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"Renaming the Desert: Sound and Image in the Films of Claudia Llosa"

For a film-maker, whom one might suppose to be more concerned with the visual image, Claudia Llosa shows a perhaps surprising interest in language and, indeed, sound. In the first instance, this is manifest in the prominence of indigenous language in both her films, *Madeinusa* and *La teta asustada*. In each case, the movie opens, with very little else in the way of preliminaries, to the sound of a song sung in Quechua. In fact, in *La teta asustada* that is all there is: the screen itself is completely blank. It is as though, instead of the traditional cinematic establishing shot, a panorama that would establish a spatial milieu and setting within which the narrative is then to unfold, we have rather an establishing *sound*. In Llosa's films, the action is situated acoustically or linguistically before it finds physical space or a visual field. And in that the specific sound in each case is Quechua folk song, the characters and plot are therefore located in a sonic space defined by the Andean highlands, even when, as in *La teta asustada*, their physical location is the outskirts of Lima, in the desert littoral. In this film, then, we soon find that there is an ongoing tension between sound and image, language and the things it is to describe or name. If the plot of *La teta asustada* is driven by fundamental physical and geographical displacement--it revolves around the task of returning the corpse of the principal character's mother (who sang the opening song) back to her

highland village--this is duplicated in its formal structure, by the slippage between what is heard or said and what is seen.

The physical displacement in *Madeinusa* is somewhat different, indeed in some ways the inverse (and this is merely the first of many inversions I will mention in my discussion of the films), though here, too, the plot concerns the need to transit between highlands and coast. In this case, what drives the plot is a journey that the principal character's mother has already taken (at some ill-defined moment in the past) and that the daughter intends to replicate as she, in her turn, seeks to flee to the capital. But *La teta asustada* suggests that, even if that voyage is successful, the sounds and acoustic affect of the highlands persist and accompany such migrants in their new lives in the city. They linger and resonate, framing our vision of the dusty slums and the both speakable and unspeakable experiences that the movie goes on to reveal. But as well as a frame, Quechua also provides for oases of communication and tenderness within the harsh sights of the urban metropolis: notably, in *La teta asustada*, in the connection established between Fausta (the young woman looking to give her mother a decent send-off) and the gardener who works in the same household where she is a domestic servant. The two characters converse in their own language, which they have brought with them from the *cordillera*, establishing a point of connection that is linguistic as well as affective. Again, however, this is an inversion of *Madeinusa*, where it is Spanish, and a relationship with a "gringo," a Limeñan displaced from the city, that provides (temporary) respite from the visual and physical environment. So it is not as though there were a romanticization of Quechua, or some essentialist association of indigeneity with compassion and solidarity--far from it, especially in *Madeinusa*. Rather (and this, in short, is my argument here), *Llosa* points us to the possibilities as well as the pitfalls opened up by displacement and heterogeneity, by a scission between the senses.

To return to the songs with which both movies begin, another disjunction presents itself when we listen to the words--or rather, in the case of most (non-Quechua speaking) viewers, read the subtitles. For the quite beautiful, lilting, haunting melody of the unaccompanied female voice in each case tells us of or is associated with shockingly ugly violence and intimations or recollections of brutality. In *Madeinusa*, the song introduces us to the notion that the singer, far from residing happily in elementary harmony with her surroundings, proposes to run away when the forthcoming "holy time" arrives. Moreover, as she sings she is preparing the rat poison with which, much later in the film, she will kill her father and make good her escape. In *La teta asustada*, the mother's song is of dismemberment and mutilation, of rape and violation. The songs themselves, then, repeat the basic disjunctions that structure both films, in form and in content, and in the tension between form and content. If this is heterogeneity, it is irredeemable and inescapable; it is not simply a product of the flight to or from the city. At root, there is no root: only an inevitable incompatibility of word and thing, an estrangement between what is presented to us and the way it is presented. From the very start, these films disrupt any project to represent either the coast or the highlands. And if we can define indigenism as the attempt to represent indigeneity, to give it its verbal or visual (and so political) due, then these films are decidedly not indigenist. If anything, they are a reminder that indigeneity itself is always split, always divided.

Hence also the concern, in both films, with naming. On the one hand, names are significant and charged with meaning. It is no coincidence, for example, that the protagonist of *La teta asustada* is named Fausta. The movie's central plot point involves something like a bargain with the devil: the contract of employment that she accepts from her white, upper-middle-class employer in order to earn the money to transport her mother's body back to the village. Moreover, this contract, too, is doubled as in the

course of her duties she accepts a second offer, trading her voice (a promise to sing) for the pearls from her mistress's broken necklace. Unlike in the case of Faust, however, this contract is destined to be broken: her employer reneges on both promises. As such, Fausta is both properly and improperly named: she makes a pact that is Faustian in all but the most essential detail.

