

INDEPENDENT



Unofficial Stories

Documentaries by Latinas and
Latin American Women

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La Operación (The Operation, 1982), by Puerto Rican-based filmmaker Ana María García, examines the common practice of sterilization of Puerto Rican women.

Courtesy Cinema Guild

Liz Kotz

The picture North Americans have of Latin American cinema—at its most militant and its most conventional—tends to be overwhelmingly male. Of all the well-known films that comprise what has become known as New Latin American Cinema,¹ only one available in the United States—Sara Gomez' *One Way or Another*—was directed by a woman. This perception persists, despite the diverse and growing body of work by Latin American women—including that by Latinas in North America—which has developed over the past 10 years. In the last two to three years in particular, the sheer quantity of work by such women and the increased opportunities to share contacts and experiences across national boundaries has led to an awareness of a movement that is changing the shape and the direction of New Latin American Cinema. However, outside a handful of features—*The Hour of the Star*, by Susana Amaral; *Patriamada*, by Tizuka Yamasaki; and *Camila*, by Marfa Luisa Bemberg—this work remains all but invisible in the United States.

What little attention has been given by U.S. exhibitors and critics has focused almost exclusively on feature films. Despite some recent exceptions, entry into this sector remains limited to the "exceptional few," and the myriad short experimental and documentary films and tapes made by women have largely been generated at the margins of existing film communities—outside the government-funded film institutes and national televi-

sion systems. This situation is exacerbated further by the tendency to embalm Latin American cinema in the "great directors" model of foreign cinema; witness the current popularity of *Dangerous Loves*, an internationally coproduced package of six films based on stories by Gabriel García Márquez. Such programs demonstrate the capabilities of relatively high-budget, studio-based filmmaking in Latin America. At the same time, independent film- and videomakers throughout the continent are producing a challenging and tremendously varied array of work. And, as conditions that influence and structure independent production increasingly become international issues—the polarization of mainstream and marginal cinemas, the hegemonic influence of national and international television networks, and the rapidly increasing use of video—Latin American independent media has great relevance for independent producers in this country.

These are also the sectors within which women producers, the vast majority of whom are under the age of 40 (and thus in the early stages of their careers) work. While few have become familiar names on the international film festival circuit, they engage a series of critical issues—what it means to be a bicultural filmmaker, for instance, or what it means to be a woman in a country undergoing a twentieth-century industrial revolution—which promise to expand contemporary cinematic practices, particularly in such genres as documentary.



By examining some recent documentaries by Latin American women alongside works by Latina producers in the United States, I am not



In *The Battle of Vieques* (1986), Zydnia Nazario uses the case of Vieques, a small Puerto Rican island, to show what happens when a military culture is imposed upon an agricultural society.

Courtesy Cinema Guild

attempting to efface the differences between filmmaking in Latin America and the U.S. but instead hope to address the increasingly transnational nature of this activity. This approach reflects a changing cultural landscape, where a number of "immigrant cinemas" and "ethnic cinemas" have sprung up alongside more traditional "national cinemas" and where alliances among those who produce, distribute, and exhibit alternative media are forming across political borders and linguistic boundaries. While omitting many important areas of activity, this discussion will outline some of the shared interests evident in this work and situate it within emerging networks of women producers throughout Latin America, the U.S., and Canada.

In the past two years, a series of key events have helped to build recognition and momentum for this emerging "movement." In October 1987 Zafra A.C. in Mexico City hosted a festival of films and videos by Latin American women, the *Cocina de Imágenes* (Kitchen of Images), at the Cineteca Nacional in Mexico City.² As well as presenting 12 hours of work each day during the 12-day event, the festival provided a major forum and an opportunity for Latina producers to meet, become acquainted, and discuss crucial issues. Almost 100 women—over half from outside of Mexico—attended the mass one-day meeting held during the festival to explore problems and plan strategies. The simple fact that there was enough work by Latin American and Caribbean women to provide almost two weeks of programming was an eye-opener for many, while the obvious range of styles, traditions, and contexts—from made-for-TV movies to activist videotapes—exploded any preconceived ideas of what constitutes "women's filmmaking." The *Cocina* also resulted in the formation of a biannual publication *Boletín Cine/Video/Mujer* (edited in Canada by film scholar Zuzana Pick³) and preliminary plans for another festival in 1989.

