

CHAPTER ONE



Al Cine de las Mexicanas: *Lola in the Limelight*

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The reporters were there, too, the gringo newspapermen and photographers, with a new invention, the movie camera. Villa was already captivated. . . . He was well aware that the little machine could capture the ghost of his body if not the flesh of his soul— . . . his moving body . . . that, yes, could be captured and set free again in a dark-room, like a Lazarus risen not from the dead but from faraway times and spaces, in a black room on a white wall, anywhere in New York or Paris.

—Carlos Fuentes, *The Old Gringo*

I often hear it said that less than a handful of women have ever been able to make films in Mexico, and it does not surprise me that most North Americans believe this to be true. Since very little has appeared on United States screens by Mexicanas, it would seem that very little exists. But I have read about Mexican women's filmmaking, thanks largely to the correspondence and lectures and publications of Julianne Burton and other scholars. In the last decade *Women Make Movies* in New York has distributed some films by Mexican women, mostly documentaries (such as

Carmen de Lara's *We're Not Asking for the Moon*), and Hollywood entertainment networks have acquired United States commercial rights for some dramatic features (such as María Novaro's *Danzón*). Archives, museums, and community arts projects have organized tours including their films, and international festivals have exhibited them, sometimes recognizing them with competitive awards. Certainly there is much to discover in this rich and growing body of work, in particular the fact that it has remained largely invisible to us (and I include myself, living in Hollywood, the "film capital of the world").

So it is that I set about the task of offering this capsule history—perhaps a hidden history for many of us—of women's filmmaking in Mexico. Here I can only hint at the variety of talent and tenacity of purpose their work has demanded, but at least I can suggest that these women have demonstrated the capacity to challenge the prevailing representations of gender, class, and race in their respective eras.

Women have participated in the production of Mexican cinema from its pre-Revolutionary inception. In fact most of them wore more than one hat, helping to develop the industry in multiple ways. As in most countries, the cinema in Mexico began as an international enterprise. Once the Lumière brothers released their fascinating flickers on foreign shores, Mexican impresarios bought stock and equipment from metropolitan suppliers and projected their magic lanterns in music halls in Mexico City and in cafes and tents along the newly built railway lines across the country. Occasionally banned for their "lascivious excess," the moving pictures took over the capital by 1903. Picturesque land- and seascapes, city architecture, and popular pageants caught the eye in their new form. More important, by 1910, most production, distribution, and exhibition was in the hands of Mexicans.¹ One of three partners who founded Azteca Films in 1917, Mimi Derba was Mexico's first female movie star. A comedienne who bridged the silent screen and the sound era with *Santa* in 1931, she wrote several features, is said to have directed *La Tigresa*, and was photographed as supervising editing.² Documentary filmmakers Dolores and Adriana Elhers, two sisters who studied cinema in the United States, launched the newsreel *Revista Elhers*, which ran from 1922 to 1929. Candida Beltran Rendon served as writer, director, lead actress, producer, and set designer for *The Grandmother's Secret (El secreto de la abuela)* in 1928.³

After the transition to talking pictures it was radio publicity that brought fame to Adela Sequeyro as "Perlita," writer, actress, and producer

for *Beyond Death* (*Más allá de la muerte*) in 1935, who filled the same functions as well as directing for *Nobody's Woman* (*La mujer de nadie*) and *The Devils Next Door* (*Diablillos de arrabal*), both in 1938. Mysterious Mexican producer and writer "Duquesa Olga" also achieved fame as Chilean pianist Eva Limiñana; she wrote films for the actor and director José ("Che") Bohr, a Chilean who associated himself with the tango fashion in Buenos Aires and thrived in Hollywood, but who gained more leverage in Mexico, where "the Duchess" earned credits for producer, original story, adaptation to the screen, and dialogue for ten films in which he acted in the 1930s. In 1942 she also directed, but without Bohr's company, and was later forgotten in his memoirs.⁴

Now let's consider the conditions under which these films were made. As early as 1911 there were already forty-six theaters (with a capacity of 25,000) programming cinema in Mexico City alone, but the new Mexican state, with all its extensive cultural programs under Vasconcelos's campaigns as Minister of Education (1920–1924), offered no funds for Mexican filmmaking or exhibition. At the same time it placed no quotas on Hollywood imports, which by 1925 filled 90 percent of Mexico's screens.⁵ Even in 1938, when the film industry was the second largest in the country after oil, and fifty-seven films were produced within a year, Mexico's own product made up only 14.8 percent of the domestic market share (compared to the United States figure of 67.7 percent); Mexico's share rose only to 18.4 percent in 1949 when 107 films were made.⁶ State money was provided for private producers, whose crews and actors were often trained in Hollywood. The Golden Age of Mexican cinema—the 1940s—generated original work with nationalistic themes and styles, but ultimately yielded to the cultural favoritism won by monopolistic producers, distributors, and exhibitors who increased their own profits through state investment. Closed-shop unions prohibited the development of talent, locking out new members for thirty years.⁷

While the state continued to subsidize mostly *churros* (formulaic "quicky" movies) and "Palmolive *tele-tamales*" produced by a cinema/TV mafia,⁸ Matilde Landeta chose to work beside her brother, Eduardo Landeta. After years of up-through-the-ranks apprenticeship as "script girl" and assistant director, for example, she wrote and finally directed *Lola Casanova* (1948), tracing Mexican culture to its pre-Colombian roots through the desires of a white woman. Then she shifted her focus in *La Negra Angustias* (1949), her most important film, to a free-spirited *mulatta* colonel in the Mexican revolution who exerts power outside the

confines of gender, only to face a color conflict with her male literacy teacher. In Landeta's next film, *La Trotacalles* (*Streetwalker*) (1951), she turned to the hallowed genre of prostitution melodrama and *cabaretera* film.⁹ She was not to make another film in over three decades after that, but would eventually be saluted and brought back into public recognition by another woman to follow in her footsteps.

