

Re-Framing Mexican Women's Filmmaking: the case of Marcela Fernández

Violante

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Research on women's filmmaking in Mexico has been a combination of important acts of recovery that pinpoint pioneering women from the first half of the Twentieth century (Tuñón Pablos 1999) and celebrations of the varied and incremental growth in numbers of women filmmakers since the 1980s (Rashkin 2001). The first group of directors were part of a studio system that supported genre cinema and they became filmmakers against the odds, whilst the second group have had to navigate complex and precarious funding regimes to make films with feminist approaches. In this historiography, Marcela Fernández Violante (1941-) is an anomaly. She does not belong to the first wave of pioneering women, nor can her work be described as 'feminist' as that term was defined to describe the work of the 1980s generation. Yet, she is both feminist and pioneering in ways that complicate both categories.

She is a formidable and noteworthy presence in Mexican cinema and a woman of many firsts. In 1969, she was one of the first graduates of the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (CUEC). In 1977, she was the first woman admitted into the film director's union and was the director of the CUEC from 1984-8. She had a notable start to her career: her first film, *Azul* (1967), a short about Frida Kahlo, won her an *Ariel* –a Mexican industry award- while still at film school. She has subsequently made 8 features up to her 2002 film, *Acosada: De piel de víbora* [*Accosted: snakeskin*], as well as a 30-minute episode on pioneering Mexican director, Matilde Landeta (1910-1999), as part of the television documentary series, *Los nuestros* [*Our Own*] (1987). Despite this body of work and her influential position in central filmmaking roles, there is little critical analysis of her work. Conversely, her centrality and renown mean that there are numerous interviews. These are illuminating because she does not deploy the usual diplomatic language of someone in filmmaking, a field that relies on goodwill and teamwork, and where it is rare to get a full account of what went wrong in a project. They are forthright assertions of her career goals, where she feels she belongs, and who and what came between her and greater success (Mosier and Gonzales 1983, Burton 1986, Horton 1987, Pech Salvador 1997, and Blanco Figueroa 2001).

Her direct, sometimes spiky, approach in interviews makes her voice a fascinating source for Mexican film history, and as a woman she is perforce a marginal figure, which makes writing about Fernández Violante an act of recovery in alternative history telling and a challenge to conventional narratives. Therefore, given the paucity of critical analysis of her work, I shall make reference to the interviews because of the unique insights they give into film education, the industry and her process. This chapter is also about recovering the untold by looking at two of her feature films, *De todos modos Juan te llamas* [*General's Daughter/Whatever You Do It's No Good*] (1975) and *Misterio* (1980). Both of the films analysed here are individually significant because they mark different modes of filmmaking and exemplify the developments both in her career and in the Mexican film industry, which I will consider here. The former is a personal project that was supported by the CUEC and she was a hired director for the latter. This chapter is also about asserting the need to reconsider how Mexican film history is told. Inserting Fernández Violante into the history of Mexican cinema shows that the current framing of that history has significant gaps, omissions, and oversights. Some of these are as a consequence of gendered assumptions and others are because Fernández Violante is a difficult fit into the existing parameters.

Film historians have different accounts of Fernández Violante's significance. For Patricia Torres San Martín, Fernández Violante, 'marca la transición entre la generación de las pioneras del cine sonoro mexicano y la generación que incursiona en la década de los setenta' (2004, 69) [marks the transition between the generation of the pioneers of sound cinema and the activities of the 1970s generation]. Yet, as one of the first generation to go to film school in the 1960s, this should place her alongside the 1970s filmmakers such as Paul Leduc, Jorge Fons, and Felipe Cazals, who had similar concerns and, like her, had to navigate a difficult period when the industry was moving from being studio-based and supported by the government to a free market model mostly funded by private finance (Mora 1989, 116-141). Torres San Martín's reading of Fernández Violante as being at a remove from this, mostly male, generation is easy to dismiss as simply erroneous, but it is rather a reflection of how Fernández Violante occupies a curious inbetween-ness. In line with the archetypal narrative of male endeavour, these contemporaries are read as operating more clearly outside of the

studio system, and their work and many of their statements about their work, are seen in opposition to the old guard, that is the studios and the unions (Treviño 1979).