Additionally, in the past few years the Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana has featured events that showcase the work of women filmmakers, including screenings of major films and large public forums.⁴ Although some Latin Americans have questioned the central role Cuba plays in setting international agendas for Latin American film—the Havana festival, the Foundation for New Latin American Cinema, the magazine *Cine Cubano*, and the new Escuela Internacional de Cine y TV are all based in Cuba—this annual gathering provides the only regular opportunity for Latin Americans to see work from other Latin American countries. Most of the other major institutions that collect and disseminate information about Latin American cinema are based in the United States, a development that poses questions about the consequences of North American institutions setting the terms of discussion for Latin American media. Regarding work by women, these institutions have become particularly powerful, because the circuits of communication and diffusion of information based in Cuba have tended to neglect the work and concerns of women producers.

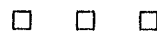
In spite of the conservative programming at most film festivals and larger exhibition venues in the U.S., some active efforts are now introducing a range of nonmainstream Latin American work to audiences here. Both the

San Antonio Cine Festival and New York-based National Latino Film and Video Festival reflect the explosion of independently produced work. Projects like the *Democracy in Communication* program of Latin American popular video organized by Karen Ranucci, X-Change TV's subtitling and distribution of Central American television programs, and the Latino and Latin American components of the satellite-distributed public access series *Deep Dish TV* promise to rethink the diffusion of foreign and minority media in this country. In addition, the *Punto de Vista: Latina* (Point of View: Latina) series assembled by the U.S. nonprofit distribution company Women Make Movies represents a sustained commitment to acquire and subtitle current Latin American works as well as circulate a permanent collection for educational distribution nationwide.

Last October, Cine Acción, a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization of Latino and Chicano film- and videomakers sponsored the *Mujeres de las Américas/Women of the Americas Film and Video Festival*, which I codirected. In the course of that event we presented over 60 independently produced works by Latin American women, about one-third of which were unsubtitled and/or undistributed in the U.S. Almost a dozen filmmakers from Latin America and the East Coast met with the local film and Latino communities during the five-day event, which featured panel discussions on documentary work, Central American media, and Chicana filmmaking. And in Canada, Groupe Intervention Video has developed innovative distribution programs designed for educational and feminist audiences, expanding from its original French-language base in Québec to include English-language tapes and materials for distribution throughout the country.

At both the *Cocina* and the Cine Acción festival, the preponderance of documentary work was striking; over 75 percent of the films and tapes screened at both events could be placed in this category. The historical reasons for women using documentary have frequently stemmed from greater professional opportunities in television and journalism, as opposed to the notoriously male-dominated world of feature film production. Yet the vagaries of institutional sexism don't sufficiently explain why so many women are producing documentaries, since the majority of work is made without institutional support or funding. Certainly documentary work provides an important point-of-entry for beginning film/videomakers involved in collective and community organizing. Documentary can also appeal on a psychological level: When unsure of one's identity as a filmmaker, one can be grounded by—and perhaps hide behind—the demands of the subject matter. In addition, the economics of filmmaking in most countries clearly favor documentary production. In any case, documentaries in general and television journalism in particular have provided a crucial training ground for large numbers of women film- and videomakers, many of whom have used this as a springboard to work in other genres.

But there is another kind of appeal that documentary media may have for women film/videomakers in Latin America—the attraction of those people who are ignored or underrepresented in the dominant media to forms that document their own reality, culture, and perceptions. While documentaries done by women in Latin America comprise a vast field with a many different formal tendencies, a great deal of this work maintains a realist aesthetic and adheres to traditional documentary criteria for accuracy and authenticity, if not objectivity.



The New York City-Puerto Rico film/video axis has given rise to some of

Nereyda García Ferraz and Kate Horsfield examine the immigrant experience in *Ana Mendieta: Fuego de Tierra* (*Ana Mendieta: Fire of the Earth*, 1988), a video portrait of the life and work of the late Cuban-American artist.

Courtesy Video Data Bank

the most cogent analyses of U.S. neocolonialism and the complex situation of women living under regimes of internal and external colonization. Two documentary films addressing Puerto Rican issues, Ana María García's *La Operación* (*The Operation*, 1982) and Zydna Nazario's *The Battle of Vieques* trace the inseparability of private lives from the dynamics of international imperialism and hegemony. Likewise, both works address the status of Puerto Rico as a colony of the United States and analyze local Puerto Rican problems in relation to larger issues of U.S. racism and imperialism. García, a Cuban woman now living in Puerto Rico, directed the Cine Festival San Juan held this past October; she is currently producing *Los Roqueros y los Cocolos* (working title), a film about youth cultures based on rock and salsa music in Puerto Rico and the intersections of class and ethnicity encountered in these communities. Nazario, who works in New York as an architect, is developing a new film tentatively titled *Linking Islands*, which explores identity and language in the poetry and visual art of various Puerto Rican artists living on and outside the island.