In the 1950s the cine club movement created a forum for film theory and a showcase for new talent. It was the seedbed for an "independent" cinema parallel or oppositional to the dominant film industry. The University Center for Cinematographic Studies (CUEC) was founded by the 1958 López Mateos regime, and advocates formed *Nuevo Cine*, which founded a journal debating Italian neorealism, French New Wave, and auteur theories, and proclaiming the need for independent cinema in Mexico. This brought pressure on the film union (STPC), which answered by launching an Experimental Film Contest in 1965 that inspired the longstanding commitment and support of Gabriel García Márquez, then working in Mexico as a screenwriter, to new directors—some forty in the next decade.¹⁰

An older cultural nationalism began to yield to a cosmopolitanism in filmmaking; this direction was boosted by a movement called *la onda*—a modernist grab-bag of United States rock music, beat poetry, novels, dress/hair/make-up fashions, and general linguistic playfulness, a dismembering of old codes by a 1960s youth culture that would be violently repressed. Beginning in July 1968 a growing student movement was met with bazooka raids by the governing PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). Regarded as "the most articulate and threatening outburst of public disaffection in modern Mexico," one in which "the students' courage and commitment had begun to inspire others," the youth movement gained force with the Olympic Games scheduled for October 12. But on October 2, 1968, when six thousand students and others congregated in one of Mexico City's central plazas (Tlatelolco), several hundred were massacred by the army and some two thousand were arrested.¹¹

The subsequent regime, striving to accommodate the unrest, elicited a full range of reactions from filmmakers. Echeverría actively reached out to oppositional filmmakers in Mexico and elsewhere (Chilean Miguel Littín, for example) and actively courted a third-worldist film discourse. The new president's anti-imperialist rhetoric—upholding the autonomous development of Mexican film as a quality product on the

world market—was backed by active programs and funding. His brother Roberto headed the leading national film agency. But there were those who saw Echeverría's politics as stifling both creative film language and an expression of class conflict within Mexico. The rhetoric was labeled by some as "leather-jacketed" populism that extravagantly endowed lush "political" film enterprises on the backs of Mexico's workers.¹²

In 1950 Carmen Toscano's compilation documentary of half a century of Mexican history was released. This film, along with the work of Matilde Landeta, became the subject of a biographical film by Marcela Fernández Violante. Violante herself graduated from and was appointed the director (1985) of CUEC, the film school of Mexico's national university. She made a thesis film on Frida Kahlo in 1971, long before the artist had been resurrected for international cultural attention. Violante wrote and directed two features regarding the failures of the Mexican revolution, one narrated through the eyes of a young girl, *Whatever You Do, It's No Good* (*De todos modos Juan te llamas*) in 1975, and *Cananea* in 1977, narrated through the eyes of a North American mine owner in northern Mexico, also based in history.¹³ In 1980 she made the internationally esteemed *Mystery* (*Misterio*), a parodic critique of Mexico's privately owned media monopoly, Televisa,¹⁴ followed by *In the Land of the Light Feet* (*En el país de los pies ligeros*) in 1981, in which a Mexico City boy tries to adapt to Indian life in the Tarahumara region.¹⁵

Meanwhile some new topics—family codes, bourgeois conformity, machismo, heterosexuality, and Mexico's uneven socioeconomic development—were being interrogated in the Mexican cinema as never before. Youthful disillusionment and rebelliousness in the face of betrayed ideals of the Revolution were taken up via filmic strategies that were increasingly self-reflexive.

During the *sexenio* of López Portillo, the country suffered the loss of the *Cineteca* collection. Marcela Fernández Violante claims:

Under the Echeverría regime, we spent \$9 million to cover royalties for American films. Under López Portillo, we spent \$60 million. . . . Margarita López Portillo did a lot to encourage these "aristocratic" airs. Her tenure as head of the film industry is the blackest chapter of Mexican film history. She literally let a time bomb explode. When the old nitrate prints stored "temporarily" in the basement of the *Nacional Cineteca* (film archive) caught fire, many lives were lost and the entire history of Mexican cinema went up in smoke. . . .

