

Transgressive Female Sexuality and Desire in Contemporary Colombian Cinema

Hermida's *La luciérnaga* and Rodríguez's *Señoritas*

by

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The contemporary Colombian films made by women La luciérnaga (Hermida, 2016) and Señoritas (Rodríguez, 2013) subvert patriarchal gender norms of classic Colombian film narratology through their representation of lesbianism, female sexual self-exploration, and orgasms. The cinematic techniques of these filmmakers construct a specific view of female pleasure, emphasizing the plurality and visibility in cinema of female sexuality and desire. An interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of specific sequences suggests that the aesthetics and visual strategies of these women filmmakers evince pioneering female characters and subjectivities that challenge the traditional gaze on female bodies. Their films offer liberating representations that deconstruct the dominant basis of heteronormativity that has historically characterized Colombian narrative cinema.

La luciérnaga (Hermida, 2016) y Señoritas (Rodríguez, 2013), dos películas colombianas contemporáneas realizadas por mujeres, subvierten las normas patriarcales de la narratología clásica del cine colombiano a través de su representación del lesbianismo, la autoexploración sexual femenina y los orgasmos. Las técnicas cinematográficas empleadas construyen una visión específica del placer femenino, haciendo hincapié en la pluralidad y visibilidad de la sexualidad y el deseo femenino. Un análisis de secuencias específicas con enfoque interdisciplinario sugiere que la estética y las estrategias visuales de estas cineastas evidencian personajes femeninos pioneros y subjetividades que desafían la mirada tradicional sobre los cuerpos femeninos. Las películas muestran representaciones liberadoras que deconstruyen la base heteronormativa dominante que históricamente ha caracterizado al cine narrativo colombiano.

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Laura Mulvey (1975) suggested that the function of women in films was as passive objects of the male gaze. In her view, cinematic images of women showed subordination to men, and this strengthened the patriarchal order. Women were part of the plot but tended to be docile, objectified, and secondary to the narrative as unconscious reflections of patriarchal societies. Women

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filmmakers have tended to be either rare or marginalized in a male-dominated domain since the early days of cinema and often confined to addressing femalehood.¹ Important afterthoughts on key aspects of Mulvey's theory, including her own reassessment after four decades (Mulvey, 2015a; 2015b; Mulvey, Rogers, and van den Oever, 2015), have encompassed further examinations of female subjectivity in narratives, gaze, and spectatorship, privileging the significance of the female voice from both sides of the camera and giving visibility to women's oppressions. The theory has also been part of a growing interest in gender as performative. Judith Butler's (1990) influential work conceptualizes gender as a never-ending performative activity that is not defined biologically, allegorizing "the spectacular and consequential ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested" (Butler, 2004: 15).

Mulvey's theory has informed different contexts over time, including the Latin American. However, some countries—in particular Colombia—have little academic work on the representation of women in films and on the creative and political perspectives of women filmmakers. Although some of the limited research that exists shows that some contemporary Colombian films (all made by men) have questioned the construction of classic and heteropatriarchal codes for women, female subordination and objectification are far more common patterns.² This can be understood in the gendered Colombian context, in which cultural codes are deeply rooted in the country's colonial and religious past. It has also shaped the dominant discourses and female images in fiction films, many of which follow post-Conquest Latin American stereotypes in which women are depicted primarily in Manichean terms as either virgin (submissive, devoted, and chaste) or whore (usually the object of male desire).

However, the pervasiveness of these prescriptive representations of women has been increasingly challenged in recent Colombian cinema. This article examines two contemporary Colombian films made by women, *La luciérnaga* (Ana María Hermida, 2016) and *Señoritas* (Lina Rodríguez, 2013), that have subverted the patriarchal gender norms of classic Colombian narratology, particularly through the construction of new meanings of female sexuality and desire. More specifically, the analysis evaluates the mechanisms through which these films reorient traditional images of women by giving visibility to lesbianism, female sexual self-exploration, and orgasms and how those representations work as liberating female images in a society that is still highly heteropatriarchal. Emphasis is given to the text as an important site of meaning. Sue Thornham (2012: 156) argues that representations of female sexuality made by women are problematic in that they encourage us to conceptualize them before considering the cinematic means that women filmmakers employ to address female bodies and passions. With this in mind, the article gives prominence to the analysis of the textual embodiment of female characters as well as acknowledging, examining, and celebrating the innovative ways in which Hermida and Rodríguez represent female sexuality and desire.