The context for this framing of film history is significant. From a peak in the 1930s-1950s, the studios were in decline by the 1960s. Given the nature of the clientelist Mexican model of governance, film unions were often closed shops unwilling to change and slow to admit new members. At their peak, this meant little advancement, but, as the studios declined, and with a change in the relationships between workers and the state in the 1960s, this led to a shift in admission. Whilst this was being worked out and impatient with the slow pace of reform, the emergence of university funding for filmmaking meant that many new directors sidestepped the unions altogether. By the 1970s a new generation of filmmakers working with a different model of financing, often preferring to shoot on location or using studio lots, but not employed by a studio, were making films that were different to and sometimes in opposition to what had come before.

The growth in Mexican film criticism and historiography coincided with the emergence of these male 1970s filmmakers. The journals that were launched at this time were highly supportive of their work and framed them in opposition to the studio system that was seen by a new generation to be too closely allied to the government and not sufficiently critical of the regime's many shortcomings (Thornton 2013, 73-78).

By becoming a member of the director's union, Fernández Violante was admitted into an organisation that some of her (male) contemporaries felt no longer served their interests. Simultaneously and conversely, as a woman her admission was a radical step but, for those who could choose to belong or not, membership allied her with the past. She did not fit into the career trajectory of the independent filmmakers, with independence often associated with male young auteurs as evidenced by the success of the Mexican directors cited above and by the New Hollywood directors of the 1970s such as Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma, and Francis Ford Coppola among others. Neither was she a traditional studio filmmaker, as it was heretofore understood. This conundrum is typical of the difficulties Fernández Violante has had to navigate as a pioneering woman of her generation, and means that she has not been included in the accounts of the period alongside her contemporaries.

These industry changes and the debates around the new directions film should take were determined by a context of protest and state violence. A key formative moment for many of the 1970s filmmakers was the student protests in 1968 in the lead up to the staging of the Olympic Games in Mexico City. On the 2nd of October 1968 in Tlatelolco Square in Mexico City, after months of protest, students were massacred under government orders (Brewster 2005). The numbers and those responsible are still not fully determined, but it was a shocking and defining moment for this generation. Influenced by this event, able to access equipment from the universities, and eager to find ways of articulating this new political landscape, some made documentaries, other filmmakers played with genre thereby disrupting conventions by taking the old and making it new, and still others made experimental Arthouse films. Although funding came from public and private sources, because they were making films outside of the studio system, these filmmakers are described as ‘independent’.

It was also against the backdrop of the rising activism in the 1960s and Tlatelolco that critics and filmmakers were honing their craft and establishing the parameters of the field. Given that this was also a time when the feminist movement in Mexico was consolidating its position, it could be expected that women’s voices would be part of this discussion. This was not the case, principally because many of these filmmakers tended to come from film schools, but only two women studied at the CUEC between 1963 and 1970 (Rashkin 2001, 68), and the only one to complete her degree at this time was Fernández Violante. Therefore, women lacked a significant presence in the discussion.

Fernández Violante participated in filming the protests and in the university occupations (Pech Salvador 1997, 103), like many of her male contemporaries. When interviewed, she emphasises that these took place out of a need for social and political change, which, for her, includes a need to challenge patriarchal power in Mexico. She criticises familial and state relations marked by ‘una autoridad muy irracional’ [a very irrational authoritarianism] (Pech Salvador 1997, 103). This anti-authoritarianism does not clearly place her politically, but it does suggest some common ground with her contemporaries. Her feminist politics are also difficult to precisely define. She rails against gender inequality and details the struggles she has had to challenge in her career as a woman (Horton 1987, 4) and repeatedly distances herself from being labelled as

someone who should be seen solely in terms of her gender. This means that she can seem contradictory in response to questions about whether she is a feminist filmmaker. When Andrew Horton asked her this question she replies, 'I am feminine, that is, I am a woman [...] I am interested in the problems of all people not just one group', and then asserts that *Frida Kahlo* and *De todos modos Juan te llamas* are both feminist films (1987, 5). These shifts challenge a clear linear trajectory or a plotting out of her politics in ways that are more evident in the post-1980s generation of women filmmakers.

