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► **To cite this version:**

Carlos Rabassó, Francisco Rabassó. Trans-Gender Roles under Patriarchy: Pelo Malo (Bad Hair). Phillip Drummond. Questions of Cultural Value, 5, pp.1-7, 2017, The London Film & Media Reader, 978-0-9573631-7-5. hal-02478290

HAL Id: hal-02478290

<https://hal-normandie-univ.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02478290>

Submitted on 13 Feb 2020

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A Trans-Gender Work in Progress

Mariana Rondon's *Pelo Malo/Bad Hair* (Venezuela *et al.*, 2013) tells a story of the emergence of gendered identities within the network of male/female family relationships. Junior (played by Samuel Lange Zambrano) is a nine year-old boy with luxuriant curly hair which he longs to straighten in order to fulfil his fantasy of becoming a long-haired singer. Junior's mother, Marta (Samantha Castillo), is trying to regain the job she recently lost as a security guard, and as a single mother she now struggles to care for Junior and his baby brother. She is increasingly determined to correct Junior's preoccupation with his appearance, but the boy is encouraged by his grandmother, Carmen (played by Nelly

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Ramos), who thinks she understands why Junior is attracted to the handsome Mario, who runs nearby grocery stall, and who, in the course of some tough and selfish talk with Marta, would very much like to take the boy into her care.

In patriarchal/phallocratic societies, women have a fixed role as mothers and wives and are thus excluded from the forces of production and the circles of power. In *Bad Hair*, the patriarchal/phallocratic model is challenged by the story's complex representations of gender involving the female/male domestic behaviour of women (the mother and neighbours) and the ambiguous and 'trans-gendered' masculine/feminine attitude of the son, Junior, with his clearly homosexual inclinations. This form of hybridity in emotional behaviour confronts the different forms of sexuality, and the active role that many women play in social life, an issue which in many Latin American societies has been repressed by structures of male dominance.

The struggle for survival on the part of the mother in *Bad Hair*, as well as that of most of the women who appear throughout the film, is undertaken in a female interior space and determined by the absence of the male. At the same time the mothers themselves also evince a 'masculine' quality, exercising the dual function of players and producers, individuals in a subsistence economy who take on what are traditionally male role in working environments, such as that of a security guard (the mother) or psychologist and dietician (a friend).

Bad Hair thus evokes "the unbreathable atmosphere of a fundamentally violent society. And violence understood almost everything from questions of a lost mother to the unhealthiness of a city hit by diseases such as fear, isolation

and stupidity".¹ The intrusion of public life into the private sphere of citizens takes place through television, that instrument of alienation and propagandistic control of mentalities, which also creates great discomfort for the viewer (as in Buñuel's *Los Olvidados/The Forgotten*, Mexico, 1950). From the perspective of the new Latin American cinema, *Bad Hair* is, like the films of Buñuel, a "dark family chronicle", depicting a world "devastated by unemployment and poverty, and the constant soundtrack of gunshots and police sirens".²

A 'Poor' and 'Imperfect' Cinema

With its interests in exploring 'double' identities full of complexity and ambiguity in relation to women's behaviour, the film is then also a type of 'trans-gender' work in progress which follows some of the post-colonial aesthetic principles proposed by Julio Garcia Espinosa in 'For an Imperfect Cinema' (1969), developed in Cuba in the 1970s, and applied to the letter by Sara Gómez in *De cierta manera (In a Certain Way)*, 1974).³ Following this model, *Bad Hair* then reflects many of the ethical and political problems that threaten Latin American revolutionary societies.

Shifting between fiction and chronicle, social reality and committed rebellion, the film is not a contemplative work of art but a combative text portraying a society in transformation where the contradictions are part of changing attitudes and roles. From this perspective the film is in intertextual dialogue with the work of Cuban film-makers such as Humberto Solas (*Lucia*, 1968), Tomas Gutierrez Alea (*Memorias del subdesarrollo/Memories of Under development*, 1968), and Claudia Guillen (*La teta asustada/The Milk of Sorrow*, 2009) in Peru, re-framing the

revolutionary realities (such as those of sixties Cuba) within the contemporary framework of the 'new' New Left in Latin America, in this case in Venezuela.

In addition to its allegiance to the ethos of 'imperfect cinema', *Bad Hair*, made on a budget of just 350,000 Euros, is also one of the films that follow the principles of *Cine Pobre* ('Poor Cinema'), an alternative film festival devoted to low- and no-budget films founded by Humberto Solás in the former colonial town of Gibara in 2003 as an alternative to the Latin American Film Festival based in the capital, La Havana. 'Poor Cinema' proposes a dialogue of dissidence with the traditional chronicles produced by Latin American cinema.