Robert Stam (2000: 185–186) asserts that films understood as texts are worthy of serious attention: "The film text is a function of semiology's focus on film as the site of systematically organized discourse rather than as a random 'piece of life' . . . [and] . . . the concept of 'text'—etymologically 'tissue' or 'weave'—conceptualizes film not as an imitation of reality but rather as an

artifact, a construct." Similarly, Alan McKee (2003: 18) suggests that performing textual analysis on cultural productions such as films reveals the way cultures make sense of the world. He argues that this poststructuralist approach to culture "allows us to see how similar or different the sense-making practices that different people use can be. And it is also possible that this can allow us to better understand the sense-making cultures in which we ourselves live by seeing their limitations, and possible alternatives to them."

With reference to Colombia, Florence Thomas (2002: 117, my translation) suggests approaching femaleness from a perspective of ambiguity and uncertainty, given the flexibility and multiplicity of (gender) identities. She declares, "We need to assert a feminine erotica based on a reconceptualization of feminine pleasure [that problematizes] sexuality and the enhancement of a new dimension with the advent of a feminine eroticism." Likewise, Deborah Martin (2012), whose work explores key female voices and artistic work in Colombian literature, painting, and film, suggests that such cultural productions subvert and resignify the notion of the political, which is associated with traditional masculinist dominance. In this sense, gender constructions by women filmmakers not only contribute to dissolving patriarchal structures and developing "herstories"³ but also produce pivotal inaugural and polysemic changes such as locating women as diverse subjects of desire (Martin, 2012; 2013; Thomas, 2002). Accordingly, I seek to determine and evaluate the varied ways in which *La luciérnaga* and *Señoritas* make sense of their contexts as cultural products and to recognize and grasp the polysemic nature of femalehood in the films without expecting to find an absolute truth in them. This evaluation of the film texts is contextualized in terms of the gendered social and cultural dynamics of Colombia, where female roles have been largely understood as part of patriarchal hierarchies (Gutiérrez de Pineda, 1998: 42, 44). As outlined above, this is rooted in the power relationships and binaries established since the Spanish Conquest and the subsequent imposition of Catholicism on Latin America.

LA LUCIÉRNAGA AND SEÑORITAS

La luciérnaga is Ana María Hermida's first feature and a benchmark in Colombian cinema as the first production made by a woman giving visibility to transgressive lesbian representations. The film tells the story of a married woman named Lucía (Carolina Guerra) and an engaged woman named Mariana (Olga Segura) who establish a strong relationship after the accident that has killed Andrés (Manuel José Chaves), Lucía's estranged brother and Mariana's fiancé, minutes before their wedding. Lucía and Andrés have been out of touch since their father died a few years before, and so Lucía and Mariana meet only some days after the accident. Through Lucía's homodiegetic narrative, the film initially focuses on the experience of loss and mourning for these two women but goes on to explore how these female "heterosexual" characters fall in love with each other. It follows the simultaneous construction of Lucía and Mariana's lesbian subjectivities, acting as a key reference for subsequent cinematic discourses on lesbian subjectivities and pleasure.⁴

