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Matilde Landeta

Matilde Landeta was one of the first female Mexican directors to create films during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. She was able to break into the industry as a writer, worked as an assistant director, then was finally able to direct films (Arredondo 191-195). The films she directed include *Lola Casanova* (1948), *La Negra Angustias* (1949), and *Trotacalles* (1951). Throughout her career, she constantly faced challenges while working in a male-dominated industry. From a female perspective, she was able to create films that represented women differently compared to how they were usually portrayed in movies created by male filmmakers. Matilde Landeta was one of the few Mexican directors to create an alternative representation of female characters on screen and make an impact on Mexican cinema and its industry.

In 1933, she entered the industry and worked as a writer for twelve years. Traditionally, jobs in the industry that did not have to do with costume or makeup were closed off to women. However, Landeta was an exception because of her ability to speak English, which was important because of the Mexican film industry's close relationship with U.S. producers who invested in Mexican cinema. The expansion of the Mexican film industry helped Landeta get promoted to the role of assistant director (Arredondo 192).

After working on seventy-five films as an assistant director, she was finally able to direct her own films. When she was finished directing her third film, Landeta was hired by an American film company to translate television shorts to distribute across Latin America. After

finishing the well-paid job, she decided to return to filmmaking. Unfortunately, after attempting to direct another film that she wrote, a male director took over and received all credit and awards. Moreover, the National Film Bank prevented Landeta to direct (Arredondo 195-196). She secured her role to continue working with film by working at the General Society of Writers of Mexico (SOGEM), in the directors union (STIC), and was the Secretary of the Religious-Social Culture of the film authors section of the Translation Union. She was in the Film Academy and has been the president of the awards committee of the Academy of Cinematographic Arts and Science for many years (Arredondo 196). By maintaining her connections to the cinema in this manner, she was eventually able to direct another film in 1991 called *Nocturno a Rosario* (Arredondo 203).

While working in a male-dominated industry, she faced problems and challenges all the time. Many kept on telling her that women could not be assistant directors, especially film directors. After reaching out to the Secretary of Labor to assist her in addressing the discrimination, she did not receive a response (Arredondo 192). “During the production of *La Guerra de los Pasteles* (1943), she put on a business suit, covered her hair with a hat, painted on a mustache, and entered the set yelling ‘Silence!’” (Arredondo 192). The general assembly then decided that she could take on the role of an assistant director.

When Landeta wanted to start directing her own films, she received even more obstacles. Even though she had worked many years in the film industry, she had a difficult time receiving financial support (Arredondo 193). Therefore, she and her brother Eduardo Landeta founded their own production company named TACMA (Arredondo 193).

As predicted, she also went through complications during the process of directing her first film, thus showing her capability of taking on the role. Besides working with people that had

a bias against her, she would face technical difficulties, such as the camera shutting down randomly. The biggest issue was that a roll of negatives was lost. Because Landeta could not reshoot what was lost due to the actors being unavailable, she put together what she had and finished her first film.

This film was *Lola Casanova* (1948), based on a novel by Francisco Rojas González and based on real-life events. Taking place during the Spanish Conquest, the film begins in Pozo Coyote, a diverse town including indigenous and Spanish citizens founded by Lola Casanova. She recalls how she got there through a flashback. The indigenous tribe seri was attacked by the yori, the white conquerors. In retaliation, they kidnapped a high-class woman, Lola Casanova. In captivity, she learned about their traditions and customs.

Here, the film spectator begins to see a movie created from a female perspective. Casanova notices how differently the women are treated. They have a representative body and even a woman as a spokesperson and wise adviser. This differentiates greatly from the predominantly masculine world that she came from, which was parallel to what Landeta had to live through, especially while working in the film industry and witnessing how women were portrayed on screen. “I believed that the woman should have a less passive role. She should be a part of the life of her country and her family, a person who thinks, acts, and educates” says Landeta (Mercado 15). One of the women that Casanova eventually meets with is Tortola Parda, who plays an antagonistic role in the film. She is afraid that Casanova and the customs she introduces will taint her people’s culture and genetic purity. The two characters represent “the confrontation of two models of civilization, the seri and the occidental” (Mercado 16). Both women want different things for their community and will fight for it, and therefore have taken an active role.

Landeta wanted to direct and write about certain women who have achieved something in their lives (Mercado 14). Lola Casanova was a prominent example of this. “Lola Casanova (Meche Barba) is a Mexican heroine, daughter of Spaniards, who reverses the system of miscegenation. [During this period,] men dominated, violated, conquers the indigenous woman” (Arredondo 197). Instead of using violence, Lola Casanova convinces the seri people to stop waging war on the Mexican government and managed to make a treaty by which they were given the right to form the seri pueblo and eventually earned the title of “la madre de consejo,” translated to mother of advice. The film ends with the female protagonist as a hero and leader, something that is very rare to be seen in films made during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. Casanova had an impactful role in the coastal region where the seri lives, where the memory of the female leader is preserved.

In addition to portraying women in an honorable image, the pioneer director wanted to represent the indigenous community in a fair way as well. Landeta was fascinated with the work of González and his stories about the lives and customs of indigenous people (Arredondo 197). During an interview, Landeta noted how the writer traveled through the country researching and learning about indigenous regions (Arredondo 197). To depict the seri as accurately as possible, Landeta hired as many indigenous actors as she could (Arredondo 197), and wanted to film in the exact location of Sonora, on the Island of Tiburon, with the seri who lived there (Mercado 9). Unfortunately, it would have been expensive to transfer a team of over a hundred people to film there. At the very least, Landeta was still able to include accurate depictions of “costumes, music, and authentic ceremonial objects” (Mercado 9). These aspects can be seen in the first half of the film when the seri prepare their revenge on the yori by choosing the strongest warrior, who will lead them in the battle, through rituals and challenges.