Consequently, just as it has proven difficult to position her alongside her male contemporaries, her place within the history of women directors is not an easy fit. There were other female filmmakers before Fernández Violante such as the aforementioned Landeta and Adela Sequeyro (1901-1992), but for many years up to the 1980s there were few recognised by the unions, critics or any of the awarding bodies. As a woman, Fernández Violante is often positioned alongside María Novaro (1951-), Busi Cortés (1950-), and other women directors who came to prominence in the 1980s, yet she was already well established before this later generation and, unlike the others, she does not make women's stories the primary focus of her films. Union membership would prove a controversial subject with this 1980s generation as well. Filmmakers such as Novaro strongly disagreed with Fernández Violante's ambition of making changes from within the unions and felt that they limited her potential to choose the crew she wanted (Arredondo 2014, 19). For such reasons, in her analysis of women filmmakers, Elissa Rashkin describes Fernández Violante as being 'on the borderline between industrial and university cinema. An always controversial figure, [...she] can perhaps best be described as a maverick' (2001, 77). The term 'maverick' works because she does not fit neatly into the 1980s generation of women filmmakers who were more explicitly interested in challenging 'a long-standing cinematic tradition of female objectification, erasure, and displacement' (Rashkin 2001, 2) and, yet, her gender and union membership has determined that she is not included in the 1970s group.

Fernández Violante's interstitial position and exceptionalism is underscored by comments made in an interview with John Mosier and Alexis Gonzales in 1982, when she stated that '[i]n Mexico, in feature length films, I am the only one [female director], I am the only survivor' (185). She further elaborates on how few women directors there were more generally in the rest of Latin America in the early 1980s. Like many who

operate within a male-dominated context, she shies away from being pigeonholed as a director who perforce tackles feminist issues,

I am a woman [...] most women directors use their scripts to talk about being women. Most of them belong to women's lib movements. I don't know what they are capable of doing if they are offered a script that doesn't talk about women specifically but jsut [sic] about things in general (Mosier and Gonzales 1982, 185).

It is worth teasing out how troubling a statement this is. It is indicative of an approach that is integral to the few women directors who found success in the Mexican film industry up to the mid-1980s. The implication is that women and their stories are not 'things in general'; they are a marginal particularity, a common perception and one that deserves to be unpicked. Additionally, elsewhere, many feminist filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s were engaged in non-mainstream, mostly low-budget experimental filmmaking that has a different set of skills, artistic engagement, intended audience, and outcome than the commercial (albeit of an independent aesthetic) filmmaking that Fernández Violante produced. Therefore, her comments, which can be read as harsh and dismissive, are also reflective of someone negotiating a difficult moment in Mexican film for women. She is aware of the critical context in which her films are received and of how being a woman determines her own experiences, yet she struggles against this. But she did not see herself as engaging in feminist filmmaking, and, in fact asserts her place in opposition to feminist filmmaking practices. Nonetheless, a feminist reading can be applied to her career as she breaks through where others have not and has often strong female roles in her films. At the same time, although she is a woman, she does not conform to the filmmaking modes of those who emerged in the 1980s. This anomaly makes her difficult to categorise within current frameworks and has resulted in critical neglect.

Two films that function as useful case studies and which should help to understand Fernández Violante's output are *De todos modos Juan te llamas* (1975) and *Misterio* (1980). The first is a war film centred on a foundational period of the modern Mexican state, a preoccupation of many of her contemporaries, and the second is an

adaptation of an experimental novel following a long tradition of such work by respected auteurs. These illustrate some of the reasons why her recuperation is complicated. Where her contemporaries made films about the Revolution (1910-20), she set her film during the more challenging period of the *Cristero* Rebellion (1926-29) when there were violent skirmishes that attempted to disrupt the stability of the new democracy. This period is still seldom filmed and when it has been it is largely by those sympathetic to the Catholic Church. This then becomes a period tarnished by conservative representations. *Misterio* is an adaptation that Fernández Violante was hired to make. The implication attached to this is that she has little freedom to express her own creativity and, thus, cannot be read as an auteur. *Misterio* was made when other women filmmakers, such as Novaro, were filming women-centred narratives, which distances her from their work. To challenge the assumptions attached to both projects and to reclaim Fernández Violante as an important figure in Mexican cinema, I shall carry out close analyses of key features in the creative process as articulated by the director and draw on these in a close reading of the texts.

De todos modos Juan te llamas (1975)

De todos modos Juan te llamas is Fernández Violante's first feature as well as being the first by a woman in Mexico since Landeta's *Trotacalles* [*Streetwalker*] in 1951 (García Riera 1994, 96). Shot with financial support from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México [National Autonomous University of Mexico], starring professional actors, and mostly crewed by students and staff from the CUEC, Fernández Violante describes *De todos modos Juan te llamas* as semi-autobiographical, 'una metáfora del 68 – que coincidía con un episodio familiar –, la disolución de una familia por diferencias ideológicas en su propio seno' (Blanco Figueroa 2001, 222) [a metaphor for 68 – that coincides with a family episode –, the dissolution of a family because of ideological differences within it]. The internal rifts caused by 1968 are what link this film to its setting (Mosier and Gonzales 1983, 16). Fernández Violante explains, 'I knew that I couldn't make a film about 1968, since it was so recent that I wouldn't have the proper perspective, but I asked what happens in the same situation when religion is the main source of the conflict?' (Mosier and Gonzales 1983, 16). The film is set during the *Cristero* rebellion (1926-1929), a religious war that took place in central Mexico

