



The Representation of Women’s Sexuality in Mexican Film from 1991-2001

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This research was produced on the unceded lands of the lək̓ʷəŋən peoples, specifically, the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose relationships with and inherent rights to this land continue to this day.

Introduction

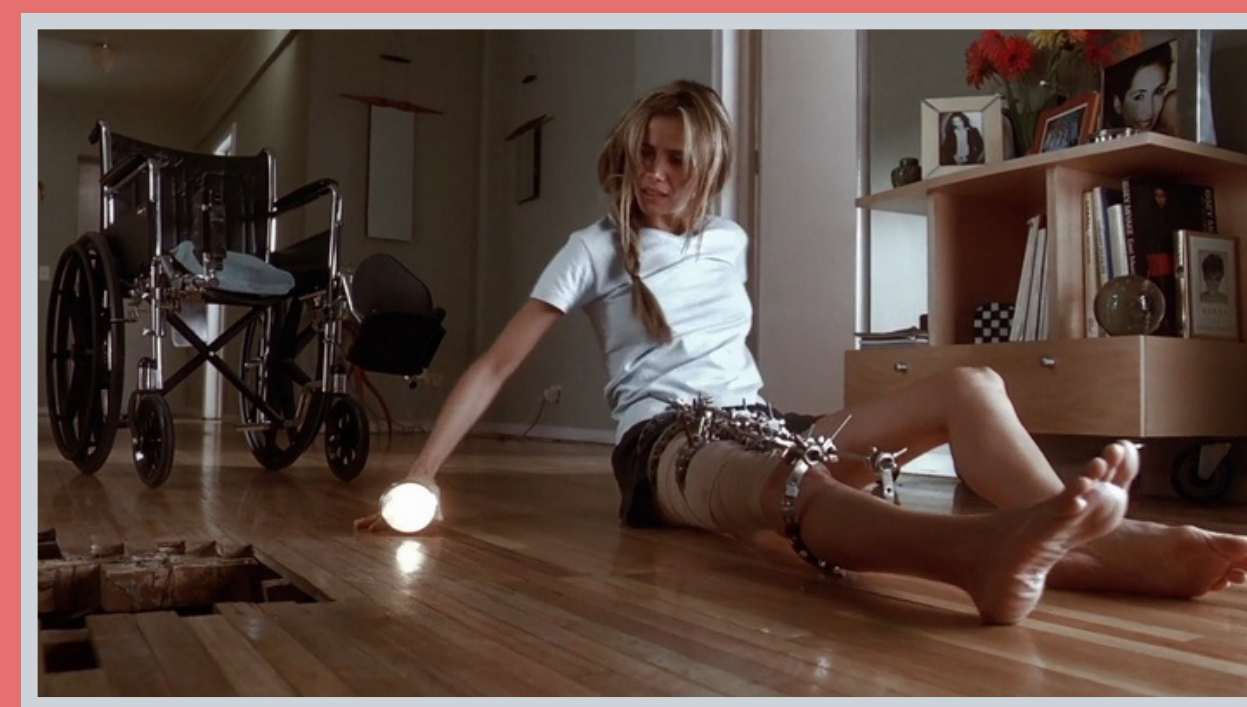
As more female directors started to gain traction in Mexican film in the 1980’s, 1990’s, and 2000’s, they finally had more of a platform to redefine and reshape how women were portrayed in film. More specifically, this opened up more possibilities to challenge how women’s sexuality was viewed by creating characters who challenged the stereotypical female characters that had traditionally been most prominent, such as the innocent and gullible virgin, the mala mujer (or bad woman), and the overbearing mother.

This research explores the representation of women, and more precisely, their sexuality, in Mexican film. I do this by examining these portrayals using the famous Bechdel test, created as a way to measure women’s representation in film and if the film can be considered a “feminist film”. Additionally I deepen my analysis by seeing if there is a correlation between the gender of the director and the depth a female character is given.



Methodology

For this research, four Mexican films were analyzed. They are: Danzón (1991) by María Novaro; El callejón de los milagros (1995) by Jorge Fons; Amores Perros (2000) by Alejandro González Iñárritu; and Perfume de Violetas (2001) by Maryse Sistach. These films were chosen due to their popularity predominantly in Mexico, but additionally for their recognition internationally. Out of the four movies, two have female directors and two have male directors. This ratio was chosen with the intention of being able to further analyze if there are differences in representations of women’s sexuality based on the gender of the director. Furthermore, in order to avoid personal bias or opinion, to measure the representation of women in these films, I applied the Bechdel Test.



What is the Bechdel Test?