Lina Rodríguez's 2013 debut, *Señoritas*, first shown and the recipient of an award in 2012 at the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Film, radically subverts the address of the female gaze through its unprecedented representation of female pleasure, self-satisfaction, and the agency of a heterosexual woman in fiction cinema. Rodríguez uses unconventional aesthetics and avant-garde techniques such as silent and elongated tracking shots and blurry and off-center shots in creating proximity to the protagonist's subjectivity and body. In doing so, she further underlines the break from the conventional representation of women in Colombian cinema. The title—*Señoritas*—alludes to the patterns of good behavior and manners of young ladies in patriarchal societies that are confronted by its main character, Alejandra (María Serrano). The unconventional storyline delves into several experiences of her day-to-day life and the way she develops and demonstrates a critique of fixed views about women through her actions and beliefs. She is permitted to behave without the pressure of conventional taboos and constraints that other young ladies would suffer. Her representation is a disruption in itself, revealing and honoring a nontraditional femininity that shapes her relationships with men, with her mother and her close friends, and especially with herself.

HETEROPATRIARCHAL EROTICISM IN COLOMBIAN CINEMA

Much of Colombian cinema has contributed to establishing gender essentialisms that, aligned with normalized patriarchal beliefs, have validated oppressive hierarchies and social roles for women in Colombian society. Accordingly, the existing scholarship highlights the pervasiveness of female stereotypes, providing descriptors of types of women that, specifically, include what Stacey Alba D. Skar (2007: 125) calls "hyper-feminized bodies" (emphasis on female nudity and sensuality, sexual experience, or pregnancy). These cinematic and gendered archetypes have tended to be constructed by men and on patriarchal notions of heteroeroticism and sexism. Most Colombian films have shown little or no interest in exploring how women experience their sexualities and sexual desires without linking this to moral judgments or male fantasies. Instead, characters have reinforced male dominance, sexual violence, objectification, and female passivity. Thus, they have been part of a wider heteropatriarchal discourse that has constructed masquerades of femininity through chaste or immoral female characters, validating a hegemonic order that endeavors to make instances of femalehood invisible.

The period between the 1960s and the 1980s saw a relaxation of sexual morality in Colombian cinema and in the way sex and women's bodies were represented on screen. More specifically, 1980s films originated a discourse of eroticism in Colombian cinema (Osorio, 2012: 8). While this created space for transgressive female characters,⁵ without an explicit political agenda to give continuity to representations of pleasure and eroticism, few directors actually succeeded in challenging traditional values and female archetypes. This trend continued during the 1990s, observable in two conspicuous constructions of female sexuality in films made by men—the representation of women's pleasure via roles of prostitutes (an eminent patriarchal fantasy) and the creation but then punishment of liberated female characters.⁶

Van Badham (2018) suggests that while female sexual liberation on screen began as the subversion of the censorious patriarchal ideal of female sexuality in visual culture, it turned into a hypersexualized and explicit representation of codes that actually favored the patriarchal discourse. In their analysis of the film *Blue Is the Warmest Colour* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013), Marion Krauthaker and Roy Connolly (2017: 29) also observed this disguised subversion. They drew attention to the film's "quasi-fetishist focus on the female body," which objectified the female characters and limited their agency regarding sexuality and desire. Similarly, in Colombian cinema the (in)visibility of the female libido has typically been subjected to phallogentric imagery, heteroerotic clichés of female sensuality and sexuality, and the gaze of male filmmakers.

As a response to these formulaic depictions, more recent films have risked introducing models of women who break the mold in exploring their sexualities, as in *Hábitos sucios* (Carlos Palau, 2003), although still from a male perspective. As the film's title suggests, four nuns and their sins undermine and blacken their habits by having repeated and secret romantic-erotic encounters in their convent. Even though the film is primarily an adaptation of the disconcerting legal case of a Colombian nun convicted of murder, Palau clarifies that it was nonsensical to disregard the lesbian theme that was also part of the legal file (Redacción *El Tiempo*, 2003). Later films, such as *Entre sábanas* (Gustavo Nieto Roa, 2008), *La vida "era" en serio* (Mónica Borda, 2011), and *Una mujer* (Camilo Medina and Daniel Paeres, 2017), offer groundbreaking representations of female sexual freedom and sex for pleasure but remain constrained by heteropatriarchal ideas of eroticism and gender. Nevertheless, female sexuality and desire in Colombian cinema have slowly moved from being scarce to being increasingly visible. This is particularly noteworthy in films made by women during the past two decades, which have moved away from rigid gender codes to more fluid and vibrant gender constructions.