Mexico had already surrendered a huge share of the Latin American film market to U.S. interests, and I doubt that we will ever be able to win it back.¹⁶

Though President Miguel de la Madrid established the National Film Institute in 1983, only nine out of ninety-one films that year were made by the state.¹⁷ The Mexican government financed half of John Huston's film *Under the Volcano*. The studios were invaded by foreign directors such as Carlos Saura (Spain) and Sergei Bondarchuk (USSR), who made their worst films at great cost—to their budgets and to Mexico. Dino de Laurentis leased Churubusco Studios for the production of *Dune*. Michael Douglas simply bought Alatraste studios. Foreign productions provide jobs for some crew members, but the important technicians are brought in from outside. This leaves Mexican directors, screenwriters, cinematographers, and composers unemployed beside their own country's studios.¹⁸

It is understandable that the decade of the 1980s produced several strong documentary filmmakers whose work is committed to social change. It is also encouraging that a growing number of these filmmakers are women. Sonia Fritz, interested in the indigenous population, made a short film, *Yalaltecas*, about real events in 1981 when the women in an Indian community overthrew their boss and formed their own union. Likewise in 1986 Mari Carmen de Lara documented the formation of the independent seamstresses' union in Mexico City in response to government inaction and incompetence after the devastating earthquake of the previous year. Her film was initially designed as an organizing tool, but it achieved a critique of contemporary Mexican politics at the same time by cross-cutting official and unofficial reactions to the earthquake: government statements and television commentaries in contrast to the social dislocation and despair voiced by the seamstresses and their families. *We're Not Asking for the Moon* (*No les pedimos un viaje a la luna*) addresses mass cooptation, resistance, and repression under the PRI party, in power in Mexico for over half a century. De Lara's current projects are a collectively produced film regarding environmental issues and a hybrid docu-drama on Mexican terrorism and political prisoners.¹⁹

Marise Sistach made *I Know the Three of Them* (*Conozco a las tres*), a fiction film about three women struggling together to keep a sense of humor in male-dominated Mexico City.²⁰ And recently Dana Rotberg has made two feature films very different from each other—a bedroom com-

edy called *Intimacy (Intimidación)* in 1989, ridiculing a professor in midlife crisis, and a dark fable of incest and religious evangelism called *Angel of Fire (Ángel de Fuego)* in 1991. During the same period María Novaro has won acclaim for her films *Lola* (1989) and *Danzón* (1992), both concerned with the needs and desires of mothers in Mexico City today. María Novaro, if not by education or choice of production sites then at least by training and style, demonstrates a transnational practice in her work. Studying filmmaking in Mexico and receiving development resources and technical assistance in both Cuba and the United States, she exemplifies Mexican independent filmmakers who are reaching for international exchanges through cultural institutions, festival circuits, and international television programming and distribution.

For nearly two decades the most serious filmmaking in Mexico—fictional as well as documentary—has been done by independents whose financing comes from universities, popular networks, European sponsors, and Mexican trade unions. These directors are seeking alternative distribution and exhibition outlets. While it lasted, *Lafra*, a Cuban-sponsored film exchange, was the most important alternative distribution network in Latin America, providing the possibility for filmmakers from both hemispheres to see each other's work when commercial outlets ignored and rejected it. Other international networks of communication are slowly becoming viable avenues for filmmakers from Mexico, and women are exploring these opportunities. And so it is becoming possible to see even those earlier images "risen . . . from faraway times and spaces, in a black room on a white wall . . . in New York or Paris . . ." but also on a movie-mall screen or a video monitor, even in Hollywood, where they have rarely been seen before.

TRAVERSING MEXICO'S FAULT LINES

The challenge of modifying frontiers is also that of producing a situated, shifting, and contingent difference in which the only constant is the emphasis on the irresistible to-and-fro movement across (sexual and political) boundaries.

—Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*

"In 1985 a devastating earthquake shook Mexico City, and the country faced both negligence and incompetency on the part of the government

in the aftermath,” explained María Novaro as she introduced her first feature film.²¹ *Lola* (1989), shot amid the rubble that remained largely untouched except for graffiti, derives from various kinds of fault lines in Mexico today: deep rifts in the socioeconomic system that produce parallel but significantly stratified spheres of living; political failures that both provoke blame and merit culpability; and short-circuit behaviors that reroute emotional energy or flair up in the urban setting. These structural, functional, and stylistic “fault lines” are expressed in Novaro’s innovative film language, which employs a ludic politics that evolved with what I will label “Eighties New Wave” cinema. We shall discover how Novaro “speaks” this playful language in *Lola*, her first feature—how she traces the emotional sparks of female youth subculture in Mexico City that allow an unusual perspective on Mexican women today.²²

Since the beginning of the Salinas de Goyari regime in 1988, Mexico has experienced 20 percent unemployment and at least 40 percent underemployment.²³ An outward reorientation of the Mexican economy—the so-called National Solidarity Program (dependency on transnational capital and import-substitution industrialization)—has driven a significant portion of the population to Mexico City and to “*el norte*.” Those who remain in Mexico are facing dramatic ruptures of the traditional patriarchal family system. A woman often strives to keep the father of her children in the country, difficult as it may be to keep him in the home (let alone functioning as an economic provider, reliable caretaker, housekeeping partner, and loyal companion.) In fact much popular literature in Mexico today, especially in the *libros semanales*, provides working women with models for how to keep men in the family while they themselves keep their “freedom” in the labor force.²⁴ Most Mexican women need to work to support themselves and their children, and the unavailability of jobs, coupled with recent cuts in welfare allotments, is a severe problem. However, should a mother manage to obtain employment outside the home, another problem presents itself: the traditional sources of servants (historically hired even by very modest families) have dried up. Child-rearing and housework in Mexico, alongside other economies such as street vending and industrial homework, comprise “hidden” economies that are represented, if at all, without the imprimatur of official data.²⁵