Released in 1982 and used extensively in political organizing and educational settings, *La Operación* was a founding work of Latin American women's cinema. The chilling documentary examines the practice of mass sterilization of Puerto Rican women—a practice so common that it is simply known as "la operación." In doing so, it presents a ground-breaking reformulation of feminist politics of the body and reproduction. Weaving interviews and historical analysis with graphic scenes on the operating table, the film exposes the imposition of this practice of population control on the Puerto Rican people and suggests how it was subsequently imposed on poor women of color living in the United States.

The Battle of Vieques (1986) also deals with colonialism—specifically the U.S. militarization of the small Puerto Rican island of Vieques and the subsequent destabilization of the islanders' lives and livelihoods. After the military usurped most of the land on the island, destroying the local economy, the Viequenses took up fishing. NATO bombing raids subsequently damaged the coastal ecology and made this work too dangerous. Now, residents are faced with a choice between work in U.S.-based, hi-tech and munitions industries or emigration.

Incorporating extensive archival footage, *The Battle of Vieques* describes the history of the island, which lies southeast of the Puerto Rican mainland, as a strategic naval base that has become a gateway to U.S. military operations in the Caribbean and Central America. In the film, Nazario reveals the conflicts produced when a militaristic culture is introduced into an agricultural society. In one scene, island fishermen enact a David and Goliath struggle against U.S. warships. Elsewhere, a Puerto Rican band is shown playing *The Star Spangled Banner* at a naval ceremony; off-key and listless, the performers seem bored and uncomfortable. In interview segments, islanders argue about the expanding role of the U.S. military in their society and discuss problems of unemployment that make the Navy's presence attractive to some.

The Battle of Vieques and *La Operación* both chart the complex power relations and permeable borders between First and Third Worlds. These films represent works of an explicitly Puerto Rican immigrant cinema—works posed on the edge between two cultures, addressing both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking audiences. They also marked a shift in North American awareness of Latino filmmaking, which in the seventies had focused on the emerging Chicano cinema movement. (The San Antonio Cine Festival, for instance, originally served as a forum for Chicano film, but quickly moved to incorporate work from Latin America and other



Latino cultures in the U.S.) This work—and its complex position as both an "ethnic" and "immigrant" cultural practice—engages issues of address, audience, and interlinguality in a rapidly changing context of neocolonial relations.



Another tendency in media made by Latin American women is the integration of documentary and fictional forms, which can be seen in fiction films that use documentary footage and techniques⁵ as well as such documentaries as *La Mirada de Myriam* (*Myriam's Glimpse*, dir. Clara Riascos/Cine Mujer, Colombia, 1986), which incorporates reenactments, flashbacks, and fictional elements, along with documentary sequences. Recognizing the complex relationships between women's external and internal realities, biographical and autobiographical works like *Diario Inconcluso* (*Unfinished Diary*, dir. Marilu Maillat, Canada/Chile, 1983) and *Ana Mendieta: Fuego de Tierra* (*Ana Mendieta: Fire of the Earth*, dir. Nereyda García Ferraz and Kate Horsfield, USA, 1988) entail a multi-leveled reworking of the ways documentaries organize and present information.

A mix of documentary, autobiography, and personal diary, *Diario Inconcluso* is a sometimes ambiguous and disorienting depiction of the life of a Chilean woman living in Montréal. The film delves into the personal experience of exile and loss, employing documentary and fictional elements that depart from a realist documentary aesthetic in order to impart a visceral sense of confusion and grief. A disturbing and often painful work, *Diario Inconcluso* follows the filmmaker as she enacts the routines of her daily life: discussions with her mother, a visit with Chilean friends, an argument with her Australian husband, and her work at a TV studio. Alternating between French, English, and Spanish, language becomes a battleground of identity, as the filmmaker raises a child in a country she herself can never call home.

García and Horsfield's tape *Ana Mendieta: Fuego de Tierra*, which was coproduced with Branda Miller, is a video portrait that recounts the life and work of the late Cuban-American artist. Produced to accompany a retrospective exhibition of Mendieta's sculpture and performance documents, the tape explores the politics and emotions that shaped her unusual and syncretic art. Although García and Horsfield avoid the subject of Mendieta's highly publicized and still unresolved death in 1985, they develop a complex reconstruction of memory and loss in an attempt to come to terms with Mendieta's powerful personal and artistic legacy. The video constructs a series of fragmented perceptions that follow the continuities and discontinuities in Mendieta's life: born in Cuba, sent to live in the U.S. as a child soon after the Cuban revolution, Mendieta ended up in an orphanage in the Midwest, hopelessly out-of-place and separated from her family and any emigré/exile community. Photographs from her childhood and adolescence; reminiscences by family members, former teachers, and colleagues; and Mendieta's own stunning documentation of her performances and



Mulheres Negras (Black Women, 1985), on racism and racial identity in Brazil, is one of several "collective portraits" produced by Lilith Video, a group based in São Paulo.