LESBIAN VISIBILITY AND HOMOEROTICISM IN *LA LUCIÉRNAGA*

In her text on the (in)visible modes of representing lesbian sexualities in film, Teresa de Lauretis (1991: 234) asserts that while some forms of female representation remain grounded in gender tropes and sexual (in)difference, there are sympathetic accounts that "alter the standard frame of reference and visibility, the conditions of the visible, [and] what *can* be seen and represented." In this sense, the notion of establishing visibility goes beyond the explicit representation of imagery that transgresses patriarchal codes to the positioning of the film's lesbian subjects as the main narrative agents and motifs for the director, the characters, and the viewers. According to Anikó Imre's (2013: 228) examination of the only Hungarian cinematic depiction of lesbianism, feature films like *La luciérnaga* have both "enabled and limited lesbian representability in a powerful way." The fact that *La luciérnaga*, made in 2016, is the first Colombian commercial depiction of lesbian love and relationships that subverts heteropatriarchal discourses underlines the scarcity of representations on the topic and bespeaks the urgent need for more overt and visible examinations of gender diversity in visual culture made by women.

Richard Dyer (2002: 21) and Gert Hekma (2014: 73), among other academics, concur that in patriarchal societies homosexuality has often been conceived as a taboo subject, a sin, a crime, or a disease and understood as a deviant manifestation of love, nudity, sex, and/or desire. In addition, when cinematic representations have referred to homoeroticism and specifically to female desire and bodies they have tended to polarize its reception as either condemned or accepted from the heteronormative perspective. This has reasserted gendered visual aesthetics, sexism, and the heterosexual male imagination and rendered the representation of different female sexualities in cinema ambiguous—echoing Nayibe Bermúdez's (2006: 77) analysis of the Colombian film *Ilona llega con la lluvia* (Sergio Cabrera, 1996), in which lesbianism is depicted as invisible.⁷ However, *La luciérnaga* does contribute to defying fixed or vague views of female sexuality and desire, giving visibility to a coming-of-age narrative about the redefinition of female sexual orientation. It builds on this by indicating that lesbian subjectivities and sexualities also set women free within the patriarchal logic, promoting alternative representations of lesbianism and homoeroticism and thus questioning persistent heteronormative presumptions.

In the film, Lucía and Mariana begin as traditional characters, participating in heterosexual relationships and holding Catholic views on marriage. This echoes the naturalized condemnation and purpose of women in patriarchy that Adrienne Rich (1980) highlights in her striking work on compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence and renowned feminist academics have seconded. Butler (1990: 26–35), for example, stresses that Wittig's concepts of the binary restrictions on sex and gender are not natural but universalized and politically invested categories that serve the purposes of reproductive sexuality. By different means, Lucía and Mariana are both socially and emotionally associated with heterosexuality. Nevertheless, *La luciérnaga* is concerned with the way lesbian subjectivities are discovered and constructed, contesting institutionalized heterosexuality, and this serves as the primary focus for the film story.

The shift in Lucía's subjectivity starts with the implied discovery of a new female self via subtle cross-dressing. When Lucía arrives at the visitation room before Andrés's funeral she meets Mercedes, Mariana's mother. Mercedes gives Lucía some of Andrés's possessions, and she thoughtlessly decides to wear his sport gloves and cap, traditional signifiers of masculine identity. Charlotte Suthrell's (2004: 3) study on sex, cross-dressing, and culture explains that clothing can be understood as "a tangible indicator of normative structures." She also argues that clothing may be a marker of transition and "problematic" desires or experiences in the binary world. When Lucía decides to subvert her feminine-coded mourning clothes by immediately wearing Andrés's old accessories she opens a portal into his world. The emotional chaos that she is temporarily part of disrupts her subjectivity. It is not just an act of mourning but one of embracing a sexual transition. This gender shift continues through two key unconventional sequences that take place later in the film.