The “informal sector.” The “second economy.” “Unofficial” employment/work. These are sites of labor that “doesn’t count” only because it *doesn’t get counted*—labor that threatens to upset favorable

statistics, class and gender relations, the status quo. Not only is there hidden labor in the midst of the market place—illegal, underpaid, sporadic, minimal labor without medical benefits, pensions, or day care for children—but there is also labor hidden in the home—reproduction, education, health care, socialization, food preparation, household maintenance. Today this labor is performed often enough by single mothers and grandmother caretakers, by unofficial networks of support in the face of the state's denial of such activity as labor. But there is also other work that *is* recognized by the state, work for which women are prosecuted, work within the economies of sex and consumption—casual prostitution and shoplifting.

LUDIC POLITICS FOR A MATERIAL WORLD

María Novaro structures *Lola* within all of these overlapping and competing economies. In so doing she shares with us not only scenes of exposure, in which she casts light on Mexico's political economy, but also spaces of performance, in which she spotlights the language of resisting subjects. It is this subcultural language that brings us to the concept of "Eighties New Wave" in conjunction with *Lola*. The Mexican experience of Eighties New Wave as a global mode of expression is more visible every day as national borders become more porous and boundaries between domestic and international arenas more blurred. Mexico City has become a cosmopolitan octopus with tentacles reaching out to every pocket of postmodern culture-product on the market. But Eighties New Wave cannot simply be reduced to postmodern mass culture any more than it can be neatly correlated with the ludic characteristic of Mexico's cultural traditions.²⁶

The term *Eighties New Wave* is rooted in youth *subculture* consisting of various components and exchanges of socioeconomic, ethnic, and sexual difference.²⁷ To the extent that constituents of subcultures resist their oppression (even when flagging and celebrating their marginalization), they may appropriate elements of mass culture, decontextualizing and transvaluing them as new forms of cultural expression. In the last decade inscriptions of race and gender accompanied by socioeconomic oppression have been transcribed as global markers of postcolonial dislocation, but Eighties New Wave is more specific than postmodern cultural disorientation or diffusion, in Mexico or any other country. Its language

is a performance of subcultural identity that evades reappropriation by others.²⁸ Conspicuous emblems of mass culture, worn or performed as insignia by subcultural cohorts in everyday life, comprise a flat, superficial toptext of failed consumer conformity. *At a given moment in time*, this language serves as back-talk to a dominant culture, parody by defiant subjects who endow familiar cultural objects and behaviors with new meanings that emerge only from shared subcultural rituals. This process has been termed *bricolage*, and it comprises the language of Eighties New Wave.²⁹

María Novaro has herself experienced the contradictions of the contemporary Mexican economy, the reconfigurations of the family, and subcultural identity in the face of mass culture. She (and also her screenwriting collaborator, her sister Beatrice) earned a degree in sociology at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. At the age of twenty-eight, as an unmarried and intermittently employed mother of two young children, María Novaro found a job researching a documentary film about impoverished women in Mexico City neighborhoods.³⁰ In the 1980s she joined *Cine Mujer* and entered the Center for Cinematographic Studies.³¹ *Lola*, Novaro's debut feature, can be seen in some ways as a hybrid product of both Cuba and the United States as well as her own Mexico. Novaro developed her script for *Lola* at the Sundance Institute's lab for independent directors under the mentorship of Robert Redford.³² Gabriel García Márquez has followed Novaro's work ever since she took that script to the film school of his new Latin American Film Foundation in San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba.³³

María Novaro's work to date consists mainly of four fiction films: *An Island Surrounded by Water (Una Isla Rodeada de Agua)*, 1985; *Lola*, 1989; *Danzón*, 1992; and *Garden of Eden (Fronteras)*, shot in Tijuana in the spring of 1992 and not yet released. Novaro's lens in each of her films captures a female's journeys to the exotic, both real and fantasized, which in conventional postcolonial terms may be regarded as naive flights to the repressed Self at the expense of the Other, but in this filmmaker's pursuits become fruitful ventures into the discovery of "difference," differences both between and within Mexican women. Novaro proposes that, contrary to confronting difference simply as a threatening, exploiting, or appropriating enterprise on the part of colonizing persons, we may regard it as encounters among the colonized—that rather than recognizing difference only in its pejorative prospects, whether at the phobic or narcissistic ends of the same spectrum, we may discover difference as processes

of enjoyable ambivalence, as encounters that *can be beginnings, of learning and changing through desire.*

Whereas in Novaro's other films the female sojourner enjoys the privileges of being a visitor and emerges as a *proactive* subject, Lola, a refugee from the exploitation and abuses of class and gender, is a *reactive* subject. Her reaction, however, is to participate in an alternative world of subcultural affiliations and practices, of youthful fantasies in the face of disemployment within the world market economy. Novaro portrays Lola's self-exile in a youth subculture of loss and retrieval as an articulation of alienation, independence, and resistance.³⁴

OPEN WIRES AND FLYING SPARKS: EIGHTIES NEW WAVE CINEMA

Popular culture is a relation to everyday life that is not only ideological but sensuous or, more literally, "sensation-al"; for example, filmic color and sound—vibrations of light and air upon the eye and the ear—are physically pleasurable, but they satisfy demands for pleasure before they require understanding, and that pleasure may be bitter when joined by a developed consciousness.³⁵ Nevertheless, in good measure our relation to the world is through our affective investments. Though this relation is formed in fragments, it suggests the possibility of a totalized sense of reality.