- Created by Alison Bechdel
- Measures the representation of women (or lack thereof) in film and to conclude if it is a “feminist film”
- Measurement is done by applying only three simple questions:
 - —Are there at least two women in the film who have names?
 - —Do those women talk to each other?
 - —Do they talk to each other about something other than a man?” (Yang et. al, 2020, pp. 2).

The Movies

Danzón (1991): directed by María Novaro (female)

- Main character: Julia, a single, middle-aged mother who loves to dance
- Compelled by her love for dance and want to find her dance partner, Carmelo
- Sexuality portrayed by her dance moves and exploration of sexual partners
- Themes: exploration of the self and of sexuality

El callejón de los milagros (1995): directed by Jorge Fons (male)

- Notable female characters: Alma (the innocent and gullible virgin); Doña Cata (the single, working mother); Eusebia (the doting and abused wife); and Susanita (the lonely, desperate landlord)
- Follows the lives of neighbours living in Mexico City
- Personalities of female characters are typical archetypes seen in Mexican film
- Their stories allude that exploration / deviation from the hegemonic ideal of how a woman should be or act like, will lead to punishment and hardships in life that may be their destruction
- Further alludes participation in acts that could be seen as empowering / defiant may provoke situations leading to low self worth, unhealthy environments including drugs and lack of bodily autonomy, as well as physical and emotional abuse

Amores perros (2000): directed by Alejandro González (male)

- Notable female characters: Susana and Valeria
- The title, translated in English to “Life’s a B*tch” tie into the tribulation the characters within the film are faced with
- Follows the lives of numerous strangers whose lives intersect
- Susana’s sexuality is represented and dependent on/through the actions of the men around her, restricted by the gaze of others and what they deem appropriate for her to do
- Valeria’s sexuality and beauty is emphasized until she is injured and loses her leg, no longer meeting the hegemonic beauty standards and becoming evermore unheard and forgotten

Perfume de violetas (2001): directed by Maryse Sistach (female)

- Main characters: Yessica and Miriam; two school girls from very different home lives who become fast friends
- Shows the disturbing lack of support many young women face after being sexually assaulted
- Additionally, as a sexual education system that shames and punishes them for the natural processes their bodies are going through during puberty
- Yessica and Miriam are conflictly sexualised by those around them yet at times are also expected not show any sign of sexualisation by very same people
- It is evident the filmmakers believe these young women should not be sexualised and are victims to a broken system

Findings

General Connections

- Traditionally, Mexican cinema used as a way to place women as symbolic figures (De Lauretis, 2001)
 - Reflected in selected films directed by males
 - On the contrary, the female-directed films challenge these notions to create well-rounded female characters
- Difference in budgets given for the film’s production
 - Female-directed films less likely to receive an equivalently high budget as male-directed films (Yang & Luo, 2020)
- Films with higher ratios of female cast members seen to be subjected to higher amounts of criticism (Yang & Luo, 2020)
- Possible correlation of higher box office sales with films that contain meaningful dialogue between female characters (Evans et al., 2024)
- Should be more attention to the importance of the ratio of female to males included not only in characters, but within the film crew as well (Evans et al., 2024)
- Female filmmakers in Mexico have struggled to tell their stories and challenge traditional narratives (Rashkin, 2001)
- Pattern of women having flat and stereotypical character traits in the chosen male-directed films



Application of the Bechdel Test

- All movies in this study passed the Bechdel Test’s three rules
- After analysis of these results with knowledge of the content of the movies, I questioned the accuracy of the Bechdel Test
- The test fails to acknowledge the content of conversations between two women, especially in correlation with the genre of the film (Lakhotia, 2020)
- The test lacks a criteria regarding a specific length of said conversations and the significance they are given in the film in order to “pass”
 - Example: within both male-directed films, the conversations between two female characters are short in length and the scenes are seemingly done in passing
- If we follow the rules of the Bechdel test, all films included in this study could be deemed “feminist films”
 - I do not agree with this assessment as the content of conversations, societal ideals, and archetypes portrayed in the male-directed films do not challenge hegemonic boundaries and instead seemingly enforce them
 - A mere three markers with simple criteria should not be the measurement of what dictates a film feminist

Conclusions

- There are visible differences in the representation of women and their sexuality in Mexican films based on the gender of the director
- Representations of women, their relationships between each other, the roundness of their characters, and the attention to two female characters having meaningful scenes together that are of importance to the film and that last, are much more present in the films directed by female directors
- When using the Bechdel test as a way to measure women’s representation, all films in question “pass,” and could therefore be marked “feminist films”
- After conducting this research, I argue that the Bechdel test is not a proper measure of what can be labelled a “feminist film”, and does not properly assess in depth the complexity of how women are being represented in film

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