motivated by repressive rules against the Catholic church (Meyer 2008), at a time in which the promises of the Revolution were being tested by a government which was still heavily influenced by military leadership. Issues that feature most significantly in *De todos modos Juan te llamas* are around land re-distribution and tackling rural poverty; ownership of oil and mining rights; and post-Revolutionary corruption.

Episodic in nature, with temporal and narrative leaps, *De todos modos Juan te llamas* is centred on the family of General Guajardo (Jorge Russek – voiced by Federico Romano), an authoritarian figure who has a difficult relationship with his wife, Beatriz (Patricia Aspillaga), and three children, Armanda (Rocío Brambila), Andrés (uncredited), and Gabriel (uncredited). Seen as an intermediary between the church and state via her husband, Beatriz is mistrusted by the local women in the small village setting. The first act of *Cristero* violence in the village takes place when the women are roused by the priest's call to arms, then they assert Beatriz's complicity with the military by saying, '¡tú que fornicas con Lucifer, maldita seas!' [damn you for fornicating with Lucifer!], and beat her to death in the church in front of her children. These local women are conservative supporters of the *Cristero* rebellion and target Beatriz for her class and educational differences, and as a provocation to instigate further violence and state reaction. Therefore, there is space for different political positions, as not all women are understood to be reactionary. Most attention is given to the impact this has on the eldest child and only daughter, Armanda, who has a close relationship with her older cousin, Colonel Gontrán Bonilla (Juan Ferrara), in whom she has a growing sexual interest, and from whom she learns about foundational Revolutionary concepts that challenge the political actions and speeches of the priest, the local women, and her father. Bonilla, in turn, frequently challenges Guajardo on the many ways he is turning his back on Revolutionary ideals, which eventually leads to Bonilla's death at the orders of Guajardo. In revenge, Armanda drags Bonilla's body into the stables and sets fire to it with her father's prized horses inside. She plans to die with Bonilla, but is saved by one of the farm laborers. The film ends with Armanda banished to the capital city, Andrés is about to go to study in the US-based military academy, Westpoint, and Gabriel is in jail for participating in a protest as a member of the Communist party. The family is dispersed.

Like the war films by her male contemporaries, the narrative moves between public and private concerns. There are also frequent scenes of brief battles, skirmishes, and assassinations, which mean that the film cannot be viewed solely as a domestic drama. It opens with a sequence that mirrors that of *La sombra del caudillo* (Julio Bracho, 1960) with several men driven out to wasteland by the military and summarily executed. The parallels between the openings of *La sombra del caudillo* and *De todos modos Juan te llamas* have been noted by Fernández Violante. She states that prior to making the film she had not seen *La sombra del caudillo* as it was subject to a form of delayed release that amounted to censorship for many years (Velazco 2005), and ascribes this coincidental opening to her reading of Mexican history (Pech Salvador 1997, 125). Comparisons between her work and a widely studied canonical text are a strategic move on Fernández Violante's part in this interview. She is clearly asserting an equivalency in quality, a necessity for someone whose work has been largely overlooked, unlike the attention garnered by Julio Bracho's controversial film.

Where *La sombra del caudillo* has the build up to the assassinations as the focus of the film and is a pessimistic realization of the violent corruption and political machinations involved in a presidential campaign, *De todos modos Juan te llamas* never fully explains this incident. As an opening scene it establishes the tense mood of the film, the military's disregard for the rule of law, and, as is evident from the incidents in the film, is to be understood as a break in linear time. It takes place after the rest of the events in the film and represents the escalation of military terror after the Cristero Rebellion. The arrival at the scene of the sinister looking US consulate, Harry Lynch (Ramón Menéndez), to ensure that the task has been carried out completely, implicates the US in Mexico's violent corruption, which is another significant strand in the narrative. Whilst Armanda is integral to the plot, this is a film that makes the wider context integral to her world. Power structures are multi-layered. Her father as a military commander is deeply integrated in a regime that imposes controls at all levels of her public and private world. This is a feminist film that places Armanda's coming of age in a pivotal historic moment.