Eighties New Wave cinema is a popular cross-cultural style of 1980s filmmaking rearticulating any of the genres of classical Hollywood cinema (westerns, melodramas, comedies) in response to 1960s culture clashes. While the 1960s gave rise to the cinema movements most widely recognized by the label—French *nouvelle vague*, Czech New Wave, New Latin American Cinema—since the beginning of the 1980s both the popular music and the everyday practices (dress, furnishings, habits, and pastimes) of youth subcultures have acquired the term *New Wave*, owing much to the work of British sociologists Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, and Angela McRobbie, for example.³⁶ Eighties New Wave expressions have survived into the 1990s in part because it took a decade of communication for the practice to be recognized and shared globally. Transcultural cinema has been one of the more prolific transmitters of this particular "Wave," which is also not to be confused with what has very recently been termed a "new wave" of *Mexican* filmmakers (including such female Eighties New

Wave proponents as María Novaro and Dana Rotberg), who have earned the label largely for their work as independent *auteurs* of “art cinema” bringing a long-awaited resurgence of creativity to Mexican film.³⁷

Effacing divisions between “art cinema” and “popular cinema,” theory and practice, Eighties New Wave films draw viewers into a plethora of identity possibilities that are enacted in other arenas of cultural practice. Filmic bricolage emerges from any combination of audio/visual/narrative juxtapositions, disruptions, inversions, perversions, and appropriations of “found” (for example, from the fashion and media industries) “objects” (both tangible products and programmed responses).³⁸

In this sense there is a particular perceivable style at play in this body of cinema even if it escapes genre classification. For example, characters emerge in Eighties New Wave films as transients—visitors or immigrants, refugees or self-exiles—who realign viewers not only in their displacement but in their alterity. This character/spectator alterity is usually enhanced in the films through the use of artificially vibrant color and lighting, violations of continuity editing, deadpan humor, magic and/or caution as pseudonarrative elements, and most of all, fusion music (drawing from African-American rhythm and blues, Caribbean jazz, disco, salsa, and gospel sources). In the nether world of New Wave we discover doubling and overlapping identities often arrived at by disruptions of memory. Verbal language barriers and mute tongues paradoxically become modes of discourse that facilitate and empower intersubjectivities. Class and culture collisions enter a mobile theater of camp stereotyping and kitsch commodification. All of these elements of style support a politics that engages spectators in a dynamic process of what Dick Hebdige has called *noise*—“interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representations in the media.”³⁹

In her investigation of the variety of uses of popular narratives today among United States and Mexican women, Jean Franco raises three challenging questions germane to this discussion of *Lola* as Eighties New Wave cinema. First, given that the pluralism of mass culture narratives (re)produces none of the social contradictions we would presume to be felt by women readers but rather “a process of constantly changing tactics and adaptations to circumstance,” she asks whether we can claim that women’s internalization (or, I would argue, “popular appropriation”) of mass culture has constituted new kinds of feminine subjects that conflict with older national “femininities.” Second, since we are dealing with transnational phenomena, she asks whether we shouldn’t ignore national

boundaries and locate mass culture products within the international division of labor. Third, she asks whether women are incorporated differently into the dominant order than are men.⁴⁰

Considering these pertinent questions, let us now turn to *Lola* itself to discover the ways in which María Novaro plays with the possibilities of Eighties New Wave cinema to bring to light popular practices of Mexican women as we may not have recognized them before. In conjuring up *Lola*,⁴¹ I would simply like to call to the mind's eye and ear a few moments of the film, to rehearse the *modes by which* sight and sound in time may speak a language of subculture, and to recite that language as lived by a Mexican woman.

PHANTOM DANCING AND THE AURAL FANTASY

Music is a herald, for change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society.

—Jacques Attali, *Noise*

Music in film covertly directs the affective responses of viewers far more than they know.

—Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings*

The cynicism of these times
Is better than the half-truths.
A great violence cannot be kept down
With just a little love between your legs.

Love me, love me a little,
And I'll love you, love you like crazy . . .

—Omar, with the Fabulous Thunderbirds
"La Marcha de Zacatecas," *Lola*

(during the song, c.u. LOLA, sober, quarter-profile facing left frame, eyes cast downward, then left, then upward . . . *Mater Dolorosa*. Then downward gaze, face turning slowly to quarter-profile facing right frame, eyes cast down . . . *Pietà*).

