single or divorced mother, (what can she do?) middle class from the poorer neighborhood, (read almost blue collar or domestic servant without much skill)—has a characteristic routine that is bland and mediocre. That kind of routine is broken by a ritual, practicing dance every week, maybe huaracha, mambo, bolero, but especially danzón. It is already soft, grave, and paused; its movements have a feline sensuality, not comparable to its earlier form.

The couple does not disdain the theatrical fictions, the obligatory pauses, the sudden turns. The male's hand rests on the woman's waist and from there imposes the rhythm and commands it. She places her right hand on her partner's shoulder and her left hand, raised to the height of her cheek at a right angle, barely touches the partner's hand. The gaze is ambiguous, infinite; the face is expressionless. Suddenly, the eyes meet, burn for an instant, then the dance continues, forcing abstention.

Julia wears an attractive, shiny dress of artificial silk, her special shoes reshape the calf, slim the ankle and waist. The white patent leather shoes are well set on the ground under the dance partner's wide pant legs, which are also white. The camera processes these disconnected images: feet, hats, skirts, and rhythm. Finally there are only the feet. The dancers exist as fragments of those sinuous feet that are undulating and snake-like.

Another view is from verses originally by Paco Píldora, the poet from Veracruz, and compiled by Monsiváis:

> Dancing on a brick with abandon, carrying the counterpoint in one's heel and squeezing the waist when the beat of the cymbal rests. That was hitting it right on time! And later, with a rhythmic sway, we exit on the offbeat and enter on the rest without a problem. Then, flute and violin in soft rhythms, the duet of the bugle and the drum and the resounding 'Three and Two' of the key giving with toe and heel the finest turn; reaching the end in syncopation with the rumba step that shakes you and leaving the embrace on time, when the cymbal rolls the 'rat-ta-tat.'[5]

Dancing is a voyage. It is a cyclical departure and return. Julia, the receptionist, connects destinations, weaves them; she is a suburban Penelope, degraded as is her loom and her waiting. But Julia is not waiting for Ulysses. Her Ulysses is simply a partner for the journey that one embarks upon during a dance. She weaves and unweaves the threads (telephone) and forms a wicked fabric, tangled in the small plots of the fake suitors and in reality, contingent upon the other women, her colleagues at work with their gossip, whining, and domesticity.

At the proper time, Julia is transformed—as in a fairy tale—into a dancer. Those two routines—the daily one of work or waiting, and the other, ceremonial, festive—are broken abruptly. Her dance partner Carmelo disappears. Julia waits in the dance hall, refusing to replace him. She is wracked by a peculiar feeling of change. This is unusual for a woman used to her habitual roles. Instead of waiting for the return of the absent one and weaving an endless fabric at the place where she is waiting, she begins a quest. She breaks the vicious circle of the myth's mechanical repetition and alters the destiny of the feet—the visible and predetermined image of dance—to turn it into the primary principles of travel in a journey toward the origin.

We must note that in myth, and even in fairy tales, feet are necessary objects. They are the instruments of a quest; the initiation journeys are embarked upon on foot and alone. A fusion is produced in the encounter that is similar in a way to that produced by dance when a couple forms.

During the journey, filmmaker Novarro tells the story of an object that defines an incessant activity, which is the only one that gives any meaning and determines the vital passing of time. But the fable told by the myth has been altered. The myth has begun at the end at the happy ending where the protagonists are dancing after the wedding ceremony. It is the coronation of a successful rite of passage. Contrary to all expectations, the one who returns from the origin, who looks into the mystery of being, is a woman. It is as if Penelope were to abandon her sacred place, the home where she creates her endless supply of fabric, to search for Ulysses. It is also as if Penelope has broken the spell that awaits her, as if she has turned into Telemacus, to wander through the whole world in search of her father. The feminine feet, clad in sandals with very high inconceivable heels, are the ones that paradoxically begin the journey.

The place is Veracruz, the site in Mexico where the danzón was born and, probably, where Carmelo was born. In Veracruz, classical plots are woven again and Julia becomes part of another group of lonely women: the marginal ones, the abandoned ones, the prostitutes, and the transvestites.

In Mexico City, the dance hall is the Colonia, a place easily found and distinguished precisely due to its main objective: as a meeting place for those who wish to practice a specific type of dance—the danzón. In Veracruz, on the other hand, the entire city seems to be a great dance hall.

Here, the ritual nature of dance is rediscovered. We eliminate a persistent, licentious, and obscene presence, that of the sexuality linked to that "mixed" race, whose movements are contrary to honesty. In this world, which lacks religiousness, dance substitutes for mass, and in one's choice of partner, one defines an aesthetic value, not an erotic one.

Julia searches for Carmelo because together they formed a figure in the most pristine sense of the word—together they won contests, practiced and perfected the game of dance—and

in that effort, in the junction of two bodies that meet to dance, they generated pleasure and elegance. They produced a form, an ephemeral form that must be recovered in the never-ending repetition of choreography.

While designing that form, while composing the figures, the couple becomes sublime, they dispense with sex. With much finesse, Novarro weaves this metaphor. As an activity, dance, which causes the whole body to intervene, stops at and is defined by the feet.

Julia does not find Carmelo in Veracruz. In Veracruz she finds love, or better yet, sex. In Veracruz, Julia does not dance, she makes love. And she finds love with he who is not to attain a harmony and maintain a balance dependent on her feet. To define her body as a whole, Julia makes love and recovers her body.

She reaches the end of her journey. She returns to the other city, goes back to work, and begins her ritual anew. She returns to the Colonia dance hall and rediscovers her partner. Carmelo comes back. We never know anything about his journey. He reappears and fulfills the only function he has been assigned, to accompany Julia in the dance, to the beat of the music and the classical announcement: "Hey family, this danzón is dedicated to Julia Solórzano and the friends that accompany her!"

The images have altered. The feet now are part of the bodies they hold up. The initiation journey has ended. Julia recovers her body. Her feet, which define a ritual made up of figures executed by the feet in a limited amount of space and with circumscribed movements, whose only dissonance is made up of the shoes, stop being the principal object of the camera. The spectator's eye has a frontal view, and absorbs in its widest perspective the immense dance hall where many full-bodied couples dance. Julia looks at Carmelo, they both smile (his smile is barely hinted at). Julia, dressed in a beautiful black dress and with a red flower in her hair, shows white teeth, gleaming in the light.

Notes

[1]*Baile y cochino* (Mexico: Biblioteca del estudiante universitario, 1941): 46.

[2]Quoted by Carlos Monsiváis, *Escenas de pudor y liviandad* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 1991): 49.

[3]*Ibid*., 51.
[4]*Ibid*., 53.
[5]Monsiváis, *Escenas de pudor y liviandad*.

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