Women, both as film-makers and as filmic characters, are crucial here. It is no coincidence that both the mother of Pedro in *The Forgotten* and the mother of Junior in *Bad Hair* bear the same name, Marta. Both are 'masculinised' by having to support the family with their work and their relationship with the fathers, whose absence is ambiguous. So too are their intimate encounters with men, who become little more than objects of female sexual desire.

A Polyphonic and Hybrid Narrative

In terms of narration, *Bad Hair* deploys characters who develop the dramatic conflict (incorporating into the fiction Marta's difficult working life and the ambiguous affirmation and rejection of heterosexuality on the part of Junior) while the camera also chronicles the wider society in which the characters endure harsh living conditions. Given the multiple focus on different sites of alienation, this polyphonic narrative is in the tradition of hybridity celebrated by

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'Imperfect Cinema', with the boundaries between fiction and reality vanishing as fictional characters are seen outdoors participating in an 'improvised' staging which incorporates the everyday world of Venezuelan people (as Tomás Gutiérrez Alea did in Cuba in *Memories of Underdevelopment*).

Bad Hair also represents a challenge to the male domination identified with Marta's lovers. Where these men are concerned, Martha's sexuality is expressed purely instinctively, devoid of any feeling: the young neighbour she summons with a glance for intense but perfunctory sex, the boss with whom she trades sex in order to get her job back. The sexual act is shown as raw and brutish on two occasions in the course of the film, the gestural expression of bodies in a world of decomposing social conventions and ethical values.

The objectification of the 'male' as an instrument at the service of desire also has another function in the course of the difficult relationship between mother and child. This is depicted in the scene where Martha has sex with her boss in full view of Junior, who has gone to bed. She looks his way, perhaps in a demonstration of the business of heterosexual desire and activity, but he closes his eyes as though sleeping - he does not identify with the heterosexual behaviour expected of him by his mother.

Bad Hair thus becomes an agonising and lapidary chronicle of a polyphony of looks and cold Orwellian images as Big Brother appears on the TV screen in the guise of Hugo Chavez, addressing a speech to the Venezuelan people in a Castro-like lecture, while other revolutionary leaders such as Che Guevara and Fidel Castro himself appear in references to

an external world, alien to the characters and their daily lives, characterised by a heady mix of politics and religiosity.

The Trans-Cultural Marta

Bad Hair underlines the presence of the mother, Marta, as the producer and host of looks and actions, giving her the status of a 'meta-chronicler' in contrast to her lack of full identity in a society that marginalises women as historical subjects. She becomes an emblem of the masses exploited by political, economic, cultural ideologies and global brands. As a result, Marta becomes a trans-cultural character who works on a symbolic level as an indication of the status of women and the exploited of Latin America who have not been fully recognised as citizens through modern history.

An intense debate in the press and other media followed statements by Mariana Rondón criticising the situation of women in Venezuela and Latin America. Like the women on behalf of whom she was pleading, the film itself was also marginalised, as the paternalistic academic *milieu* did not consider it as a valid social chronicle: in their view it failed to comply with the rules inherited from traditional literary discourse.

This reinforces the status of *Bad Hair* as a subaltern chronicle, with its post-colonial perspective on how people live in alienating spaces, suffering domination and oblivion. In the context of Latin American identity, Marta is like another version of Caliban, taking as reference the works of Roberto Fernández Retamar⁴, as well as Fausta, the central character in Guillén's *The Milk of Sorrow* and any of the trio of Lucías in Humberto Solás's study of three Cuban women of the same name, but from different epochs, in *Lucia*.

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Rondón studied film at the school of San Antonio de los Baños in Cuba, where many directors and theorists of 'Third' Cinema were taught (Fernando Birri, Santiago Alvarez and Fernando Solanas amongst others). Her cinema is a committed denunciation of the political, social, economic and cultural colonisation of Latin America. It is a form of 'guerilla' cinema in which an individual biography is mixed with a biography of the nation.

This is also the case in Rondon's *Postales de Leningrado* (*Postcards from Leningrad*, 2007) where the director refers to her parents, members of the Venezuelan guerrilla movement, the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN), and one of her grandparents who participated in the founding of the Venezuelan Communist Party in 1931. This film portrays children playing games while waiting for the arrival of their absent parents who are fighting with the guerrillas. In *Bad Hair*, she shows the struggle for survival in the city, where children also play and dream of becoming beauty queens or famous singers, in the absence of parents who are missing, forgotten, or unknown.

Latin American Film History: A Context

In constant dialogue with the urban cinema of the dispossessed, Rondon's film belongs to the tradition of cinema about the exploited in Latin America, looking to the Cuzco school of indigenous cinema, as well as the films of Victor Gabiria (for example *La vendedora de rosas/The Rose Seller*, Colombia, 1988) and Arturo Ripstein, especially *Un lugar sin límites/The Place without Limits* (Mexico, 1978), based on the novel by Chile's José Donoso. In the latter the main character, La Manuela - a transvestite played by Roberto Cobo (El Jaibo in Bunuel's *The Forgotten*) - suffers a

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violent death in the streets at the hands of the 'male' Pancho, whom he has dared to kiss.

