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Of Stars and Solitude: Two Mexican Documentaries

Paul Julian Smith

By happy coincidence, Mexico in 2016 yielded two expert and moving documentaries on women, sex, and aging: María José Cuevas's *Bellas de noche* (*Beauties of the Night*) and Maya Goded's *Plaza de la Soledad* (*Solitude Square*). Both are first-time features by female directors. And both are attempts to reclaim previously neglected subjects: showgirls of the 1970s and sex workers in their seventies, respectively. Moreover, lengthy production processes in which the filmmakers cohabitated with their subjects have resulted in films that are clearly love letters to their protagonists. Widely shown at festivals and beyond, *Bellas de noche* won best documentary at Morelia, Mexico's key festival for the genre, and was picked up by Netflix in the United States and other territories. *Plaza de la Soledad*, meanwhile, earned plaudits at Sundance and a theatrical release in its home country in May 2017, a rare opportunity for a documentary.¹ Its touching tagline was "We are all looking for love," a sentence that in the original Spanish (*Todas buscamos amor*) is emphatically feminine.

I caught *Bellas de noche* at the Casa del Cine, a small independent art house in Mexico City's Historic Center. It was an intimate screening and, by the film's moving finale, there was not a dry eye in a house made up of hardened cinephiles such as myself. Further testifying to its wide appeal, *Bellas de noche*'s credits acknowledge support from not only TV network Televisa (which provided sequin-strewn vintage footage from its variety shows) but also from government cinema and culture agencies IMCINE and CONACULTA, which might once have turned up their noses at such an avowedly populist project.

In an evocative pre-credit sequence, a raven-tressed siren is seen writhing seductively on a silver chair as drapes billow in purple and pink around her. Cuevas cuts to period footage testifying to the contested definition of the term *vedette*, a Mexican Gallicism that roughly translates as "showgirl." One enthusiast of the period claims the voguish figures are "authentic stars in the true meaning of the word," but another opines more skeptically that they are simply strippers.

After this preamble, the five principals of *Bellas de noche* (little known to most modern Mexicans) are helpfully introduced with onscreen titles that spell out their exotic stage names: Olga Breeskin, Lyn May, Rossy Mendoza, Wanda Seux, and Princesa Yamal. The original conflict between stardom and stripping is now complicated by a new and jarring contrast between past and present versions of the aging women. Yet there are continuities, such as the sight of a mature Wanda managing, still, to maneuver a huge orange headdress in a contemporary testimony to the enduring showgirl fetish for feathers. She reassures us that the peacocks that gave their plumes did not suffer painful plucking but rather molted naturally (in her current incarnation, Wanda will prove to be an animal rights activist).

Throughout, Cuevas will tell her tale through editing that juxtaposes past glories with present indignities. Thus, at a modern-day photo shoot for one *vedette*, the small crew are encouraged to recite somewhat half-heartedly, "We all want Olga." Cuevas then cuts to a vintage number from the star's heyday, complete with silver sci-fi costumes and decor, this time with a massive audience chanting the same talismanic words. Olga's gimmick was to play an incongruous violin. Her dry comment is typical of the showgirl survivors' disenchanting verdicts on their truncated careers: there were few opportunities, she says, for female classical musicians.

Given the disadvantages they faced, it is not surprising that *vedettes* actively participated in the crafting of their public selves. One claims explicitly that her role was to "create characters." Yet Lyn May, who boasts the most altered face and implausible sex life (she advocates intercourse in trees), claims simply, "I'm normal." Similarly, in vintage footage, the girl who took the shamelessly unlikely name of Princesa Yamal is interviewed with her dowdy family in tow, testimony to the everyday life that even the most glamorous *vedette* could not quite shake off. And it is love between mothers and daughters that will prove to be the most durable, surpassing the fickle affections of male admirers. A lasting life in the spotlight did not come easy: one showgirl insists on the inner strength needed for a half-naked woman to control a crowd of men who were watching her so closely (too closely).

Cuevas's shooting style recreates that minute visual attention with tight close-ups that emphasize her subjects' psychological

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Netflix's ad campaign for *Bellas de noche* recalls the five vedettes in their heydays.



Olga Breeskin plays her violin in *Bellas de noche*.

complexity. And although her questions are heard only off-screen, there is sometimes evidence of the presence of the filmmaker, identified informally by her first name, as when the former Princesa remarks nonchalantly to a friend on the phone: “I’m filming with María José.” And the women have reason to be grateful to the director who shared their daily lives during the lengthy shoot, for Cuevas generously includes musical numbers from her stars, whether in period footage (glamorous or grainy) or in performances restaged for the documentary in full costume and makeup.