Courtesy Women Make Movies

installations constitute the collage portrait. Like Mailliet's film, García and Horsfield's tape suggests the collisions and disjunctures of immigrant experience, belonging to two worlds and yet not entirely at home in either. This effect is underlined in interviews with members of the arts communities in New York and Havana, who describe how Mendieta's interest in rebuilding cultural ties with Cuba reflected a deeply personal quest for connection.

An equally dense and imaginative work grappling with contemporary problems of biographical filmmaking, *La Mirada de Myriam*, by the Colombian collective Cine Mujer,⁶ explores shifts in identity—the deep changes in what it means to be a woman—in a rapidly and often chaotically industrializing country. Like their earlier film *Carmen Carrascal* (dir. Eulalia Carrizosa, 1984), *La Mirada de Myriam* portrays a poor woman who overcomes fierce obstacles to build a creative and satisfying life. At first, the film appears to be a conventional documentary about a single mother building a life as a squatter in the outskirts of Bogotá. But this initial impression is challenged and extended by dramatic recreations of the protagonist's childhood memories and fears, including a mystical sequence in which a rural healer cures Myriam's "evil eye." The director, Clara Riascos explains:

La Mirada de Myriam was a project that was started by Myriam herself. Myriam Ramirez is in her early thirties, a single mother with three kids, who lives in a outlying barrio of Bogotá. She is a very sensitive woman with a very sad past who developed an inner strength and imagination that have enabled her to struggle to overcome the obstacles that had condemned her to poverty. There was a certain magical element in this. After having had a sad, very abusive childhood, she is now a protector of the kids. She started a day-care service in her neighborhood and learned how to run it herself.⁷

Although perhaps best known in the U.S. for their earlier humorous feminist short *Y Que Hace Su Mama? (What Does Your Mother Do?)*, 1983), in *La Mirada de Myriam* Cine Mujer departs from their previous cinematic strategy, which contested women's oppression through realist representations, and develops more indirect and provocative techniques to elaborate the complexity of women's private and public lives. This approach engages traditional elements of storytelling and fantasy to explore the psychological dimensions of empowerment and transformation. Grounded in the daily concerns of poor women, the film nonetheless provides powerful analyses of social dynamics and political issues.

An alternate approach to the problem of biography—how to convey the changing and conflicting aspects of female identity—is posed by the "collective portraits" produced by Lilith Video. Lilith, a women's video collective in São Paulo, Brazil, has produced several short documentaries, including *Mulheres Negras (Black Women)*, dir. Silvana Afram, 1985) about

racism and racial identity in Brazil; *Beijo na Boca (Kiss on the Mouth)*, dir. Jacira Melo, 1987), composed of interviews with prostitutes in São Paulo's Boca do Lixo district; and *Mulheres no Canavial (Women in the Cane Fields)*, dir. Silvana Afram, 1987), which profiles various rural women who cut cane. Each of these tapes combines multiple interviews in order to represent the range of experiences, thoughts, and feelings within specific groups of marginalized women. Jacira Melo, a member of Lilith, has described the interrelation of formal experimentation with the documentary material:

You have so much freedom with video to develop approaches and discover a rhythm that suits the material, since video has so little tradition. For example, our work *Mulheres no Canavial*, made in a rural area with women who cut cane, has a different rhythm than projects we shot in the city. It was an attempt to make a work very close to the rhythm of these women's lives. They have a very different pace of moving, of talking, a different rhythm of expressing themselves. I think that these questions of pacing, language, and form mean a constant search for each subject.⁸

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As Latin American women have become increasingly active in political organizing, often taking the lead in countries where traditional forms of radical protest have been coopted or eliminated through repression, several documentary films have covered the development of these movements and their efforts to articulate political agendas outside of traditional power structures. Both *We're Not Asking for the Moon* (dir. Mari Carmen de Lara, Mexico, 1986) and *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (dir. Susana Muñoz and Lourdes Portillo, USA, 1986) address an emerging political subject—in the first case, a new union of Mexico City seamstresses, and in the second, the mothers and grandmothers of Argentineans who were killed, imprisoned, or "disappeared" during the military dictatorship. Made to inform both local organizing and international support campaigns, these films exhibit strikingly different forms of address, although both attempt to mobilize and sustain popular memory in ways that overcome institutional silence and repression.