As previously mentioned, 1968 was a foundational and deeply formative moment for filmmakers of Fernández Violante's generation. She was not part of the student organizing committee, but was an active participant in marches and in their filming and

reporting. Her then partner, Roberto Jaime Sánchez, collaborated closely with Leobardo López Aretche who made the documentary drawn from students' films of the protests, *El grito* (1968) (Blanco Figueroa 2001, 221). Additionally, her brother was very active in the movement and their father turned him out of the house for this (Blanco Figueroa 2001, 221). This biographical detail has significant parallels with the character, Guajardo's, attitude to his rebellious communist son, Gabriel. Fernández Violante describes her father, a specialist in military law and employee in the national oil company, as a considerable inspiration for this film (Pech Salvador 1997, 126). Her reflections on this film make her one of the few filmmakers of her generation to repeatedly draw this comparison between the films of the Revolution produced in the 1970s and the student movements.

The use of music in *De todos modos Juan te llamas* is a significant referent in this regard. It creates further layers to the representation of women in the film and opens up further interpretive spaces to understand the contrasting characters. As many of the documentaries reveal, the student protestors in 1968, in line with others in Latin America, were drawing on traditional folk music forms and inflecting these with the political energies of the present, which resulted in the *nueva canción* folk music movement. She describes herself as part of 'una generación de radio. Nuestro bagaje es más auditivo que visual' [a radio generation. Our baggage is more aural than visual], and asserts that musical awareness is integral to this sensibility (Blanco Figueroa 2001, 218). Song has a grassroots political function that signals solidarity with the labouring class and is allied to the appeal of popular forms to Fernández Violante's generation. In the film this is manifest in the ways that music is employed throughout. The acoustic space at the burial of Beatriz is filled by the diegetic singing of the mourners burying those murdered in retaliation for her death as they process past the Guajardo family. In this way, the small numbers at Beatriz's burial, their silence and isolation from each other and from the villagers is made more acute through this use of song just as, conversely, the villagers' solidarity with each other and their deceased is made explicit. On another occasion, *Cristero* songs are sung by those following the priest in an attack on the mining company and even as they flee from the army who defend it. The power of the song and the banner with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe carried by the *Cristeros* means that the foot soldiers initially refuse to defend the mine. Thus,

Fernández Violante demonstrates the power of the audio-visual markers of religious and folk tradition on the soldiers who are clearly identified as lower ranking and of humble origin. She captures the multi-faceted experience of the Rebellion and sonically posits the potential for folk music to be a force of reactionary rebellion as well as radical change. This is an unconventional approach and contrasts with the use of such music as coterminous with a challenge to conservative power and the status quo.

The use of the word 'our' in the above quotation is not incidental. Just as reference to *La sombra del caudillo* asserts value, 'our' is inclusive and collective, and identifies a generational trait that has significance in her work. At the same time, her choice to focus on the *Cristero* rebellion sets her apart from the majority of her contemporaries who ignore this battle in favour of the earlier Revolution. The *Cristero* rebellion is an unusual event to choose to draw parallels with the student movement. Rarely represented on film, it is a historical episode that was characterized by reactionary politics, unlike the radical leftist politics of the students. But, demonstrating her unique perspective, Fernández Violante sees it as a similar moment of power games (Pech Salvador 1997, 126) when a considerable shift was taking place in the relationship between the people and the state. Commonalities can be seen in the tensions, power plays, and the imposition of military might on grassroots activities of both eras. In *De todos modos Juan te llamas* she also drew on Spanish history under Francisco Franco (1936-1975) where, she contends, priests acted as spies for the military (Pech Salvador 1997, 126). In the film this is made explicit when at the end the priest, despite his repeated rhetoric against the government, is shown laughing and celebrating with Guajardo. Thus, she makes a potent point about the relationship between the church and state whilst also making international connections.

For Fernández Violante the family is the unit of society where its dysfunctions are both played out and impossible to sustain in the face of 'tanta corrupción' [so much corruption] (Pech Salvador 1997, 127). The dispersal of the family and its breakdown are shown to be as a direct consequence of Guajardo's authoritarian actions. Therefore, in *De todos modos Juan te llamas* she works this out through an exploration of the interrelationship between family, community and the state, and how political ideologies work on and through these.