Most poignant perhaps are the everyday settings chosen for these informal musical numbers. In *Bellas de noche*, the *vedettes* sing and dance, one more time, in beauty salons, cars, and kitchens, or even to an audience composed only of cherished canine companions. And, though faces and bodies may have changed, classic dance moves remain preserved in aspic. While torch songs like “Bésame mucho” are safely familiar, others prove more unsettling. In one number, a naked Lyn May boasts, “*Lo que me a mí me gusta a ti te asusta*” (“What I like scares you”), a defiant erotic challenge to the complacent male viewer. It is a phrase borrowed by Laura G. Gutiérrez for the title of her excellent article on the film.²

Bellas de noche, a documentary stranger than fiction, offers frequent surprises as its narrative develops. Rosy was crowned “Queen of the Tlacoyo,” an endearingly humble staple of street food. Wanda, who sought to be a “real, quality actor,” became an animal rights campaigner—but still dresses in scarlet lurex for street demonstrations. And while one woman recounts the shock she felt when a long-lost boyfriend asked her to wash his socks, another recalls how she slept for two months with the dead body of a beloved husband beside her. A third continues to see men through rose-tinted glasses. Groping for an adequate word to describe the generous gifts of her male admirers in her heyday, she finally settles on *espléndidos* (lavish). Now, of course, along with the fake glitter, all that real gold is gone. Cuevas cuts for contrast once more: as one showgirl recounts how “rivers of champagne” flowed, another is shown flushing out a pet-soiled patio with copious buckets of water.

The *vedettes* enjoyed spectacular successes (Rosy is shown atop an elephant in a soccer stadium) and suffered equally notorious misfortunes (Princesa Yamal was imprisoned for the theft of antiquities from the Museum of Anthropology). But most now maintain a modestly dignified afterlife. Wanda is shown being honored at a Mexico City shopping mall that hosts a bargain-basement version of Hollywood’s Walk of Fame. The small audience at the event is made up of die-hard fans, mainly mature women (middle-aged Mexican men also shyly confirmed to me that the *vedettes* were once

the stuff of their teenage dreams). Briefly back in front of her faithful followers, Wanda will boldly remove her flowing blond wig to reveal the skimpy tufts of hair beneath, an effect of the chemotherapy she describes elsewhere in the film.

Bellas de noche thus charts a kind of oblique history of modern Mexico. One showgirl even compares the deadly earthquake that hit the country in 1985 to her aborted career, which foundered around the same time. But Cuevas, like her subjects, never settles for sentimentality or facile pathos. There is genuine emotion when a heartbroken Wanda coos to a dying dog. Cuevas cuts back to another showgirl visiting a fortune teller in Mexico City (“You will have a great success”) and to Lyn, the one-time sexual athlete, promenading oh-so-slowly with the aged pajama-clad sixth husband whom she claims as the love of her life. Rosy has written a doorstopper of a book (its unlikely title: *Universes in Evolution*). And Yamal, now seen at the seaside, has a daughter who clearly adores her. She whispers with hard-won contentedness: “Life is as short as a sigh.”

Olga, meanwhile, now lives in the unexpected but surely appropriate location of Las Vegas and stars in a new kind of show. Clad in flowing white, but still clutching her violin, she is shown conducting a religious service for an evangelical congregation. She is the only one of the five subjects to have found Jesus. But the tour de force of surprising endings is a final tearful monologue from Wanda delivered straight to a mercilessly close camera in which she demands angrily, “Who am I?” and gesturing to a ravaged body and face, “What’s wrong with this?” It is a scene that might seem cruelly voyeuristic were the viewer not so aware of the showgirls’ skill in self-fashioning for the benefit of an audience.

Bellas de noche thus ends optimistically with a paean to rebirth and freedom. And indeed the film ensured that its five heroines gained a certain renewed celebrity, giving rise to a photo exhibition, public appearances, and pop video cameos. And perhaps fame the second time around will be better than the first, when the women had supporting roles in forgettable exploitation movies with names like *El sexo sentido* ([The Sex Sense], Rogelio A. González, 1981).

And a continuing connection with Mexico’s cinematic past is clear. Cuevas’s documentary takes its name from the original *Bellas de noche*, a fiction feature from 1975 by work-for-hire director Miguel M. Delgado, which stars the nearest thing to a male *vedette*, the fondly remembered muscle hunk Jorge Rivero.³

Still, showgirl celebrity, however tawdry, cannot compare with the dangerous and gritty lives of the working-class women of *Plaza de la Soledad*. I attended a screening of this second feature at New York’s Museum of the Moving Image



Wanda Seux in *Bellas de noche*.

in Queens, where it was shown in the presence of director Maya Goded and formed part of a festival of the year's best Latin American films from enterprising distributor Cinema Tropical.

