

LIFE IN FILM:

BEATRIZ SANTIAGO MUÑOZ

From public television in Puerto Rico to Lucrecia Martel's *Zama*, the artist shares the films that have influenced her



I grew up in Puerto Rico in the 1980s: a time when Hollywood films and television dominated the cinemas and airwaves like alien broadcasts. There was no strong culture of films about Puerto Rico, no programmes that grappled with life on the island, until a remarkable, unscripted televised event that unfolded over many months and kept the entire country rapt: the congressional hearing investigating the 1978 police murder of two young *independentistas* – activists for Puerto Rican independence. The hearing that followed slowly disclosed the cover-up which had taken place; it had been planned and swept under the rug by the governor. This was not a trial, which would have been less spectacular, perhaps, because of stricter witness rules. Rather, this was a televised hearing that involved *careos* – face to face encounters between individuals with conflicting testimonies – and a cast of characters: smug undercover agents,

innocent taxi drivers, duplicitous politicians and other figures performing to archetype, in suits and sunglasses, slowly cracking under the questions of an incisive, if somewhat comical and dramatic, prosecutor. It was 1983 and I was 11 years old. Every adult conversation during those months was about the Cerro Maravilla murders. I learned about performance, moustaches, casting, geography, radio towers, sight lines, movement, expectation and surprise from Cerro Maravilla. If the tapes were re-run today, I would watch them from beginning to end. Even the audience, with their dark shirts and ties and dresses, their visible sweat and discomfort, were striking. My political views were largely formed during that time, not so much from the hearing itself but from my extended family's running commentary. I learned everyone's position on the case, but also how to imagine an event through what is left unsaid, and how to decipher words

intended to obfuscate. The hearings shaped my thinking about images, performance and running time.

Later, I searched desperately for models of filmmaking that would make sense to me. Conventional narrative methods, which require actors and sets, hammer the world to fit a particular image in a director's head and rely on funding that is often hard to come by. I was interested in finding films that captured the world as it already existed around me. During a short trip to Paris in my 20s, I discovered Pier Paolo Pasolini at Cinema Accattone. It seemed to be screening his entire *oeuvre*. Every time an actor looks straight at the camera in one of his films is a thrill. I wish there were more movie houses devoted to just a few filmmakers. Imagine! Cinema Akerman or Cinema Vertov. (My son's name is Dziga after the latter.) I fell asleep at Cinema Accattone watching Jean Rouch's *Jaguar* (1967) but couldn't shake it after waking.

Lucrecia Martel,
Zama, 2017.
Courtesy: © Rei Cine
SRL, Bananeira
Filmes Ltda, El
Deseo DA SLU,
Patagonik Film
Group SA

I was an art student in the US at a school with wonderful teachers and amazing peers, whose work I admired. My friend Franklin Cason smuggled in VHS tapes like prison cigarettes. It was his way of thinking about avant-garde black filmmakers, thought rooted in aesthetics not as secondary to politics but as a quality that cannot be reduced to meaning. We saw fantastic work – Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1987), Sara Gómez's *De cierta manera* (One Way or Another, 1974), Trinh T. Minh-hà's *Shoot for the Contents* (1992), Luis Ospina's *Agarrando pueblo* (The Vampires of Poverty, 1977), Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989) – and it was there that I understood there was a family of filmmakers that saw film as a way to re-imagine or resignify the world.

I love the un-film, the almost film, the broken film, the overly long film, the film with visible cracks, the film that reveals its guts. I'm into surprising formal choices for their poetic potential and, especially, I'm into films that upend what is taken for granted, whether it's plot or continuity or even sense. I'm into non-actors: I love watching people think and make decisions on camera. I am a materialist film viewer – the way something is made usually screams at me from behind the screen. I love films that don't yet have an audience, the ones that let you know you're not even ready for them, and tell you to come back in a few years.

Some scenes will stay with me forever: the moment when, in Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (1986), the protagonist, a prostitute, puts on her client's condom, which the camera captures in an almost instructional way, before cutting to the same framing of her hands washing dishes. I think, too, of the final mesmerizing shot of Neza punks at twilight in Sarah Minter and Gregorio Rocha's *Sábado de Mierda* (Saturday of Shit, 1988). In Pasolini's *Appunti per un'Orestiade Africana* (Notes Towards an African Orestes, 1970), while searching for a suitable protagonist, the filmmaker suddenly speaks to the image of a man: 'Here is our Orestes.' And so he is! Nothing more is needed. Yet, when an Ethiopian student tells Pasolini that he is wrong, that he does not recognise this 'Africa' the director calls forth, Pasolini's own words come undone.

Films can cast spells. Sometimes, it can take an actor 30 pages of dialogue to become real, at others, as in Lucrecia Martel's *Zama* (2017), a simple utterance: when Matheus Nachtergaele



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TOP
Cauleen Smith, *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit* (by Kelly Gabron), 1992.
Courtesy: the artist

MIDDLE
Jean Rouch, *Jaguar*, 1967.
Courtesy: Icarus Films

BOTTOM
Lizzie Borden, *Working Girls*, 1986.
Courtesy: Photofest Digital

finally declares, 'I am Vicuña Porto,' who could not be delighted by his sly smile and his softness? Our sense of Martel's world shifts rapidly yet elegantly. In *De cierta manera*, Gómez's first and last feature film, the camera moves away from the main actors to a staged yet unscripted discussion among factory workers: it is not a document of what is but of what could be. In *Sambizanga* (1972), Sarah Maldoror's film set during the Angolan War of Independence, we follow every step of a young boy's work for the resistance: he listens; he pays attention; he is careful; he tells revolutionaries what he has seen. It may be storytelling, but it is also a rehearsal for the actors-as-citizens. So many scenes in Mireia Sallarés's five-hour documentary *Las muertes chiquitas* (Little Deaths, 2013) – in which Mexican women detail their experiences of sex and violence in intimate, often shocking conversations with the director – stay with me. The film made me wonder how it could have been possible for a century of moving images to end without sex ever being addressed in this way in cinema.

I saw Cauleen Smith's short film, *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit* (by Kelly Gabron) (1992), at Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago. Smith is my contemporary but I know I hadn't yet finished my undergraduate studies at the time. I remember even where I sat, and the angle of viewing. It is a dense little film, which doesn't care how many times you have to watch it to understand it. The film is composed of the same three-minute sequence played twice – unchanged as far as I can tell. Two voices wrap around each other; text moves across the screen, partially obscured; images collage atop each other as the film's sense of time collapses. It achieves dynamic motion with an extreme economy of means. Phrases cut through other phrases: 'the border'; 'this picture taken from the trunk of a Chevy Impala'; 'sex work'; 'poses for a racist picture'; 'Cauleen dies in the middle passage.' The last line, though, comes through clearly, and it's one I've never forgotten: 'But I was saved!' I know now that the only way I'm going to get on television is to make my own damn tapes and play them for myself ●

BEATRIZ SANTIAGO-MUÑOZ is an artist based in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Earlier this year, she had a solo exhibition at Tabakalera, San Sebastián, Spain. In 2017, she had solo exhibitions at the Pérez Art Museum Miami, USA, and El Museo del Barrio, New York, USA, and her work was included in the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.