So on the other hand, then, names are also troublesome and arbitrary. This is particularly the case in *Madeinusa*, a film that takes its title from the protagonist's name, which is both manifestly fitting and supremely incongruous. As a snippet of English it suits well a young woman who collects such fragments (trinkets and postcards, a battered copy of an old magazine) and who dreams of escape from an Andean reality that she finds both uncomfortable and dangerous. When she sees that the gringo has a shirt that says "Made in USA," she takes this as a point of connection (another affective resonance enabled by linguistic difference). She tells him that he has her name on the shirt. "That's not a name," he responds. "It's my name," she says. "I like it." "It's not a name," he insists. "You should be Rosa or María, not Madeinusa." But for all Madeinusa's claim that names should stick, she herself suggests otherwise when she takes the magazine that is in her collection, which is called *Maribel* and whose cover shows a blond white woman clasping a young child, and with a thick pen carefully inscribes her own name over the magazine title: no longer *Maribel* but *Madeinusa*. Here, naming or renaming, the fact that names can come unstuck, is a portent of escape or even liberation. Madeinusa writes herself in to the film (for there is no other title screen) and into her own sentimental vision of what life must be like elsewhere.

In *La teta asustada* (a film for which, symptomatically, its English translators had to find a new name, *Milk of Sorrow*, rather than the more literal rendering of the title as something like "The Frightened Tit"), renaming or mis-naming is more problematic. A

very early scene has Fausta in hospital, with a nurse asking her for her "full name." At first, Fausta refuses this bureaucratic interpellation, responding instead with the question "Where is my uncle?" But on the second time of asking, she provides her full, legal identity so that it can be registered and recorded, by the viewer as much as by the nurse: "Fausta Isidora Janampa Chauca." But again, we see that this act of registration and inscription fails to stick. In a subsequent visit back to the hospital, she has forgotten to bring the appropriate identification. The doctor asks: "What have you got so I can find your case history?" To which her response is simply silence, and she is dismissed from the facility.

Fausta's employer, meanwhile, consistently forgets or simply never takes the trouble to learn her "real" name, despite that fact that (on being mistakenly confused for another domestic servant, Fina) her maid tells her: "My name is Fausta. Fausta Isidora." Instead, she calls her "Isidra": a mangled version of the young woman's middle name; not quite proper but not fully improper either. Again, this misnaming reduplicates a more fundamental appropriation, as the employer (a professional singer) takes her employee's music, her voice, and replays it or recasts it in theatrical performance in (presumably) the center of the city. To return to the question of indigenism: if anyone is the indigenist here, it is the singer, who translates the folk song for "all of Lima," to great applause and acclaim. But the moment that Fausta expresses pleasure in the event, implicitly offering a reminder of her own contribution to her employer's success, she is cast out of the car in which they are both travelling: "Isidra gets off here. She's walking." Accepting now the interpellation of this misnomer, Fausta quietly opens the car door and leaves, even as she subsequently runs along the highway shouting "We made a deal!" This, after all, is the point at which the Faustian

pact is betrayed. But Fausta has already accepted the betrayal, the fact that she is not Faust after all.

Again, an inversion, for the climax of *Madeinusa* is also a betrayal, a pact denied, and a misnaming. After she has fed the rat poison to her father, and as he lies dying, his mouth frothing (and voice silenced), Madeinusa sees the gringo, who had agreed to take her to Lima. The gringo gleans what has happened and is horrified at the sight. "You're mad!" he exclaims. But his nightmare is about to get worse. Madeinusa's sister, Chale, arrives and sums up the situation. Turning to face the young man, she declares "You killed my dad." Then, shouting: "Come! The gringo killed my dad!" The Limeñan is open-mouthed, his look turning to pure horror when, after a brief pause, Madeinusa also joins in: "Come! The gringo killed my dad!" She then runs through the village, waking the neighbors with her allegation. And in the next (and final) scene, Madeinusa is in a truck, with a chronically chatty driver who goes by the name "El Mudo" ("the mute"): they are en route to Lima, and of the gringo there is not a sign. Here, it is the Limeñan who takes on the role of the indigenist. He, too, glories in a name that is suitably fitting and ill-fitting at the same time: for he is Salvador, or "savior," but his mission to save Madeinusa ends ignominiously, betrayed by the putative object of his salvation and compassion.