Still wearing Andrés's belongings, Lucía looks devastated and needs to lie down on the car seat while her husband, Adrián (Andrés Aranburo), is outside in the cemetery. When he attempts to open the car door, skillful editing between consecutive shots of Lucía and her husband, strong shovel-digging

sound effects, and soil being thrown on her face indicate what seems to be Andrés's burial but also, from a queer perspective, Lucía's, in accordance with B. Ruby Rich's (2013: 167) examination of queer cinematic visions in 1960s Latin American cinema—visions that were those of the margins and the domain of outsiders. This sequence suggests an alternative sphere for performing gender, one that opposes (still) male-dominated and heteronormative continental image making. It is within this transgressive scenario that Lucía's heterosexuality is buried, and she emerges as an oppositional voice within the patriarchal system.

Having left the cemetery on her own, Lucía goes to Andrés's flat. There she comes across his old jacket, which she also decides to wear. Lucía has initiated a symbiotic relationship between Andrés and herself beyond their family connection in which she briefly and symbolically explores masculinity in order to reject the heteropatriarchal status quo and taboos. Lucía begins to recognize Otherness and embraces it as a route into the complex narrative of her emerging queer subjectivity. While looking at an old photo of Andrés and herself, Lucía realizes that someone else is in the flat. She finds Mariana on the bed, weak, disoriented, and heartbroken. Mariana first imagines that Lucía is Andrés because of the symbolic embodiment of him in her body and accessories. Lucía hugs her new acquaintance and promises never to leave her. She lies down next to Mariana and they hold hands. This signals the interdependence and visible bond they will develop, embracing their nascent close lesbian relationship in a way that confronts patriarchy. This last moment in bed takes Lucía to a childhood memory with her brother, listening to their father reading Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. The words seem to refer both to the monster that Gregor Samsa was after waking up from uneasy dreams and to the "monster" that Lucía has seen some nights before. More interesting, the nightmare that their mourning has been shifts for Lucía and Mariana when they wake up and get to know each other and themselves during the following days.

Several academics in queer studies have approached the notion of lesbian visibility with a certain level of agreement, understanding the unbiased recognition of social and cultural particularities of female homosexuality that lead to seeing *and* hearing alternative women's subjectivities that are shaped through feelings, desire, and/or sexual practices with other women (Farkas, 2013: 178; Robbins, 2011: 124; Walker, 1993: 868, 869). Likewise, Dyer (2002: 19) comments on the representation of gay people that "[a] major fact about being gay is that it doesn't show." He suggests that there are cultural forms that bespeak gayness (such as gestures, expressions, clothing, or environments)—a multiplicity of signs that, in context, make the invisible visible through representations and serve as the basis of "the requirement of recognizability" of homosexual subjects. In this sense, the visibility of Lucía and Mariana as lesbian characters lies not only in the chief narrative of the redefinition of their sexual subjectivities but also in the way Hermida avoids the popular heteropatriarchal conventions of lesbianism. For this reason, the motif of the "monster" that *La luciérnaga* uses is essential for analyzing Lucía's character, and the fact that the film lacks codes of the predominant butch/femme binary provides a more even representation between Lucía and Mariana and emphasizes the cultural disruption of these lesbian characters.

Considering Barbara Creed's (1993: 62) analysis of the numerous representations of the monstrous-feminine faces of women, it can be argued that Lucía is a female monster within her heteropatriarchal reality as she starts to signify sexual difference and the threat of castration. Significantly, Mariana (who also crosses patriarchal gender boundaries in the film) reminds Lucía that there is nothing wrong inside of her so there should be no discomfort. The first time the "monster" is seen is when Lucía wakes up one night and sees her reflection in the mirror. Similar to Emma Staniland's (2016: 146) analysis of the use of mirrors in Sylvia Molloy's (1981) *En breve cárcel*, in *La luciérnaga* the mirror works as a key motif of self-confrontation and self-recognition. In this vein, as the viewer sees, the "monster" Lucía has referred to is a fantastic embodiment of herself, wearing dark clothes and with supernatural eyes. Beyond the characterization, the "monster" is actually the "firefly" (aligned with the film's title). This metaphorical inner self, in line with Dyer's analysis, makes visible how the process of recognizing herself as an altered subject begins. Facing that fanciful self in the mirror for the first time and feeling terrified, Lucía says, "I was no longer the same, something inside me had died." And although this seems to point to the loss of her brother, she is actually referring to the heterosexuality she once lived in and would be burying afterwards.