Lola opens with a performance; or rather, I should say, with a black screen. Before we even "open our eyes," we open our *ears*. The pulsing

beat of a youthful guitar engulfs us in its rhythm. Then our diva bursts through the curtain, pulls a mike out of her guitar, flings her body into the music, and guns us down with direct address—*Bad luck can be quicker than the eye*—with a crash to the floor on the “appropriate” (consummate macho heavy metal) phrase—*The bullet can win out over life, So much it seems a waste . . .*

But wait. Our diva is no operatic prima donna, nor even a hip “girl musician”; she’s a girl, *period*. And she hasn’t even been singing. Her dimple-cheeked little face has been lip-syncing (and not very “accurately”), her pudgy child-body miming the “live” performance (mediated by an audiotape recording) of a male singer.⁴² The spotlight struggles to follow the five-year-old’s wanton movement, her mike flailing at arm’s length from her lips while she “sings”! But on the *bold* phrase, . . . *to watch the pretty women on the street . . .* she pops in, voice and all, and belts it out: *Together we are united, A little because of you and a little because of us. And again it’s said we’re not all the same. Because as you well know, happiness doesn’t come cheap.*

At this cue another performer mounts the “stage,” grabs the mike, and joins in; the camera closes in on the swaying hips of an adult woman sewn into her jeans. A voyeuristic lens? She swings her body in closed-eye reverie, strumming away on the toy guitar hardly bigger than her hands, her voice joined by the girl-spectator’s: *And here we are without you, Together with all the rest, We ask ourselves disbelieving, Where the hell this bus is taking us, And where each of us gets off.* On the first “where” the camera follows the woman away from the clothespinned blanket-curtain as her *spotlight* becomes a *flashlight* that she shines over the “props” of their dark apartment-“set,” motivating our point of view in search of her daughter. The camera pans with the roving light over a portable tape deck (the diegetic source of the music) to a scenic paper mural “backdrop” of a beach upon which the flash becomes the sun over the water, floating freely from the painted palm trees to a shiny 3-D plastic Christmas tree and the girl’s toys. Then the spot of light drops off the screen *but rises again* toward the ceiling (in the form of a transitional kleiglight), appearing as two alternate but overlapping illuminations, a white full moon in a black background and a red sun in an amber aura. This “cosmic” (Aztec) duo-universe evoked in a domestic space casts its light upon the livingroom disco as a sociopolitical arena as well when the male voice, now unaccompanied by female singing or lip syncing, continues, *The enemy is invisible here, No one worthy of pub-*

lic acclaim. Here the only crime is to be alive. Here the death we all know never shows signs of life . . . of life . . . of life . . .

The cruising light in the *gameplay* of a parent seeking a child becomes a police light in the *gameplan* of seeking the enemy. Though the visual track discovers little Ana in hiding, the audio track retrieves the male singer, her father, Omar, when the scene is punctuated by the ring of a telephone: he won't be there for the planned Christmas party that the apartment lights now illuminate on the table. The two voices of the father—singing and speaking—are like sound bites flickering between mediated presence and structural absence (Omar is rarely at home).⁴³ Likewise the theater “set” of a wife and a daughter appropriating and celebrating the agency of a husband and a father alternates in our perceptions with the daily “setting” of a missing person (an absent man). In turn Lola's facial expression and tone of voice on the phone reveal an auto-surveillance of the hidden enemy within—the person who allows or even unconsciously facilitates her companion's negligence.⁴⁴ This is not to say that Novaro restricts her scope to either Lola's or Ana's internalization of the conflict, nor is it to say that the conflict stops at home. With one sad mother-daughter kiss on the lips, the two “girls” take to the street, and a neon night-walk through Mexico City—past a giant dazzling sign “Fénix”—becomes a backdrop for the film's initial credits.

Lola employs several parallel scenes of media self-reflexivity. Omar's small-time band rehearsal, set in a domestic space with children playing and women cooking, suggests that his music may still be a personal and shared subcultural expression, a grassroots outlet, that has not yet been co-opted as a marketable commodity. An echo of the overall persistent use of diegetic, as opposed to nondiegetic, music in *Lola*, it serves as a fundamental interrogation of mass media entertainment in its simultaneous power, inadequacy, and exploitation.⁴⁵

Lola stages a number of interventions in mediated performance, be that performance theatrical or social or one and the same. Imagine Ana and her father tuned into their new color TV airing an old musical in Spanish with a Mexican actor in an Arabic costume singing a take-off on the Calypso “Banana Man”—praying to Allah because he is sentenced to die for his “sin” of *machismo*—joined not only by on-stage belly dancers but also by Ana and her dad, Omar, who mime their movements. In case we should insist on distinguishing between authenticity and representation anywhere along the continuum of this exercise in kitsch, the act to follow it affords just as little opportunity to do so at the other end of the

spectrum. The real mother Lola returns home and has a real conversation with the real Omar at the refrigerator door while opening a beer: no, she's not angry about spending Christmas Eve "alone with the rug-rat." In the cross-cutting, Ana's eyes roll from ear to ear; Lola and Omar kiss; Ana lies back on the couch, knees in the air, legs spread in a specular position, unconsciously miming Lola—or is it parody? The next time we see Ana doing Arabic dancing it's on the street, flipping her skirt up to "show a little doggie some tail."