Plaza de la Soledad was shot over three years in collaboration with its subjects and edited for another year and a half. And it opens, like *Bellas de noche*, with music. Here the principals, five in number once more, have more commonplace names: Éster, Ángeles, Carmen, Lety, and Raquel. They are first shown in a minivan singing along to “Amor de cabaret,” a classic ballad that voices, in spite of the singer's bitterness and grief, an addiction to a love that is untrue because it is bought for money. The women sing their song and gently weep.

But, unlike in *Bellas de noche* (where the *vedettes* are barely seen together, so that each can remain the star of her own firmament), here from the start there is a sense of long-lasting community. The next sequence shows a collective dinner outside the church in the titular plaza. Although unidentified at the start of the film, individuals will soon emerge from this initial festive group. However, the fact that the women will be awarded their full onscreen titles only at the end of the

feature means that Goded's stress remains more on the collective than on Cuevas's clearly differentiated individuals.

Plaza de la Soledad's technique is, however, similar to that of *Bellas de noche*: for the most part, subjects simply respond to questions from the offscreen director. And occasionally they refer orally to “Maya” as casually as they did in the previous film to “María José.” One lengthy scene, however, shows the smiling filmmaker reflected in a mirror as she shoots a female couple in their hotel room. Goded thus acknowledges her own presence as observer and participant in the world she knows so well and records so beautifully. This sense of intimacy is enhanced by an unintrusive crew of just two: the director-photographer herself (shooting with Canon Mark II and III cameras, known for low-light performance) and a sound engineer. As the author of a book and photo exhibition on the same subject prior to making her film, Goded has a close and long-standing connection with her admirable but vulnerable subjects.

Some of these women have harrowing backstories. Lupe, a young pregnant lesbian, recounts her rape. Later we will see her present her newborn son to a series of possible fathers,



Raquel in *Plaza de la Soledad*.



Esther in *Plaza de la Soledad*.

who are smiling but seemingly reluctant to take responsibility. Shockingly, a second woman recalls being violently molested when she had just given birth. And a third had to leave her *pueblo* in shame when she was sexually abused as a child of only eight. If life is tough for independent women in the hostile city, it would seem hardly better for them back in the censorious village.

Yet, countering stereotype, these proud sex workers are rarely miserable. Even a trip to a rubbish-strewn cemetery is brightened by the presence of a bougainvillea and a heartfelt song to a missing mother. Soon pink blossoms will grace the pristine tomb. In this world of women, maternal bonds are still strong (as in *Bellas de noche*) even when those mothers are so often remembered as neglectful or brutal. Elsewhere the all-female purification rituals of popular religion (known significantly in Spanish as *limpieza* or “cleansing”) or simply warm hugs from girlfriends serve as compensation for past neglect or present distress. Conversely one woman seeks a cure for her woes with a tarot reader who, blaming the victim, attributes illness “in female parts” to “resentfulness” against fellow women.

Like the showgirls, the sex workers are seen consciously creating personalities via elaborate makeup and costume. And like the *vedettes*, once more, they are not unreflecting victims but rather psychologically self-aware subjects. One confesses to seeking in older clients the father figure she never had as a child. Another tells her affectionate female friend: “This is the hug I needed from my mother.”

And Goded’s women are more diverse in language and origin. Two migrants to the city speak in Mixteco, an indigenous language rarely heard onscreen. Another is shown taking an outing beyond the city limits to float luxuriously in the river of her village. In a typically poignant detail, she keeps her precious wig on.



Carlos in *Plaza de la Soledad*.

While men are nearly absent in *Bellas de noche*, in *Plaza de la Soledad* they make frequent appearances. Unsurprisingly the sex workers’ relations with their long-term male clients are ambivalent. One woman’s regular partner is a street shoe-shiner who seems sympathetic and declares his respect and love for his “stunning blonde” on camera. Both of them, he says, are wounded and despised by the world. Carmen, we discover, was lengthily married to a man who appears to be her pimp, although it should be noted that, unlike in the recent fiction feature *Las elegidas* ([The Chosen Ones], David Pablos, 2015), Goded shows no evidence of duress or trafficking in sex work. A third reminisces fondly of a trick who was a policeman but turned out to be a transvestite and gave her a wig as a souvenir of their encounter. A fourth tolerates one very elderly client only to raise funds for her daughter’s chemotherapy. In this case at least (as for one of *Bellas de noche*’s subjects) maternal love is a constant and durable force.