We're Not Asking for the Moon documents the formation of the independent seamstresses' union in the wake of the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City. Made as an organizing film, *We're Not Asking for the Moon* was originally produced for the seamstresses union with their cooperation. Whereas most First World news organizations framed the earthquake in the clichéd and ahistorical discourses of natural disaster and human tragedy, de Lara's film examines the politics of the destruction and its aftermath by juxtaposing interviews with the seamstresses and their families with the official interpretation of events given by government spokesmen and Mexican television. As the film progresses, it engages a whole network of local "cultural knowledges" (to use the formulation by British critic Paul Willemen⁹) that allow the viewer to situate events within contemporary Mexican history. At times, this technique may hinder understanding of the film for foreign viewers unable to read the complex political landscapes and the histories they draw upon. However, the absence of an explanatory narrative functions very effectively to insert the viewer into the experiences of chaos, grief, and confusion as the magnitude of the disaster and the obstacles to the seamstresses' efforts unfold.

De Lara organizes information and material to reveal the conflicting forces and tensions that underlie the events she depicts and thus evokes a dense history of political institutions, resistance, and repression. For in-

Mexican director Mari Carmen de Lara documents the formation of a new union of seamstresses in the wake of the 1985 earthquake in *We're Not Asking for the Moon* (1986).

Courtesy First Run/Icarus

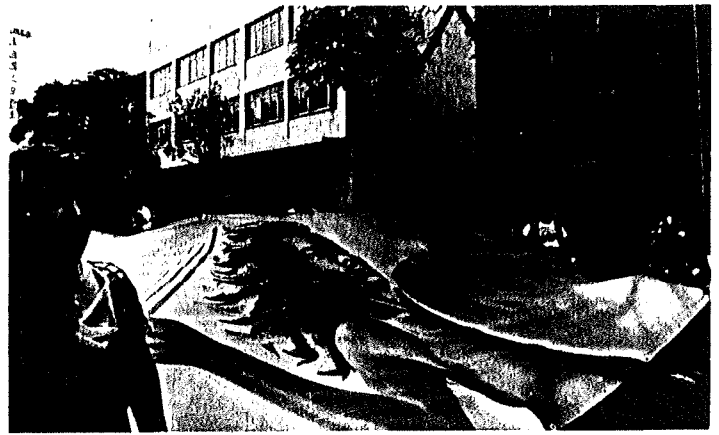
stance, in one segment she intermixes shots of state-sponsored May Day celebrations in the Plaza de la Constitución—an homage to the government's cooptation of the "recognized" unions—and shots of the seamstresses demonstrating and being attacked by police. This sequence juxtaposes two relationships between state power and workers' organizations, emphasizing in the process the threat that the independent women's organization poses to both traditional union hierarchies and unresponsive government bureaucracies. In addition to the specific historical meanings implicit in this scene, it provides a deft representation of relations of power in a society where many historical bases of opposition have been effectively incorporated into the centralized political structure of Mexico's largest political party, the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), which has consistently repressed independent political movements.

We're Not Asking for the Moon has become an important and controversial piece in Mexico, and de Lara, a graduate of the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (the Mexico City film school), is now working on two other projects: a collectively produced documentary on environmental concerns and a dramatized/recreated documentary on political prisoners and terrorism in Mexico. Her films represent some of the excellent work being done by a younger generation of filmmakers who, rather than aligning themselves with the state-sponsored film apparatus (which is currently just about bankrupt and subject to widespread state censorship), are taking important roles in Mexico's changing political landscape. In search of fresh approaches and new audiences for independent film, many of these women are working in narrative forms—for instance, the highly innovative short fiction film by Maria Novaro, *An Island Surrounded by Water* (1986), which employs hand-tinted images and poetic personal filmmaking devices to tell the story of a girl whose mother has left to join a guerrilla movement in the interior of the country.

Both Mari Carmen de Lara and Lourdes Portillo are concerned with how their films help to construct a popular memory—reinvoked in times of crisis. And both the mothers in Argentina and the seamstresses' union in Mexico City have used documentary films to convey information as well as to provide inspiration. Discussing specific uses of *We're Not Asking for the Moon*, de Lara states,

We trained garment makers to be projectionists, because the main reason for the film was to help the union get more members. What's most important is for the film to have a practical application. Also, when split over some issue, recently, they sat down and watched the film and recovered their mission and unity.¹⁰