The process of recognizing and revealing Lucía and Mariana's sexual discovery does not stem from the stereotypes of butches and femmes. Lisa Walker (2001: 128), writing about the lesbian pulp fiction of the late 1950s and early 1970s, explains that "the butch has always known her sexual difference, while the feminine lesbian comes to an awareness of her 'true' sexual identity later in life." Taking Lucía as the closest representation to the butch (because of the cross-dressing transition analyzed earlier), she breaks this stereotype by not being the woman who has always known about her sexual difference. Beyond the temporary codes that Andrés's accessories have created for her, neither she nor Mariana represents the butch type. Instead, they seem to be more aligned with the traditional ideal of the lesbian femme but further developed through a shared neutrality with regard to female codes. The whole film shows them wearing similar outfits in which the same colors or styles predominate. They are defined by their performative acts, those balanced and shared modes of constructing their new selves, and by the romantic and erotic representations of their encounters that reaffirm their connection and their reshaped subjectivities.

Simone de Beauvoir (1949: 479, 499) says that lesbian visibility is not anatomically determined but a set of attitudes expressly chosen that explain female sexualities as "both motivated and freely adopted." The representational strategies in *La luciérnaga* make lesbian sexuality visible in a society that denies its existence. This visibility is initially achieved through the characters' private and curious explorations and a nonsexualizing gaze at each other's "naked" body and through the increasingly public displays of affection and attraction that result from the strengthening of their emotional bonds. When meeting Adrián at a restaurant, Lucía and Mariana appear closer than before. Their greeting hug and kiss, their subtle touching of hands under the table, the triviality of the presence of Adrián (who does not seem to notice their special connection), and their closeness in the bathroom, which almost leads to their first kiss, articulate their sexualities and drive. These markers show that the gaze

has shifted to a world that does not focus on men—in which, not surprisingly, male figures are distant, absent, or dead.

This absence of male figures and the disruption of the cinematic codes of heteroeroticism come into focus again, later in the film, when Lucía and Mariana take a weekend trip. Following multiple arguments of de Lauretis (1988: 160–161) in her reading of the complexities foregrounded by the lesbian representations of the 1980s, the sequence in which Lucía and Mariana spend the night together inscribes the erotic in a mode of representation that, instead of escaping (disguising or suppressing) gender, embraces a new notion of gender—as de Lauretis summarizes, “a female desire not hommo-sexual but homosexual,” one that is not determined by male models (162).⁸ Hermida’s approach to the representation of Lucía’s and Mariana’s sexualities transcends gender by presenting both women as active and desiring lovers.

The night they arrive, they go together to a lake nearby and jump into the water holding hands in a synchronous recognition of their reshaped subjectivities and lesbian existence. In her analysis of the trope of liquidity in Molloy’s novel, Staniland (2016: 148) declares that water, for women, represents a point of self-knowledge and self-contact. In *La luciérnaga*, what starts as an innocent manifestation of support and caring through a series of kisses in the lake opens a key homoerotic portal, since Mariana’s last two kisses are on Lucía’s mouth. This enables them to produce new meanings of desire, eroticism, and the self, subverting those seen/accepted as traditional regarding lesbianism.⁹ Mariana leaves calmly while Lucía, agitated, remains. Nevertheless, this event leads them to their first sexual encounter.

