
Latin American Women Filmmakers: Production, Politics, Poetics

Edited by Deborah Martin and Deborah Shaw

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Reviewed by Isabel Seguí

Favourable winds seem to be blowing for Latin American Women's Film Studies. In recent years, a collective revisionist historiographic endeavour has been undertaken by women scholars both in the Anglo and Latin American spheres. In issue 10 of *Frames*, I reviewed an example of the latter — the edited volume *Nomadías. El cine de Marilú Mallet, Valeria Sarmiento y Angelina Vázquez*, by the Chileans Catalina Donoso and Elizabeth Ramírez. In this issue, it is my pleasure to present the collection of essays compiled by Deborah Martin and Deborah Shaw, published this year by I.B. Tauris: *Latin American Women Filmmakers. Production, Politics, Poetics*.

The volume starts with a preface by B. Ruby Rich, one of the most influential Anglo-Saxon academics specialised in Latin American Women's filmmaking, who advocates for this area of knowledge to be "a field of its own."[\[1\]](#) This is followed by a comprehensive introduction by the editors. Their aims: not only "telling un(der)told stories and presenting neglected histories"[\[2\]](#) but also narrating "an alternative history of Latin American cinema: that of women's filmmaking."[\[3\]](#)

From the beginning, a particularly welcomed approach stands out. The editors are trying to overcome the idea of the "exceptional" female creator to, conversely, enhance the understanding of the production context and how women's participation shaped it. For that —and citing B. Ruby Rich's ground-breaking essay— they sum up "An /other history of Latin American Cinema,"[\[4\]](#) through a chronological review of practitioners, from the first decades of the 20th century to our days. Afterwards, they make the effort to present the essays contained in the book in conversation with each other, clarifying that behind the edited volume remains the consciousness that the needed change in Latin American film historicisation could only be done as a collective effort (Deborah Shaw was even more insisting in this realization during her presentation of the book in the conference "Latin American Women's Filmmaking," held at the University of London last September).

In the articles abound the critics to exclusively auteurist approaches, which often result in masculinist canons. Along these lines, *las Deborahs* affirm: "We aim to reinsert women into the story of Latin American

political filmmaking, with **canon reconfiguration understood as a political act** (emphasis mine)."[5] Coherently, the essays compiled in the collection will follow this line, contributing to it from different perspectives.

The first section is devoted to the industrial contexts. A statement about the willing of the compilers to go beyond textual analysis and the acknowledgement of the necessity to address production research to correctly incorporate women to the histories of filmmaking practices. This, section —to me, the most interesting of the book— is composed of three remarkable articles. It starts at the very top with “Beyond Difference: Female Participation in the Brazilian Film Revival of the 1990s” by Lúcia Nagib. The author straightforwardly affirms: “I will argue that the most decisive contribution brought about by the rise of women on Brazilian filmmaking has been the spread of teamwork and shared authorship, as opposed to a mere aspiration to the author pantheon, as determined by a notoriously male-oriented tradition.” Moreover, Nagib introduces another critical aspect to the research of women’s participation in the creation of political cinema: personal relationships, mostly the collaboration in cinematic projects of members of the same couple. She, efficiently, pushes the argument far beyond the Western-centric theories of female authorship and explores male/female cooperation and shared authorship as a better framework for understanding non-mainstream cinema. To exemplify her arguments, she analyses the film *Crime Delicado/Delicate Crime* (Beto Brant, 2006).

Following this auspicious beginning is Sarah Barrow’s essay “Through Female Eyes: Reframing Peru on Screen.” In general, here is an urge of more research about Peruvian women filmmakers, and a specific necessity of reframing the understanding of women’s participation in Peruvian cinema —beyond the ubiquitous Claudia Llosa, a typical example of the exceptional female auteur. Barrow focusses here on two diverse Peruvian filmmakers, Marianne Eydee and Rosario García-Montero. But Barrow’s goals are broader, as she asks at the beginning of the article: “what influence might these women have on the development of film policy, production, criticism, spectatorship and funding avenues in Peru?”[6] This research question exceeds the scope of Barrow’s intervention in the book, however, it posits an interesting frame and an invitation to all Peruvian cinema researchers. In her conclusion, Barrow highlights another key issue, which should not go unnoticed further: all the women filmmakers referred in her article come from privileged backgrounds. Although they usually act as well-intentioned mediators of the less advantaged ones, there is a need to enable policies that allow Peruvian women of subaltern origin to undertake their own cinematic projects.

Next is one of the most exciting articles of the collection “*Parando la olla documental: Women and Contemporary Chilean Documentary Film*” by Claudia Bossay and María-Paz Peirano. The authors establish a comparison between the solidarity act of cooking communally, conducted by women of the popular classes in times of crisis, with the labour practices among Chilean women documentarists. A women’s culture which consists in feeding, caring, educating and resisting in precarious contexts, can well be extended to any social practice, such as documentary production. The focus of the article is, hence, on collaborative production strategies, horizontal work ethics, and communitarian reciprocity practices in filmmaking.