Bonilla has numerous functions within this family, community, and ideological terrain. He is the voice of Guajardo's conscience, which makes his assassination meaningful in its/his silencing. For Armanda, he is the focus of her burgeoning sexuality and their conversations facilitate her ideological coming of age and are a means of bolstering her challenges with her father. Bonilla also signals a link with Fernández Violante's next film, *Cananea*, a fictional biography of the leading Mexican anarchist and intellectual originator of the Revolution, Ricardo Flores Magón (1874-1922). When Bonilla is packing up to leave the village, the camera focuses in on a copy of Flores Magón's influential collection of political essays, *Semilla Libertaria* (1923).

Dedicated to her mother, who died during the shooting of the film, *De todos modos Juan te llamas* is an ambitious semi-autobiographical first feature (Pech Salvador 1997, 135). It shares many commonalities with films by her contemporaries in its preoccupation with the abandoned Revolutionary promises. Given the originality of her approach and focus, it is remarkable that this film has been ignored. In its decision to shift the focus to the aftermath, she asserts that this is 'the first film to put the armed forces on the screen', that is, their political maneuverings and domestic life. It avoided the censorship that befell other projects, such as *La sombra del caudillo* because of the university support. *De todos modos Juan te llamas* is critical of the regime, but 'with the university behind me [...] I had the freedom to attack two of the most powerful institutions in Latin America, the military and the clergy' (Burton 1986, 198). Authoritarianism stemming from these is shown to be destructive for all. Its episodic narrative has the family as a central defining connection and traces out its collapse. Armanda's point of view is privileged, thus focusing our attention on her experiences and coming of age sexually and ideologically. How this is done is consistent with feminist film praxis. Her losses and coming of age are the emotional centre of the film, but she is not the sole focus nor do we filter everything through her point of view. Therefore, whilst Armanda and Bonilla are given considerable agency and attention, there is space for critical engagement and ambiguities with regards to other characters. This distance and interpretive space can also be found in *Misterio*.

***Misterio* (1980)**

Misterio is a very different project, but one that challenges how the 1980s in Mexican cinema are to be understood and understandings of what it meant to be a female filmmaker at this time. *Misterio* was adapted from the novel, *Estudio Q* (1965) in collaboration with its author, Vicente Leñero, an experimental author and prolific scriptwriter. It is a farce about process, production, and power in the television industry. The narrative follows a television star, Alex (Juan Ferrara), whose own life becomes the subject of a soap opera. He realises this early on in the narrative when he is told that his first holiday in a decade cannot go ahead because this decision to convert his life into televisual spectacle has been taken by the producers and station owners. He is never a willing participant in this experiment and the lines between truth and fiction are continuously blurred through dialogue and audio-visual technique. For example, the set is deliberately lit in a flat soap opera fashion, the mise-en-scène appears typically stylised to resemble a set even in the outdoors scenes, and the characters make value judgements about specific scenarios based on whether their dialogue appears convincing. Comparisons could be drawn to *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), which is about a reality television show that observes an individual's every moment from birth. Unlike Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) in *The Truman Show*, Alex is aware from very early on that his life is being mined for entertainment value in *Misterio* and responds negatively to it. His fellow actors treat it as another job. At several points, characters assert that a fellow actor/character's lines must be false because they appear too 'cursi' [trite or tacky] after the fashion of the scriptwriter, Gladys (Beatriz Sheridan), yet, it is frequently unclear whether we are watching the truth of the actor/character's story or the scripted enactment for the television. This is because they are never sure of where the boundaries between truth and fiction lie.

Misterio was made in the 1980s which is, according to Mexican film histories, a supposed lost decade (Hershfield and Maciel 1999, 193-196). Already in decline in the 1970s, the studios had lost their power, some were in financial ruin and government support for filmmakers was waning. At the same time it was a period during which there was a very high level of production, most of which was low budget and intended to go straight to video distribution. Therefore, it is an era that has become synonymous with trash cinema (Sconce 1995) or, *Latsploitation* films as they have been labelled by Tierney and Ruetalo (2011) in the Latin American context. Accepted assessments of the

decade suggest that because audience attendance was greatly reduced as a result of the poor condition of cinema theatres and the increase in home video viewing, little of consequence was made. However, such an assessment ignores filmmakers, such as Fernández Violante, or her other contemporaries, such as Felipe Cazals and Luis Alcoriza who continued to make challenging films that play with form and narrative. There is critical space for further explorations into the blanket disavowal of this period of auteurs. In part, it is a question of taste because most were shot on video, which has not withstood the passing of time. In the case of *Misterio*, filming the story drawing on narrative tropes and audio-visual structures from the telenovela, with its formulaic conventions, works at a metatextual level. The use of video simultaneously draws on and critiques the aesthetic choices and narrative structure. Fernández Violante thereby becomes both creator and cultural critic.