The sex scene in the bedroom presents a transgressive cinematic discourse that reorients the traditional gaze placed on women. Echoing de Lauretis’s (1994: 88) analysis of Sheila McLaughlin’s film *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987), *La luciérnaga* foregrounds the equivalent investment of look and desire between two women. Without having recourse to a pornonormative mode of addressing them, Hermida’s techniques recognize the erotic beyond rigid male/female gender identities and expectations. She constructs a more poetic idea of lesbian love through homoeroticism, encouraging us to recognize sexualities as socio-cultural constructs, fluid behaviors, attitudes, feelings, and desires between people of the same sex, dissolving the notion of a static Otherness. With its lack of sexual moaning, numerous close-up shots in movement, fusions of the sexual encounter and the “monster/firefly” image, and points-of-view on the other woman, this scene constructs a private moment/ritual whereby Lucía and Mariana transcend their patriarchal surroundings. The sex scene reinforces how female bodies and sexual experiences with women can be seen differently but still through erotic means of nudity and pleasure.

La luciérnaga subverts compulsory heterosexuality and heteroeroticism in patriarchy and contributes to establishing a new basis for lesbian visibility and homoeroticism in Colombian cinema. Different layers of visibility underscore the agency, freedom, and voices that characters construct, reflected in their undisguised lesbian representations as well as in the meanings of the film’s title and the characters’ names. Hermida uses unconventional aesthetics and visual strategies to represent powerful transgressions such as sexual attraction, sex, and nudity between women and a lesbian mode of mothering

(Mariana confirms that she is pregnant by Andrés by the end of the film). As Walker (1993: 868) suggests, these representations can be considered as a shift from stereotypical categories of gender discrimination to visible signifiers of difference. De Lauretis (1991: 224) encourages us to recognize that films may be limited in their capacity to portray lesbian characters and sexualities outside of patriarchy. However, she suggests that the project of lesbian performance in film (and theater) is to keep altering and redefining the standard frames of visibility and the modes of representing lesbian subjects as Hermida has done with *La luciérnaga*. Ultimately, visibility means raising awareness about inclusion and diversity in our societies through overt alternatives for expressing LGBTIQ+ rights, the demand for social justice, and sexual tolerance (Farkas, 2013: 178; Robbins, 2011: 124; Walker, 1993: 868).

FEMALE SEXUAL SELF-EXPLORATION AND FEMALE ORGASMS

The pursuit of sexual pleasure can take many forms, from individual to collective practices: kissing, caresses, types of sexual activities, masturbation, types of orgasms. However, as discussed earlier, when erotic pleasure-seeking activities are represented in patriarchal popular culture, they tend either to give little attention to the way women experience pleasure or to focus on the distortion of it.¹⁰ Women's masturbation and orgasms are themes conspicuously absent from Colombian cinema in general but explored in *Señoritas* and *La luciérnaga*. The two films deliver pioneering representations of female sexual self-exploration and female orgasms, respectively. They abolish the patriarchal masks that hide women who are determined to express themselves sexually and can reach orgasms that refute formulaic pornonormative conventions.

Rodríguez's *Señoritas* is a production that refocuses the female body. Overall—through an unconventional narrative—the objective of the director is the development of Alejandra's femalehood, and the film accompanies her as she reconstructs the meaning of being a "señorita" in modern times. Significantly, the way Rodríguez portrays Alejandra's choice to self-stimulate her libido is groundbreaking in contemporary Colombian cinema. It deconstructs standardized cinematic patterns of how a woman should look or sound when feeling and desiring sexual pleasure and increases the visibility of the female.