And this, I suggest, is the reason for the aura of controversy and outrage that still attends this film. Above all for the liberal left, the real crime of *Madeinusa* is the breach it opens or reveals between the young man from Lima and the young woman from the village of Manayacuna (a name, incidentally, that allegedly means "the town no-one can enter" in Quechua). For so much of the film, after all, the plot holds out the promise of a prototypical "foundational fiction" in which romance would quasi-naturally secure the idea of nation, bringing together representatives of coast and highland. It is when

subaltern betrayal refuses this affective mechanism of would-be hegemony, choosing flight instead, that the critics sound the alarm. But why should Madeinusa exchange colonial authority or postcolonial abuse for an unfeasible tie with some liberal hegemon? She needs no Salvador, no savior, to make her way to Lima and who knows where thereafter.

Madeinusa and *La teta asustada* are films of posthegemony. They are movies that consistently and thoroughly deny the possibility of any project to articulate meaningfully any of the many breaches that constitute (and at the same time undo) Peruvian society: between genders, between races or ethnicities, between languages, between language itself and the things it sets out to name, and finally between sound and vision or between voice and touch. The promise of hegemony is that it will to suture these fissures, to construct chains of equivalence and produce the illusion of consent. But that consent is sabotaged, first, by the series of betrayals on the part of creole elite and indigenous subaltern alike, and second by the very instability of these identities and indeed of any other category that might be proposed as the ground of some purported national community.

But this is not to say that Llosa's films, especially *La teta asustada*, deny community altogether: outside the walled garden that seals in the singer who employs and appropriates Fausta's labour power and affect, there is another world. This is the world of Fausta's extended family, who construct elaborately kitsch rituals of love and marriage that are, yes, shot through with market value and commodification, but that also go beyond such considerations. The family exploits the mutability of words and things to carve out spaces of community, encounter and (where possible) enjoyment. They play with representation, never asking for authenticity of fidelity: staging group photos, for instance, in front of a patently faked waterfall whose function is simply to

obscure the desert around them. Rather than asking their subjects to be happy (the impossible dream of hegemony), they ask merely for them to smile, with another linguistic fragment snatched from English: "Say cheese!" It is not minds they work on (no pretense of consent) but bodies and things. They revel, in almost baroque manner, in ornamentation and frills that threaten (or at least play with) the logic of commodification itself. In one wedding, for instance, icons and guinea pigs, upholstered furniture and beer, ironing boards and mirrors are all paraded by dancing guests, cheered on and applauded by the crowd. The use value of these objects is underlined ("The chickens, for them to have eggs at home") but also something else: an aesthetic joy in the thing itself, and in the social relations that it incarnates: "that ironing board, this is wonderful." There is something shallow in this, of course, but that is because the very notion of depth is denied. Even a grave, in the family's hands, becomes a swimming pool and the occasion for a party.

Near the very end of the film, Fausta seems to reject such frivolity. Abandoning her plan to return to the highlands, she gets off a truck in the middle of the desert. The desert of the real, perhaps, that has been in the background throughout. With her mother's corpse, from this sandy outpost she gazes out on the sea. "Look at the sea, mum," she says. "Look at the sea." But this is but one more disjuncture between word and image, language and act, for of course the corpse can neither hear nor see. The screen then goes dark for several moments, in an echo of the opening scene except that now the soundtrack is completely silent. But all of a sudden the light returns, and we see Fausta's young cousins dancing on the concrete roof of a typically half-built house, with empty plastic bottles perched on the rebar and (as always) the desert behind. The children are dancing without music; or their dancing is itself the music. The little girl instructs her brother: "No, not like that, you have to stomp your feet hard. That's it."

They are interrupted by someone or something, and the girl shouts out "Fausta, someone is calling you!" Responding to this final gesture of naming, Fausta is then seen opening a door, breaching yet another of the divides that this movie endlessly constructs and deconstructs. Outside, there is nobody. But there is a plant, transplanted and potted, and it is Fausta wordlessly smelling its flower and examining its tender leaves that gives the film its final image. There is nothing particularly organic about this: we are still, after all, in the desert. But it is as though the film had finally reconciled itself to that fact, and to the transplantation and uprooting that give us adornment and (however briefly) joy. It is reconciled to the play of affect (and habit), the exuberance of the multitude that allows us to rename the desert and call it life.

Filmography

La teta asustada. Dir. Claudia Llosa. Starring Magaly Solier, Susi Sánchez, Efraín Solís.
Spain/Peru, 2009.

Madeinusa. Dir. Claudia Llosa. Starring Magaly Solier, Carlos J. de la Torre, and Yiliana Chong. Peru/Spain, 2006.