The tactic of engaging local "cultural knowledges" to shape an activist film, used so effectively in *We're Not Asking for the Moon*, poses a problem in works of "immigrant cinemas" like the films made by Portillo and Susana Muñoz. Muñoz, an Argentinean who lived in Israel before coming to the United States, and Portillo, who grew up in Mexico and moved to the U.S. as a teenager, live in San Francisco. Unlike the dense national consciousness embedded in de Lara's and Novaro's films, Portillo and Muñoz' collaborations *Las Madres* and their more recent *La Ofrenda* (*The Offering*, 1989) address a lack of shared awareness/information between filmmaker and audience and thus broach the problem of constituting an audience for immigrant cinema. In *Las Madres* the task was to make the private anguish and political struggle of the Argentinean mothers and grandmothers comprehensible to a North American and international audience that was not, when the film was produced, very familiar with the plight of the



desaparecidos and their families. Concerning audience, Portillo explains, "The film wasn't made for the mothers but for the rest of the world. But it's had such a success that even the mothers use it now to rekindle interest."

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At the Cine Acción festival, Portillo reflected on her position as the maker of immigrant cinema, in contrast to most of the Latin American participants whose work, however marginal, addresses a national audience. She discussed the problems of trying to recuperate her relationship to her own cultural heritage and of attempting to explain that culture to a foreign—Anglo-U.S.—culture. This becomes a central concern in *La Ofrenda*, which examines the observance of Day of the Dead ceremonies in Mexico and San Francisco, where the tradition had died out and was reintroduced largely by the Chicano arts community in the 1970s. What is the fate, the filmmakers seem to ask, of folk customs in a diaspora culture? Whereas the Mexican observances are imbued with spontaneity and a lack of self-consciousness about indigenous ritual celebrations, the San Francisco scenes suggest nostalgia. Unlike the Oaxacans who describe practices handed down by *abuelitas* and community memory, the Chicanos who speak in the film analyze their involvement in Day of the Dead rituals and the role it plays in their lives. The film implies that, having been lost, culture is something that must be recovered, rediscovered, taught, and explained.

This tension is reflected in the film's structure, which employs extensive narration to explain the Mexican practices and their history to audiences in the U.S. At work recutting the voiceover as this article went to press, Muñoz and Portillo expressed frustration with the need to translate, explain, and provide basic information. Without a social and historical context, they feared that the Mexican footage would become just another set of pretty, exotic images for consumption. But too much historical background distances and potentially dilutes philosophical issues about duality and death raised in the film. Funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and slated for broadcast on public TV, *La Ofrenda* illustrates some of the problems entailed in making immigrant cinema for a mainstream audience: how to present immigrant/ethnic cultural practices without becoming caught in the sets of viewing conventions—"exoticism" and "education"—reserved for other cultures; how to present images of Mexico that resist incorporation into the representations of that culture already developed by mainstream media.

A very different approach to such questions is taken in the unusual found-footage documentary *From Here, From This Side* (1988), by Mexican videomaker Gloria Ribe, which presents a powerful essay on North-South relations. Made from clips of U.S. and Mexican films and television—all "borrowed" and rephotographed—the videotape addresses the power relations between "central" and "peripheral" countries. Ribe's assemblage of overdetermined images and materials graphically demonstrates how these relations structure cultural discourses. At the same time she refuses any claim to cultural authenticity; instead, the tape explores the places assigned by these discourses and the world that they construct.

Ribe's earlier videotape *Tepito* (1987) used conventional documentary



Muñoz and Portillo's recent collaboration, *La Ofrenda (The Offering, 1989)*, documents Day of the Dead ceremonies in Mexico and San Francisco, examining the fate of folk culture in a diaspora culture.

Courtesy filmmakers

techniques to portray a historic working-class neighborhood in Mexico City, but *From Here, From This Side* marks her growing frustration with the such strategies—the attempt to “capture” reality with interviews and provide yet more information “capsules” to a TV-soaked culture. One reason Ribe cites for her choice is the considerable time and money required by “pure” documentary filmmaking and the irony of interviewing people in order to record statements that are predetermined. Speaking at the Cine Acción festival, Ribe joked, “Maybe realism is one of the biggest fictions ever created.”

In part, her found-footage technique also responds to the traditional position constructed by documentary film in relation to Third World subjects. Ribe noted how, by concentrating on Third World misery, documentaries tend to reproduce a construction of the Third World as “victim.” Viewing Mexican television as official and closed to dissent, she proposes her technique as a means

to change the victimness of the Third World personage. On TV, you have fragments of reality without anything making sense of them. You take them like a pill every morning—that’s why they’re called capsules—and we overdose on these pills.¹¹

Ribe’s concerns and strategies resonate sharply with many First World critical practices, and her work has received considerable attention in the independent video community in the U.S., giving it a certain “crossover” status. In addition to screenings at last year’s International Public Television Conference in Philadelphia and the Cine Acción festival, *From Here, From This Side* was included in the American Film Institute’s 1988 National Video Festival and subsequently exhibited in San Francisco at New Langton Arts—not a venue known for its attention to Latino or Third World media.