From the opening scene, the film is meta-fictional in ways that comment on the means of production and repeatedly draw attention to it. It opens with Alex being instructed on his movements through a voiceover that is revealed to be the director (V́ctor Junco) when he says ‘perfecto, graba’ [perfect, print] and in reverse shot we see the crew and set. At first, this set up suggests that it is just going to be a film about the making of a television soap opera. Gradually, it becomes about the collapse of fact and fiction in Alex’s world that has sinister elements of surveillance culture, where the director is acting as omnipotent and willing to kill those, such as Gladys, who do not conform to his wishes. When Alex is told that the soap opera is to be about his life, the director shows him that the conversation they are having is already written down and the outcome is decided. Alex believed it to be a spontaneous real life event. When the director reveals it to be scripted he is confused and tries to both puzzle through what is his real life and what is soap opera and to resist being controlled by the director.

The character of the director is integral to a political reading of this film in his sinister capacity to control the fate of the characters. He repeatedly orders the actors and crew to perform their roles in specific ways, and punishes individuals such as Gladys with death, as an example to others of the consequence of disobedience. Surveillance is an important component of his control. This is revealed in ways that are impossible according to conventional understandings of space and time and are unsettling for the characters. Dialogue is repeated, scenes are repeated, and the cast appear not to

remember events that have just taken place. These breaks are a comment on patriarchy and authoritarianism, that from her interviews, Fernández Violante sees as indelibly interlinked (Pech Salvador 1997, 103).

It is Ellen McCracken's contention that the source novel is typical of the Boom in Latin American literature of the 1960s and 1970s in that Leñero and his contemporaries (such as, Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes, who also wrote for the big screen), 'strongly asserted their identity as practitioners of high culture' (McCracken 2010, 210), and that while they were 'fascinated with the mass media and constructed their work with many elements of mass culture, [...they] never allowed their texts to *become* mass culture' (2010, 210, italics in original).¹ This assertion is a more complicated one when the intermedial relationship between television and film is not so distant, especially in the 1980s when films were frequently shot on video and, therefore, have the same aesthetic traces (Hershfield and Maciel 1999, 193-196). It is in the meta-textual awareness, collapse in time and space, and the frequent pulling back and revealing the means of production, visually, and through both dialogue and effects, [that](#) *Misterio*'s challenges to convention lie. These techniques and their experimental nature should have been lauded. However, given the scant critical attention this period of filmmaking has received, the use of a much-derided form (*telenovela*) and shooting on video, has resulted in *Misterio* being overlooked. This neglect is further compounded by the fact that it was also made by a filmmaker difficult to pigeonhole.

McCracken uses the term 'meta-telenovela' to describe the film and discusses the use of paradigmatic substitution in the adaptation process and how it 'teaches that none of its signifiers can be trusted because new signifieds are constantly being substituted' (2010, 209). The novel is multi-layered in its textual referents in ways that have much to do with the formal aspects of fiction writing and many of its conceits are highly text-based. For example, much space is given over to detailed classifications of Alex (also referred to as Alejandro in the novel). This begins with the minutiae of his birth registration (22-24); exhaustive measurements that include his height, length of his legs to his knees, and even the number of hairs on every part of his body (34-37); his medical history (39-42); phrenological analysis (44-46); and so on. This information is

¹ For more detail on García Márquez's writing for cinema as well as the adaptations of his work, see, Joel del Río (2013).

mostly dull to read and disrupts the flow. It also functions as a reflection on the impossibility of knowing a character through facts and (pseudo-)scientific analysis. *Misterio* has none of this detail. Instead, it draws on the transcriptions of direction; dialogue between actors in their roles and of characters from the novel; passages taken from scripts; and descriptions of action; and plays with these in ways that are possible using conventional televisual language. The film changes the order in which some events take place and, unlike the novel where it is often unclear who is speaking to whom, the actors' physical presence obviate confusion in the same ways, the tactic used in the film is that they sometimes change roles, blur the lines between being characters and performers, or speak dialogue that is against type and sometimes self-reflexively. *Estudio Q* is a novel about writing as much as it is about television. In *Misterio* form and content make it a meta-narrative but also make broader points about power, control and surveillance in everyday life. Again, as in the case of Fernández Violante's contemporaries, politics continues to be an important component of the narrative.