Exoticism and eroticism have much to do with the ways that New Wave film expresses itself as a movement. Skeptical of both representation and its concomitant ideological inscriptions, Eighties New Wave dodges the linguistic and mocks dominant cultures with a kaleidoscopic carnival of tricks and stunts, often those of magicians or circus players who invert or pervert the dominant order, thereby inviting participants to discover themselves in new forms but also *in new ways*. Lola and Ana practice these rituals a bit more euphemistically, through dance; in their intermittent acts they both savor and mimic their own seductive capacities. But more important, they achieve a mutual outlet for romance, escape to faraway deserts and islands of the imagination where their self-expression of emotional longing—albeit, through the silent soliloquies of pantomime—deliver them from their dystopian environment.

Both the mother-girl and the daughter-woman use dolls as extensions of their egos by animating them with their own voices. A spoof of gender and colonial puppetry is enacted by Lola when she plays the Gorilla begging a dance from Ana's Ballerina at the ball, suggesting that the coy dancer accept the jungle beast as a partner. "I don't play that way," grumbles Ana, but Lola shows her how fun it can be to change the rules. Is Lola fetishizing the racial Other, displacing his voice with her own?

In fact, as is not unusual in New Wave films, *Lola* includes a silent character, in this case "Muto," Lola's comrade-in-vending, virile, supportive, speechless. Eighties New Wave, having generated its own music as a primary subcultural expression, has often used film quite ingeniously and ironically to endow the deaf, the mute, and the silent with a cacophony of language. Lola's and Ana's performative muteness can be read in multiple ways (particularly against Omar's singing voice): as disenfranchisement, censorship, resistance, but also as masking their vital, visceral, co-communication and as rejoicing in their own pleasures and identifications, their travels in aural fantasy. In any context, these are transformative fantasies they share *with each other*: in reinforcing recipro-

cal exchange without fear and guilt, they foster and nourish mother-daughter, or better, sisterly bonds of solidarity. But furthermore, their joint retreats into reverie are rehearsals, experimental grounds for developing and nurturing these bonds with others, “different” as they may be within histories of colonization. A fluctuating movement *between* cultures and codes of meaning (including audio, visual, and verbal)—a celebratory “choreography” of new affiliations with women far and wide as well as those close at home—adds an edge to a politics of resistance.⁴⁶

FLASHES IN TIME, WAVES IN WATER

So far we have discussed Novaro’s strategies for presenting sound and image; these are generated by and reiterate her concept of time and her approach to narrative. As a fiction film, *Lola* never tells a “story,” yet there is a certain integrity to be felt in its lyrical expression and an uncanny wisdom to be reckoned with in its ludic whole. These are pleasure-effects derived from the deployment of time itself as a mediator in the experience of “events.” The principle that guides Novaro in creating her playful politics is the implosion of performance with multiple layers of representation contesting each other’s validity, the elaboration and random collisions of flashes in a diary rather than the consequential events of a narrative. These are so many uncontained sparks, valuable only in their erratic, fragmentary energy and manifest most of all in the private expanse of self-reflection.

The diary structure of other films has been appreciated as facilitating “a descriptive, nonexplanatory mode of representation and a transitory limning of identity.”⁴⁷ These filmic modalities are integrally related to Lola’s subjective experience as a worker on the run, a street vendor of clothing in the unofficial sector of the Mexican economy. In at least three separate, pronounced moments, Novaro trips the fuses in *Lola* and intervenes in the flow of energy to steal it away to Lola’s dark subconscious. These occasions have to do with clothes. The very “things” by which Lola strives to earn her living exploit her, but in terms of labor and social marginalization, not in terms of self-expression.

The first of these scenes expands time by evoking a ritual of previous off-screen domestic strife; at this stage Lola vents her feelings in actions rather than words. The players are Lola and Omar; Ana is positioned as the spectator-chorus, singing her girl’s songs in wry commen-

tary, the only human sound in this scene's unspoken exchange. Omar is packing his suitcase to depart for a one-year gig in Los Angeles. Lola nonchalantly and adroitly tosses the contents, piece by piece, from his suitcase out through the open window. In extreme slow motion they float dreamily through the sky, catching on the electricity lines like so much laundry drying in the breeze—or frying on the wires. This amid the surreal thunder of an earthquake.

The second example, again expanding time in a surreal relation to the setting, establishes Lola's detachment from the bourgeois notion of clothing as lucrative, either as a commodity to be sold or as an insignia of class standing to be worn. At the garment factory where she routinely obtains stock for her outdoor clothes rack, the manager spins out the usual sales talk: "They're exclusive models. You won't find them anywhere else." His ad-hype discourse fades into the lulling drone of the electric fan, blowing Lola's hair and psyche into an empty no-(wo)man's-land of paradoxical alienated reverie. Conceit melts from masculine vanity to feminine fantasy as the clack of women's sewing machines takes over the soundtrack, itself dissolving into the rhythmic scraping of another vendor's pocket knife: with a subsequent visual dissolve this aficionado carves Lola's name in the tin shingles of the building where he awaits her on the street.

Clothes serve two purposes for Lola, physical survival and personal expression. They help her feed Ana and they let her be herself. Her denim jacket is every bit as much—and more—an emblem for her as the fashion products of her "trade" may be for anyone else, but the "more" is precisely the point, not the look nor the meaning, but the excess, the sparkly bright sequins that make it a kitschy overstatement of the prescribed role of clothing for women in a capitalist, patriarchal society. It's within this context that we are positioned as celebrants in another of Lola's rituals: shoplifting.