The second part of the book is more conventionally devoted to “Representations.” The first article, by Catherine Leen, addresses the portrayal of Latinas in cinema, from the fictions of Hollywood to Chicana activist documentaries. To that end, she confronts the stereotyped representation of Latinas in US mainstream media with the documentary *A Crushing Love: Chicanas, Motherhood and Activism* (Sylvia Morales, 2009). In the next chapter, Deborah Shaw analyses the representation of domestic servants in Latin American Women’s Cinema, taking *La mujer sin cabeza/The Headless Woman* (Lucrecia Martel, 2008) and *El niño pez/The Fish Child* (Lucía Puenzo, 2009), as case studies.

In chapter six, Leslie L. Marsh addresses women’s participation in the comedy genre in Brazilian cinema through the figure of Anna Muylaert. Following Muylaert’s path in the film world, the author makes an insightful industrial contextualization, mostly on how women have been multitasking in different, but commonly unstable, historical contexts. Marsh also reflects on the nature of comedy and its use. Finally, she analyses two films by Muylaert, *Durval Discos/Durval Records* (2002) and *É proibido fumar/Smoke gets in your eyes* (2009). In chapter seven, Constanza Burucúa addresses the case of Solveig Hoogesteijn, in the broadly unknown Venezuelan cinematic context. Burucúa makes a brief but instrumental sum up of Venezuelan women filmmakers (Margot Benacerraf and Colectivo Cine Urgente). She defines Hoogesteijn as a female auteur, and from that framework proceeds to textually analyse her films *Macu, la mujer del policía* (1991) and *Maroa, una niña de la calle* (2006). These two films are separated by fifteen years and created under different political and economic conditions. The author shows Hoogesteijn’s cinematic language evolution, or, as she suggests, involution.

The last section of the book is titled “Key Agents.” In it, three articles address three key filmmakers, two directors (Marcela Fernández Violante and Lucrecia Martel) and a producer (Bertha Navarro). The first essay, by Niamh Thornton, focusses on the exceptional figure of Marcela

Fernández Violante, who neither belongs to the Mexican women pioneers nor the celebrated 1980s generation. But who is a preeminent presence in Mexican cinema, although an “in-between” one. Thornton analyses two movies by Fernández Violante, *De todos modos Juan te llamas* (1975) and *Misterio* (1980). In her conclusion, Thornton makes an interesting claim about the necessity of including in the historical narratives, those figures who break with the established categories usually used in Mexico to address gender and independent. She suggests that many of these categories just do not work because they leave many women, and women’s labour, outside.

For its part, Marvin D’Lugo’s essay on Bertha Navarro embodies the idea expressed by the editors in their introduction, the necessity of pushing the boundaries of women’s filmmaking historicisation, shifting the focus from exclusively directorial roles to the broader landscape of female participation in film production. Navarro is a seasoned producer and a crucial agent in Mexican cinema. In his article, D’Lugo provides a review of Navarro’s career and instrumentality. The last piece of the collection is Deborah Martin’s “*Planeta Ciénaga: Lucrecia Martel and Contemporary Argentine Women’s Filmmaking.*” The essay addresses the enormous influence —aesthetic and thematic— that Martel has exerted over an entire generation of Argentinian women filmmakers.

To conclude, this book is a must-read for anyone interested not only in Latin American Women’s Filmmaking but Latin American cinema at large. Behind this editorial project, the reader will perceive love, curiosity, and political commitment. Furthermore, this book is only the tip of the iceberg of what is coming. As was seen in the recent conference “Latin American Women’s Filmmaking” (University of London 18-19 September 2017) —in which the editors acted as keynote speakers—, a whole new generation of Latin American film scholars are currently engaged in the writing of a more comprehensive film history, theory, and criticism, which incorporates not only women’s names and film products, but their influential filmmaking practices and processes. Collaboration, a genuinely feminine way of making things possible, is key to this revisionist project.

Notes:

[1] B. Ruby Rich, “Preface: Performing the Impossible in Plain Sight,” in Deborah Martin and Deborah Shaw, *Latin American Women Filmmakers*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017: XV.

[2] Deborah Martin and Deborah Shaw, “Introduction,” *Latin American Women Filmmakers*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017: 3.

[3] Ibid, 3.

[4] B. Ruby Rich, "An /other history of Latin American Cinema," first printed in *Iris* 13, 1991, reprinted in Michael T. Martin ed. *New Latin American Cinema*, Vol.1. Detroit: Wayne State University Press: 1997: 281.

[5] Deborah Martin and Deborah Shaw, "Introduction," in *Latin American Women Filmmakers*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017: 19.

[6] Sarah Barrow, "Through Female Eyes: Reframing Peru on Screen," in *Latin American Women Filmmakers*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017: 49.