Rondon's film can also be seen in the context of dissident Latin American films dealing with homophobia, such as Hector Babenco's adaptation of the novel by Argentine Manuel Puig, *El beso de la mujer araña/Kiss of the Spider Woman* (Brazil/USA, 1985), and Cuban revolutionary films such as Nestor Almendros' *Conducta impropia/Misconduct* (1983), Tomas Guitierrez Alea's *Fresa y chocolate/Strawberry and Chocolate* (1994), and Fernando Pérez's *Suite Habana/Havana Suite* (2003), as well as the film adaptation by Julian Schnabel of the autobiography of Reynaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls/Antes que anochezca* (USA, 2000).

Equally, Rondon's film can be linked to the cinematic treatment of gender and in particular homosexuality in the transition to democracy in Spain, especially in the work of Catalan Ventura Pons (for example, *Ocaña, retrato de un artista intermitente/Ocaña, an Intermittent Portrait*, 1978) and the early films of Pedro Almodóvar - *Pepi, Luci, Bom, y otras chicas del montón/Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls like Mom* (1980), *Laberinto de pasiones/Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), and *La ley del deseo/Law of Desire* (1987).

The complex form of hybrid identity proposed in *Bad Hair* is strongly present, for example, in one of Almodovar's later films, *La piel que habito/The Skin I Live In* (2011), with its tribute to the French artist Louise Bourgeois concerning sexual ambiguity and the ideas about 'post-gender' identity developed by the American feminist theoretician Judith Butler. In the case of *Bad Hair*, if the absence of the father is a determining factor for the young Junior and his performance of a feminised masculinity, then the title of the

film is marked by a rebellious and politically engaged history in Venezuela and also refers to wider Afro-Caribbean cultures, issues of discrimination, and struggles for identity.

A Dialogue with Venezuela: Nelly Ramos

The actress who plays *Bad Hair's* paternal grandmother is Nelly Ramos, the veteran Afro-Venezuelan activist for the rights of black women. She was a founder of *el grupo Madera* (the 'Wood Group'), a great diffuser of Venezuelan music, dance and folklore, most of whose fifteen Afro-Venezuelan musicians tragically perished on 15 August 1980 when their boat sank in the Orinoco delta during a tour of the indigenous villages of the State of Amazonas. Shortly before the triumph of the film at the San Sebastian Film Festival in September 2013, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro paid tribute to the group on the 33rd anniversary of their death.

Nelly Ramos is one of the first feminists of the 1970s to demand the social re-integration of impoverished women in areas suffering from deprivation in terms of education, work, health, and so on. Afro-Venezuelan women of The Wood Group emulated the ideas and clothing of women in the Black Power movement in the United States by growing curly hair and re-interpreting black poetry, controversially claiming that the black slave should also be seen as a coloniser by dint of being male and therefore dominant.

As played by Nelly Ramos, in *Bad Hair* Grandmother Carmen is black - which by tradition makes Junior a mulatto - while his mother is white. From a social perspective the mixture of black and white has almost never been fully accepted in Latin America. Curly hair indeed makes Junior look more 'black' than 'white', more 'barbarian' (following the crude

dichotomy between 'civilisation' and 'barbarism' in Latin American thinking). On a broader front the iconic 'Afro' hairstyle has been a way of claiming membership in a committed 'barbarism' which confronts the aesthetic and social values of 'straight-haired' bourgeois society. Junior thus moves in two opposed directions – on the one hand towards a conventional rejection of 'black' hair, and on the other towards an equally unconventional identification of his own sexuality.

From this perspective, Rondón's film is in a fertile dialogue with the longer history of Venezuela, with its minorities, women, blacks, homosexuals, transvestites or members of the 'third sex', vast colonised minorities and all those recognised by Fanon as "*the wretched of the earth*".⁵ Where contemporary values are concerned, we should add, Rondón's film is also a cry of cinematic protest against a Bolivarian Venezuelan revolution which is fraught with contradictions and still marked by the profound cultural biases of paternalism and of the conservative tradition.

Notes and References

¹ Luis Martínez, 'Peluquería emocional', *El mundo*, 14 March 2014, online at <http://www.elmundo.es/cultura/2014/03/14/5321f699ca474102508b4576.html>.

² Sergi Sánchez, '*Pelo malo*', *Time Out Barcelona*, 14 March 2014, online at <http://www.timeoutbarcelona.es/Barcelona/es/cine/pelo-malo>.

³ Julio García Espinosa, *Por un cine imperfecto*, Havana: Cinemateca de Cuba/Ediciones ICAIC, 1969.

⁴ Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Todo Calibán*, San Juan, PR: Ediciones Callejón, 2002.

⁵ Franz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*, Paris : Editions Maspero, 1961.