Both *La Ofrenda* and *From Here, From This Side* suggest interesting questions about the borders of New Latin American Cinema and the appropriation and reappropriation of cultural practices, images, and discourses. Both North and South America are sites of unprecedented flows of populations and cultural practices—especially in mass media. A major influence on these developments is U.S. mass media, which saturates the film and television circuits throughout Latin America. The resulting transnational character of media technologies, techniques, and visual languages makes it increasingly difficult to demarcate the boundaries between “First World” and “Third World” media. As people from throughout Latin America and the Caribbean have immigrated to the U.S., often fleeing

the repercussions of U.S. neocolonial involvement abroad, more established communities of Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans have been joined by growing numbers of Dominicans, Colombians, Chileans, Ecuadoreans, and Salvadorans. The traditional segregated model of U.S. Latino populations—Chicanos/Mexican-Americans in the Southwest, Puerto Ricans in the East, and a handful of Cubans in Florida—no longer accurately describes the diversity of Latin American cultures in this country and their encounters with white, African-American, and Asian North American cultures.¹²

These historical experiences of immigration, dislocation, and displacement have profound implications for discussing Latin American cinema. Situated on the border between two—or more—cultures, those who make documentaries like those discussed here are often forced to formulate film languages that can address not just different audiences but divergent modes of organizing and receiving information, and even different ideas about what constitutes information. And a video like *From Here, From This Side*, which entails a critical view of both U.S. and Mexican cultural clichés, will be received differently on each side of the border. Likewise, a film like *Las Madres*, made to inform an international and North American audience, will function differently when shown in Argentina. Work that is oppositional in a Latin American context may not be in the U.S. and vice versa.

Although relatively little has been written in English on Latino cinema in the United States,¹³ recent critical work on Latina literature offers some useful parallels. An important contribution to criticism of writing by women from diverse traditions—Chicana, Puertorriquena, Cuban-American, and immigrant/exiled Latin American—*Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writings and Critical Readings*,¹⁴ problematizes the bilingual or interlingual text and its exclusion from both English and Latin American literary canons. Another example can be found in contemporary Black British filmmaking and related projects—in sociology, music, and media studies—concerned with the processes of dislocation, adaptation, and hybridity developed in diaspora cultures.¹⁵

Just as one current in Black studies has adopted the model of “cultures of Africa and the African diaspora,” the American migrations of the past decade propose parallel developments in Latin American diaspora cultures. Intersecting class, national, and ethnic identities, complicated by personal experiences, reflect a contemporary history of Latin America (and the United States) in which exile, rupture, transnational migration, and bicultural identity have become relatively common.¹⁶ With this in mind, the range of recent documentary films and tapes by Latinas and Latin American women raises a series of questions: How does the diversity of Latina media “fit” into analyses of North American and Latin American cinemas? How do critics—both First and Third World—situate this work by film/video-makers who are themselves bicultural? And how do white North American critics, such as myself, write about these emerging immigrant cinemas without reduplicating problematic relationships between Third World cultures and First World critics? The traditional method of identifying and delineating “national cinemas” may no longer be adequate for understanding transnational networks of communications—not to mention a world where the category of “national culture” is itself hotly contested.

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Mexican videomaker Gloria Ribe cuts together rephotographed film and television footage from the U.S. and Mexico in *From Here, From This Side* (1988) to create a powerful essay on North-South relations.

Photo Kirk Schroeder



NOTES

1. New Latin American Cinema refers to a movement of filmmaking that emerged in Latin America in the late 1950s. For an analysis of "the complex network of determinants that catalyzed the movement's emergence and later, its effort to achieve pan-Latin America unity," see Ana Lopez, "An 'Other' History: The New Latin American Cinema," *Radical History Review*, No. 41 (Fall 1988). For an examination of work by women within New Latin American Cinema, see B. Ruby Rich, "After the Revolution: The Second Coming of Latin American Cinema," *Village Voice*, February 10, 1987, pp. 23-27.

2. For more information on the Cocina, see Julianne Burton, "A Feast of Film-Video: Notes from the Cocina," *Cine Acción News*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring 1988), and Patricia Vega, "Video Work by Women," in the exhibition catalogue *Latin American Visions*, Pat Aufderheide, ed. (Philadelphia: Neighborhood Film and Video Project, 1989).