If we are to read Fernández Violante as an auteur with a significant and consistent voice, she deals with power, its potential to corrupt, and how destructive it is for others. Yet, she does not ascribe full ownership of any of these projects to herself, thus undermining the auteur label, a gesture which can be read as inherently feminist. For example, she is credited as a scriptwriter for *Misterio*, but in interviews she is clear that the script is Leñero's and that she took on the film as a jobbing director (Pech Salvador 1997, 146). In interviews she is unusually honest about the frustrations and challenges posed by the industry, lack of finance, and the effect individuals' decisions have had on her career that have sometimes impeded her realising her vision, but also generously ascribes skill and talent to those she is collaborating with on her films. Her blunt statements about producers and their impositions have also worked against the distribution of her films. All of these elements have resulted in her work being largely overlooked.

Conclusion

It is important to recover Fernández Violante's filmic output and see it beyond and within gender. Her gender must be taken into account given the pioneering nature of her work and the limitations and constraints that her gender has entailed on how her work is

distributed and seen. However, to only read her through this lens, according to current framings of Mexican film history, is not to see her in the light of her 1970s contemporaries who have been lionised by earlier generations of critics who, in turn, ignore her work, primarily, because she is a woman, but also because her status as an auteur is more ambiguous than her contemporaries. Her interviews illuminate what analysing her work demonstrates, that she makes a fascinating case study in the evolution of the Mexican film industry as a director, a worker, an influential industry professional, and a gendered subject. She is also someone whose work and her assertion of where it should be placed indicate that there are significant flaws in how Mexican film is read.

To return to Rashkin's contention that Fernández Violante is controversial, this is due to her repeatedly very forthright and critical statements about others in interviews, as is evident in her description of her pathway to inclusion and acceptance within the industry. For her, these are twofold. Firstly, 'after six years in the union of being treated like the worst boy in class, they accepted me. You know why? Because I take shorthand and type! But this is very useful to me' (Horton 1987, 4). Her pragmatism and disappointment in the means of attaining recognition through having secretarial (read feminine) skills in the male dominated industry are evident here, and can also be found in the second reason she gives: 'in order to have power and to be respected in Mexico, you must be well known internationally' (Horton 1987, 4). Serving on the jury of the Moscow and Havana film festivals fulfilled this function. She is highly self-reflective in these interviews. Her reading of her career is clear: she has carefully manoeuvred through a system that was stacked against her. She is very aware of the limited chink of possibility her success has afforded her and other women, '[s]o I am an important person for the industry. They feel it is best to work with a well-known "prestigious" woman director and then they are able to say how pro-feminist they are because they support me' (Horton 1987, 4). Her example does not necessarily lead to radical systemic change because she becomes the exceptional woman. The scare quotes in her remark reflect an awareness of what she represents, and work to ironize the notion of value in the word 'prestigious'. Her gender has determined how she has gained access to institutions, such as the director's union, and she has made considerable moves to pave the way for others, who then chose alternative routes. There is a directness in the

interviews that unmask the conservatism of the context in which she was making films and the resistance she experienced as a woman in trying to succeed in the industry.

Fernández Violante has been in the unusual situation of being simultaneously inside the structures of the studio system and signalled as a marginal subject because of her gender. She became a director at a transitional moment and has been highly influential due to her various professional roles in education and direction. Her first feature, *De todos modos Juan te llamas*, was made shortly after graduation and won significant industry awards. Being asked to make *Misterio* resulted in an experimental adaptation of a post-modern text. These shifts and changes are not a story of linear progression and upward trajectory. They are the account of someone who has had to navigate an industry in crisis and one in which her gender has been a significant impediment to renown and acclaim.

Fernández Violante has worked within and outside the studio system to make ambiguous, politically complex films ambivalent about many of the grand narratives. An analysis of her filmmaking foregrounds the difficulties in taxonomy, challenges how Mexican film histories are conventionally told, and highlights the ways in which the intersections of gender and generation serve as simultaneously exclusionary and inclusionary. Her career is disruptive to current narratives regarding Mexican film history and demands that it be re-told. Historically, she belongs to the 1970s generation, yet is left out in critical studies. As a woman she was pioneering and should be read as such, but her lack of clear feminist aesthetics means that she is excluded. Her work challenges us to consider what it means to be a woman filmmaker trying to make her way in an industry that was resistant to her presence, amongst contemporaries who did not accept that what she made is worthy of inclusion in their canon. Fernández Violante's output creates a dissonance in the neat categories heretofore used about gender and independent filmmaking in Mexico, which suggest that they do not work. She deserves a place in a history that has a place for her and others who fall between and outside of the current frameworks.

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