The film's devaluation of commodities playfully subverts the social order when the whole principle of profitability from "surplus" production (i.e., surplus *labor*) is parodied in surplus consumption—that is, consumption enacted outside of market value, a value that is thereby reappropriated as use value.⁴⁸ Lola is a rip-off artist. But worse yet, so is her daughter, who teases her mom into buying the plastic honey bear instead of the jar because "it won't break" (when Lola throws another tantrum and flings it against the wall). Ana knows they can afford it because they'll "lift" it. But in a treacherously unending moment with multiple refrains,

“boon” turns to “bust” (and back again). “Products” come out of hiding from Lola’s shirt and Ana’s pockets over the desk of surveillance—panties, bras, candies. Ana hides sheepishly behind Lola, who announces glibly, “Now we have nothing.” To avoid a legal penalty Lola wages an illegal bargain, the next in the layers of “surplus labor” in the patriarchal economy. Ana returns home to devour a juicy telenovela and TV snacks in one fell swoop as Lola “satisfies” the invasive appetite of the supermarket manager with her trade-off for a jail sentence.

In the three moments I have recalled, time is exposed by contradictions of meaning. Lola’s three transgressive actions in the face of three sources of dominance—a negligent husband, a capitalist middleman, and a hypocritical law enforcer—represent her battles of production and consumption in her daily life. To shed light on these battle zones Novaro subverts the artifice with which time is usually made invisible in the projection of separate frames of film.⁴⁹ Not simply through slow-motion footage but also through the extended, elaborated, personal narrative moment, Novaro invades time with subjective experience to impinge upon the social order, and it’s worth noting that her subjectivity is a uniquely feminine one in its capacity for polyvalent bonding born of female alienation in 1980s Mexico City.⁵⁰

It’s easy to see this same invasion applied to space.⁵¹ Most of Novaro’s exterior shots of Mexico City indiscreetly reveal the damage done by the 1985 earthquake, left untouched by repair or rebuilding; these shots include the juxtaposition of a government billboard slogan, MEXICO IS STILL STANDING, with a children’s mural capturing the emotional experience of the earthquake itself, painted in the genre of naive primitivism over the cracks of an inadequate but obstinate “wall left standing.”

Novaro also plays with luminous color throughout her film. The hypercoloration and flattening of surfaces produced by casting magical fluorescent hues of light upon otherwise dreary structures does more than create a scintillating ambience of immediate stimulation. It exposes the excesses of inscribing women with exchange value based on appearance; it exposes the hyperanxiety within women to “cash in” on the Hollywood-style fashions reproduced on Mexican screens, to enact gender performances that signify consent even as the objective property relations governing them vanish in these women’s daily lives. Even as such women continue to live without the same superficial beauty, luxury, and youth in their world, they *also* live without men in their households who are eco-

nomically capacitated or politically disposed to perform the other side of the gender contract.⁵²

If sparks and short circuits are the metaphors Novaro uses to conduct color and light as energy diffusions, water is her mode for proposing recuperation and fluid identities. Lola's bath water offers her two escapes: to drown in her own tears or to emotionally come to terms with all that the water "washes up."⁵³ The erotic sounds of water motivate the camera in transporting Lola to the exotic imaginary of hula, a "place" where wishes are transmitted in talking hands and swishing grass skirts. Her departure comes, oddly enough, from a rehearsal of the art of writing the letter "O" as she takes over Ana's homework assignment when Ana is not performing "up to par" according to the judgment of her school teacher. The amplified sound of sensuously dripping water motivates the panning camera from the repeated Os on the page to the waves on the wallhanging to the water tower outside (via a seamless cut), and then the camera swerves down like a giant wave along the exposed plumbing of an urban building to the tune of a ukelele and follows the water pipes to the painted ocean backdrop of an outdoor stage where dozens of little girls barely past the age of toddling wiggle their hula hips in a community Mothers' Day pageant.

With the illusion of one big swirling sway of the camera, we are transported to "Hawaii." In a subsequent parallel scene on a sandheap outside their apartment, Lola mimes Ana miming the language of hula, already a Polynesian pantomime. Once again, the fallacy of representation gives way to the primacy of the signifier when the exotic is employed in a so-many-times-removed way to structure the erotic in an economy of deprivation. Desires and pleasures take on a short-circuit vitality in a new currency of the experiential.

Ocean water poses an alternative space for Lola and her peers and her daughter, an interior "island" devoid of dominance, a utopian spa where the Phoenix rises up from her ashes, an oasis where natural light emits the primary colors of children at play, children of any age. Ana claims it as her vehicle: "If you lie down on a cloud, will you fall off?" "I guess so," Lola tells her, "because clouds are pure water and you can fall right through." Perched on a cliff at the beach, looking out over a real ocean this time, they gaze at the shifting configurations in the sky with their magical rose illumination. "What if we *did* climb onto a cloud?" Ana persists. "Well, where would we go?" muses Lola. And Ana's offscreen voice giggles, "Wherever it takes us."