3. Available from Film Studies Department, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, K1S 5B6, Canada.

4. For a report on presentations at the 1986 Havana Festival, see *La Mujer en los medios audiovisuales: Memorias del VIII Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano*. (Mexico City: Coordinación de Difusión Cultural/UNAM, 1988).

5. For example, Tizuka Yamasaki's film *Patriamada* (Brazil, 1985), which incorporates extensive documentary footage into its dramatic narrative, or Solveig Hoogesteijn's *Macu: The Policeman's Wife* (Venezuela, 1987) and Susana Amaral's *The Hour of the Star* (Brazil, 1985), which use a documentary aesthetic in the context of feature films.

6. The Cine Mujer collective, founded in 1978, consists of Sara Bright, Eulalia Carrizosa, Dora Cecilia Rameriz, Patricia Restrepo, Clara Riascos, and Luz Fanny Tobon.

7. "Entrevista con Cine Mujer," *Cinemateca: Cuadernos de Cine Colombiano*, No. 21 (March 1987), p.17.

8. See Liz Kotz, "An Interview with Lilith Video," *The Independent*, Vol. 11, No. 7 (August/September 1988).

9. See Paul Willeman, "An Avant Garde for the Eighties," *Framework* No. 24 (Spring 1984).

10. De Lara's comments were spoken at the panel discussion New Directions in Documentary Filmmaking at the Cine Acción Festival, San Francisco, October 22, 1988.

11. Ribe also participated in the New Directions panel discussion.

12. For an analysis of East Coast Latino communities, see Xavier F. Totti, "Latinos in New York," *The Portable Lower East Side*, Vol. 5, Nos. 1-2, (1988).

13. For an overview of contemporary Latino cinema, see Eduardo Diaz, *Latin American Visions*, *op. cit.*

14. Asuncion Horno-Delgado, Eliana Ortega, Nina M. Scott, and Nancy Saporta Sternbach., eds. *Breaking Boundaries* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989). See also, Enrique Fernandez' article on a panel discussion at the Miami Film Festival, "El Norte: Tres Amigos," *Village Voice*, February 28, 1989, pp. 34.

15. For discussions of Black British cinema, see, for example, Kobena Mercer, "Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation," *The Independent*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January/February 1989); Coco Fusco, *Young, British and Black* (Buffalo: Hallwalls, 1988); *Screen*, "The Last 'Special Issue' on Race?" Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer,

eds., Vol. 29, No. 4 (Autumn 1988); Reece Auguiste, Jim Pines, and Paul Gilroy, "Handsworth Songs: Interview with Black Audio Film Collective," *Framework* No. 34 (1988); Martina Attile and Jim Pines, "The Passion of Remembrance: Interview with Sankofa Film and Video," *Framework* No. 32/33 (1986); and Jim Pines, "Territories: An Interview with Isaac Julien," *Framework*, No. 26/27 (1985). For more general discussions of race, identity, and cultural information, see Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (London: Hutchinson/Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1987); Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question," *Screen*, Vol. 24, No. 5-6 (November/December 1983); and Paul Gilroy and Hazel Carby, eds., *The Empire Strikes Back* (London: Hutchinson/CCCS, 1982).

16. See, for example, Zuzana Pick, "Chilean Cinema in Exile," *Framework*, No. 34 (1987), and Coco Fusco, "Long Distance Filmmaking: An Interview with the Cine-Ojo Collective" in Coco Fusco, ed., *Reviewing Histories* (Buffalo: Hallwalls, 1987).

Distribution Information

Ana Mendieta; Fuego de Tierra: Video Data Bank, Art Institute of Chicago, 16 Columbus Drive at Jackson Blvd., Chicago, IL 60603; (312) 443-3793

An Island Surrounded by Water; Black Women; Carmen Carrascal; Diario Inconcluso; From Here, From This Side: Women Make Movies, 225 Lafayette St., Ste. 212, New York, NY 10012; (212) 925-0606

Batalla de Vieques; La Operación: Cinema Guild, 1697 Broadway, New York, NY 10019; (212) 246-5522

We're Not Asking for the Moon: First Run/Icarus, 200 Park Ave. S., Ste. 1319, New York, NY 10003; (212) 674-3375

Las Madres; The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo: Direct Cinema, Box 69799, Los Angeles, CA 90069; (213) 652-8000

La Mirada de Myriam: Cine Mujer, Apartado Aereo 2758, Bogotá, Colombia 283-6593 (Due to shared rights with FOCINE, the Colombian national film production agency, Cine Mujer has not been able to release distribution rights to the film in the United States.)