The following year, Landeta directed *La Negra Angustias* (1949), also based on a novel by Francisco Rojas González. Taking place during the Mexican Revolution, the film was about a young Afro-Mexican woman named Angustias, who refused marriage. As a result, the women in the village bullied her for rejecting the traditional role of a woman. Angustias was forced to leave her hometown after killing a man in self-defense. Inspired by her father, the acclaimed bandit Antón Farrera, and all the stories he told about injustices and inequalities, Angustias went on to be a Zapatista troop and eventually became a commander. According to Manrique et al., in genres focused on the Mexican Revolution, films focused on men as the main character and often portray women as supporting characters that do not take the role of leaders. “Most of the time, women lack any will and the meaning of their existence belong to others” (Manrique et al.). As is shown throughout the film, Landeta changes this portrayal of women. In the book, Angustias gets married, and the character changes (Arredondo 201). Angustias “completely surrenders to a husband who disdains her, financially exploits her, and tells others that she is not his wife but his "mistress," because he is ashamed of being married to a Mulatta” (DePaoli). In the film, however, she did not marry nor did she change when she became enamored. Landeta did not believe that women change once they fall in love or get married, and even applied it to her own life when she was married (Arredondo 190). Angustias’ ideologies, values, and beliefs continued on. In the end, Angustias returns to command her troops yelling “Viva la Revolución! Viva México!”

In terms of dominance, the audience can clearly see the growth of power the main character achieved through her body language, costuming, and camera angles. In the beginning portion of the film, Angustias was wearing a dress and looked up at her father as he was telling his stories, shown through a high-angle shot. This image demonstrates the character’s

compliance. Almost halfway through the film, Angustias rallied the troops, gave an inspiring speech, and told everyone that she was the daughter of the renowned bandit Farrera, which earned her the title of colonel. She spoke confidently and raised her torch up high while wearing the same uniform as the rest of the troops. Here she felt more than an equal, was not afraid to fight, and had earned her power. Angustias was liberated from the constraints women had. This can be seen through her change in clothing and the character even acting like a man, such as drinking and smoking in a bar with all the troops.

It is worth mentioning that this was not just the story about a woman, but also the story of someone who was a person of color, impoverished, and illiterate. Landeta showed the hardships of being a black woman including being rejected by the man she loved because of the color of her skin. However, some find that the film hardly dives into the full exploration of issues regarding race in a significant way (DePaoli). Additionally, Landeta was criticized for hiring a non-black actress to play the role of Angustias (Paranaguá 26). Although progressive in some aspects, Landeta demonstrated some unethical decisions in other circumstances. Nonetheless, it can be argued that it was not her intention to cause harm or insensitivity to anyone, but rather to speak on the injustices some may face and to empower those that are usually shown as inferior.

The last film Landeta directed during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema was *Trotacalles* (1951). This film is about two sisters who lived two completely different lives. María worked as a prostitute; meanwhile, Elena was married into a rich life. This film addressed the idea of prostitution differently from what was regularly shown through the genre of *Rumberas*. Landeta said she “wanted no part in making some story about a good girl who takes herself off to the brothel just so she can support her old dad” (Dever 95). Instead, the viewer sympathizes with María and the hardships she had to face including being physically abused and being shown as

inferior in order to survive. This aligns with the other issue conveyed in the film, which is the economic inequality shown through the impoverished setting of the city streets (Dever 98).

During the 1940s, there was an established notion regarding film morals that “a good woman will marry, and a bad woman will end up in prostitution” (Calderón et al. 127). Yet in *Trotacalles*, the spectator hardly sees Maria committing any sins. Instead, the viewer observes Elena cheating on her husband. According to Calderón et al., one of the biggest directors of the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, Emilio Fernández, said that all women portrayed as prostitutes should suffer and pay for their sins in the story (128). While Landeta does not necessarily counter this idea completely, it can be argued that she does not have the same intentions in showing this. In some ways, the audience sympathizes with Elena as well due to her frustration with not being able to find true love and being used and objectified by her husband. During an interview, Landeta was asked “Faustino is deceived by his wife Elena. Why doesn’t he redeem her?” (Arredondo 202). Landeta replies “In general, in movies made by men, they redeem the women: they forgive their bad deeds and move on with them until they become holy” (Arredondo 202) She believes that only women can redeem themselves, a man cannot do that for them (Arredondo 202).

Although there are not many sources studying how female spectators felt about these films, it can be argued that seeing these films on screen was liberating and empowering for women. Even though Landeta did not consider herself a feminist (Tenorio 285), she fought to change the stereotypes of women and to portray them more accurately and in more dominant roles. She was absolutely irritated witnessing women being shown on screen as passive, superficial, and rarely thinking of themselves and their values. Therefore, she worked her way up through the industry to create change through her films. Being told that she would not be able to

direct did not stop her from doing her work. Although she was barred from resources to direct more films, she was able to work in many different careers and jobs relating to the cinema and broke new ground for women in film during the 1940s and 50s. Moreover, Landeta tackled additional issues besides the misleading images of women, such as the destruction of indigenous lands (Arredondo 198), the inequalities that people of color face, and the income gap between the rich and the poor. Matilde Landeta was truly an inspiring and empowering pioneer of the Mexican Golden Age of Cinema.

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