But most moving are the scenes featuring Ésther and Ángeles, two passionate lovers who tell us they are forced to “hide from society,” not because they are sex workers but



Ángeles in *Plaza de la Soledad*.

because they are lesbians (one is also a transgender woman, a fact never mentioned in the film itself). Intimate, but never voyeuristic, Goded's camera lingers on the couple as they lie fully clothed on their shared bed, fingers entwined. When later they take to the street, however, the couple dare not hold hands. The pair will also take part in a collective discussion on whether women should allow themselves to feel pleasure in sex acts for which men have paid. This will prove to be a special bone of contention for the lesbian partners.

Like Cuevas, Goded relies on cuts for contrast. For example, a sequence of quiet and meticulous preparation for work at home segues into a noisy and chaotic nocturnal street scene. Yet the Plaza de la Soledad itself, with its colorful houses and circular fountain, is surprisingly calm and picturesque. And it stands in the shadow of one of the gorgeous baroque churches that stud this popular market area. (My own experience is that, in spite of the vibrant street life shown here, the surrounding streets are not so aesthetically pleasing.) The so-called "Square of Solitude" belies its name, which is in any case taken from the church: the site of shared work, meals, and even funerals, this is hardly a lonely place. It comes as no surprise when one woman claims toward the

end of the film: "This square is my home. These women are my family." And humor is their weapon of choice. Sitting familiarly by the fountain, a couple of sex workers talk back to unwelcome potential clients ("Keep on walking, old man") and keep up their spirits with jokes ("I'm as cold as a popsicle. I need a lick").

Like *Bellas de noche*, again, *Plaza de la Soledad* boasts several sequences of improvised or informal performance. The heartfelt soliloquies by Goded's subjects are often accompanied by a delicate piano theme, a tender aural equivalent of the camerawork that frames her subjects with such respect and compassion. One woman does a sexy dance that she specifies is for Goded's camera and her (female) partner, not for macho men. The pimp, who laments his inability to be faithful, sings with practiced skill a romantic ballad to his ex-wife in an empty night club where both are dressed to kill.

Like *Bellas de noche* with its now incongruous piles of feathers and sequins, *Plaza de la Soledad* offers moments of pure visual pleasure that sometimes come close to the surreal. One woman's bedroom boasts twin altars: the first is made up of fluffy toys, the second of the images of the Virgin

and Saint Judas, the patron of lost causes and a popular favorite in Mexico City. Amid the confusion of a market street, we suddenly come across an imposing statue of Santa Muerte, its flowing pistachio robe contrasting with a blood-red artificial flower. As the women have their nails elaborately painted and eyebrows waxed, they are accompanied by disembodied mannequin hands, disconcerting displays for the manicurist's latest creations. *Bellas de noche* thus strays well beyond Bazin's "degree zero" of cinematic realism, offering a master class in film form as well as in social engagement.

It is surely a coincidence that these two similarly themed films appeared at the same time after spending years in pre- and post-production. Yet, as shown by the example of the prize-winning Tatiana Huezo (*El lugar más pequeño* [The Smallest Place], 2011; *Tempestad* [Storm], 2016), documentary seems a more congenial genre for women in Mexico than fiction. It is telling that Mexican theaters are currently full of local romantic comedies whose target audience is young and female but whose directors are all male. Beyond gender, the question of age is vital here. After her New York screening, Maya Goded said that the subject of her documentary is not so much sex work as the possibility of getting older and remaining sexually active. It is a combination that remains as taboo in Mexico as elsewhere.

Yet the final moral of both documentaries is quite simply love. The classic *ranchera* ballad featured in the last sequence

of *Plaza de la Soledad*, beautifully sung by Raquel, one of the film's more senior subjects, cites the strange effect that love has on people: they go to sleep praying for release from their beloved yet wake up longing to see them once more. In lyrics unheard in the film, though, the song goes on to say that lovers are at once slaves to their passion and masters of the universe.

Complex and contradictory, like the complete lyrics of the beloved song, these twin films celebrate women whose lives may be limited by circumstances cruelly beyond their control but who are vital, still, in their quest for friendship and freedom.

Notes

1. B. Ruby Rich, "Sundance 2016: Uplifting, Tragic, Always Disruptive," *Film Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (2016): 112.
2. Laura G. Gutiérrez, "I Like What You Dislike / I Like What You Fear: On *Vedettes*, Nightlife, Beauty, and Aging in *Bellas de noche* / Beauties of the Night (María José Cuevas, 2016)," <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/mediatico/2017/03/14/i-like-what-you-dislike-i-like-what-you-fear-on-vedettes-night-life-beauty-and-aging-in-bellas-de-noche-beauties-of-the-night-maria-jose-cuevas-2016/>. For background, see also Gutiérrez's *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas y Cabareteras on the Transnational Stage* (Austin: University of Texas, 2010).
3. Sergio de la Mora treats Rivero's appearances in sex comedies of the 1970s in his *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film* (Austin: University of Texas, 2006), 116–17.