

A Fragile Transition: Past and Present in Chilean Canadian Cinema

By Cecilia Araneda

There is one constant, and that is that it is there and we are here. But in as much as a new generation of Chilean Canadian filmmakers have in common with each other, there are also significant differences.

The trajectories of three filmmakers – Francisca Duran (Toronto), Eduardo Menz (Montreal/Edmonton) and Claudia Morgado Escanilla (Vancouver) – reveal strong tendencies towards alternative forms of filmmaking, but have manifest themselves in different directions and paths. Born in different decades, in different countries and subjected differently to what is the single defining moment in modern Chilean history which defines and polarizes Chileans still to this day, 36 years after the fact – the Chilean coup d'etat of September 11, 1973 and the aftermath that followed – as well as living in culturally-distinct different Canadian cities, these three filmmakers leave no doubt that they are working within the fringe (in Hoolboomian sense of the word), as neither wholly Anglophone (or Francophone) and revealing a sense of separation from the mainstream, but yet without a sense of disenfranchisement from it.

Though Duran and Morgado Escanilla have close 'surface' similarities – both females close in age and both born in Chile – it is actually Duran and Menz who demonstrate similar trajectories in terms a habitual back and forth weaving between grappling with the impact the coup had on their personal identities and pure technical experiments in moving image, for Duran in film and Menz in video.

During the 15 years that followed the coup, Duran and Menz lived mostly Canada - indeed, Menz was born here – while Morgado Escanilla lived mainly in Chile, coming to Canada in the early 1980's, when she was in her twenties. In as much as she is clearly Canadian, she has also clearly retained her identity as an unhyphenated Chilean at the same time, reflected in the very Chilean practice of utilizing both of her family names. The fringe within which Morgado Escanilla works, in terms of the alternative nature of her work, is not the impact of a complicated geo-political history on an expanded sense of self within the world, but rather rooted in challenging established notions of female sexual identity.

Indeed, Morgado Escanilla is most known for the strong LGBT thread that runs through her work, including being recognized with a Teddy award at the prestigious Berlin International Film Festival in 1996 for her short docu-drama *Unbound* (1996), where

sixteen women of different cultural and religious backgrounds free themselves from society's expectations and stereotypes as represented by the bra. Her most recent work, *No Bikini* (2007) – a work equally as well received as *Unbound* – is a short drama that traverses a similar terrain, as the young protagonist decides to take swimming lessons free of her impractical bikini top.

In the chapter “Beyond the Homeland: Latino-Canadian Film and the work of Marilú Mallet and Claudia Morgado,” of the anthology *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing*, scholar Elena Feder notes that in Morgado Escanilla's films is an “absence of discourses of belonging... Issues pertaining to the representation of ethnic, national, or subnational identities are depicted as simply one element among many within a wider cultural field...” (362-363). Feder observes that Morgado Escanilla's mode of working “is to take not only homosexuality but also national, ethnic, and linguistic differences for granted, with the result that they come to be perceived as the natural or the norm...” (363). Indeed, this is clearly the case with her most recent work, *No Bikini*, where the 'freeing' effect of being released from the bikini top is not only literal, but also figurative as well, and presented in a way that is completely devoid of any complications of self-doubt or negative ramifications from society. At the same time, however, Morgado Escanilla's work is not devoid of references to the Canadian immigrant experience. In the article “The big picture: Looking at immigrant filmmakers”, published online at canadianimmigrant.ca, writer Margaret Jetelina notes that the immigrant experience is always a part of Morgado Escanilla's work. “My immigrant self is there because the music is Latin or one of the characters is a little darker than the rest. It's always there,” Jetelina quotes the filmmaker.

Unlike Morgado Escanilla, Duran and Menz broach topics that are more common among second generation immigrant Canadian experience of living with a split cultural identity – one which was experienced within the home while growing up and the other which lay beyond the door to the outside. In this context, Chile (the mother country) is more a mythology than an actual place. Menz explains, “I do think that culture partly defines and artist's practice... I have always questioned my own identity because of the conflict between my birthplace and my culture and I have tried to examine that issue with some of the videos that I have made.” In a very parallel explanation, Duran notes, “All of my work deals with Chile (or my particular experience as a Chilean and as a Canadian) even when it is not overtly mentioned in the work. These 'cultural' connections are a part of me, difficult to tease out.”

But, at the same time as Duran and Menz engage in socially aware works that often address square-on the contradictions of public interpretations of recent Chilean political

history, their methods of working in experimental forms spoke out from a centre that moves beyond – or, perhaps, which is a natural extension of – addressing the Chilean roots of their personal identity: in Duran's case, a search for remnants of that which has been lost, and in Menz's case a mode of assembly that forces viewers to actively participate in the construction of reality they are perceiving.

Menz notably repeats a pattern of 'inviting' viewers into creating meaning within his work, first leading them into an initial conclusion through juxtaposed sound and image, and then guiding them from that point to a greater awareness of meaning. This mechanism of construction is squarely evident with *Fracas* (2007), which juxtaposes children's school portraits with the voices of children participating in a spelling bee to an ominous conclusion, and repeats itself as the underlying framework to varying levels in other works, also very strongly in *Las Mujeres de Pinochet* (2005).

For Duran, her work is an exploration of “the intersection points of memory, history and technology within a poetic framework that reveals that material presence of the film (or digital) medium.” Indeed, the materiality of the medium with which she is working is always a foreground presence in her work, as much in her 'non Chilean' work (*In the Kingdom of Shadows* (2006), which documents a paragraph being typeset on an early twentieth-century Ludlow Linecaster; *Mr. Edison's Ear* (2003), an exploration of the nature of sound and how we learned to capture and reproduce it over time), as in her 'Chilean' work, most especially through her in-progress, multi-year *Retrato Oficial* series.

And yet, as both cycle into other themes within their body of work, Menz and Duran's most personally affecting work is directed specifically to audiences who comprehend first-hand the cultural markers they are playing with - Chilean Canadians who have spent most, if not all, of their lives in Canada: the conflicted transformative meaning of flying and flight, the human degradation of the Chilean coup as an image system that serves as the symbol of the root of separation, the mythology of martyred Chilean President Salvador Allende and a fluid shift between Spanish and English without translation into the other.

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