Rodríguez's rendering of Alejandra's masturbation scene is a subversive, powerful, and feminist representation of female self-exploration. During a scene that takes almost five minutes, we witness in detail how Alejandra follows her sexual drive alone and in complete silence. Remaining dressed and with the camera still, framing her full body, Alejandra touches herself gradually, moving her hand from her trousers and crotch to inside her clothes. She rubs her body against the pillow and the mattress, opens her legs, arches her body from time to time, moistens her lips, and touches her breast under the jumper she wears. The last few movements briefly suggest that she is either about to reach her orgasm or already feeling it. Similar to the portrayal of female sexual self-exploration in Ángeles Mastretta's (1985) *Arráncame la vida* (Staniland, 2016: 181), Rodríguez's scene challenges the classic psychoanalytic conception of a woman as a site

of lack (because of the lack of the phallus). It shows the pursuit of the orgasm as something fully in the hands of the woman to recognize and explore the self, utterly aware that she does not need to be penetrated or depend on the presence of a man to resolve “the lack.”

What Rodríguez makes clear is that the normalized and masculinized “lack” that would be projected onto the woman’s body via a pornonormative perspective does not need to be remedied. Instead, Alejandra’s self-exploration leads to a positivized difference in which her experience is connected to what Staniland (2016: 181) describes as the “desire to be autonomous and through that autonomy construct her own identity.” As the sequence ends while Alejandra is still touching herself, the cut leaves inconclusive something that cannot be fully captured through the lens. Far from being a rejection of her orgasm, the film invites us to grasp in detail how Alejandra’s actions in such a personal sexual moment contribute to shaping her subjectivity, one based on sexual freedom and autonomy primarily focused on herself. It also invites us to imagine (and take part in) the way an orgasm may feel for Alejandra and how a day may start for her, seconding the idea of flow and open-endedness of the seminal notion of *écriture féminine*.¹¹ Although the film implies that Alejandra experiences sexual freedom with different men, these experiences are hardly explored. Instead, the film succeeds in being the first production by a woman to focus on how the female character recognizes herself as a sexual subject, someone who can be in control of her body to feel pleasure and understand the self, through masturbation.

In *La luciérnaga*, Hermida addresses female orgasms, challenging pornonormative discourses through a shared experience. Although contemporary films such as *Entre sábanas* (Gustavo Nieto Roa, 2008) and *Una mujer* (Camilo Medina and Daniel Paeres, 2017) disrupt certain codes on women’s reaching sexual climax, these representations (made by men) fall short in exploring what their orgasms are like. Both these films resort to privileging soft-porn codes with female sexual sounds and nudity. In *La luciérnaga*, in contrast, immediately after the lake sequence, Lucía’s image is intertwined with her “monster/firefly” figure swimming in the lagoon and then shown with Mariana having sex in the bedroom. The only sound heard through the sex sequence is the extradiegetic soft music that accompanies their body movements together. In slight slow-motion and a dark visual style, a series of nonsexualizing close-ups shows their naked bodies, allowing us to see how they gently kiss and touch each other and performatively embrace their gender identities. Specifically, through a combination of god(dess)’s-eye shots and close-ups, we take part in the construction of the characters’ points of view and their interdependent gaze while having sex. Thus, we follow closely how they feel pleasure and seemingly reach their orgasms, manifested through gestures, superimposed images, sounds of flowing and bubbling water, and light emerging from beneath their bodies.

Water remains essential to acknowledging how femalehood emerges from this deconstruction of heteropatriarchy. As Alexis Wick (2013: 53) says in analyzing water as the source of modern civilization, water unites and signifies progress and freedom. Similarly, Krauthaker and Connolly (2017: 28) state that “water symbolizes the liberation of feminine subjectivity and links it to a predominant position in the modern world.” With this in mind, reaching

their orgasms together, in constant analogy with transitional images of the lake and the “monster/firefly” swimming in it, is an optimistic symbol of feminine fulfillment. It validates the rite of passage for both characters and their liberty to feel sexual pleasure differently. This scene also allows us to see a subjective way of understanding their orgasms while the light of the firefly shines around them on screen, framing their lesbian desires as liberated, fluid, and cleansed.

Inspired by Staniland’s (2016: 171) words on Mastretta’s novel, *Señoritas* and *La luciérnaga* are films whose overall trajectories suggest that “selfhood for women begins only with the death of patriarchy.” Luckily, for Alejandra, Mariana, and Lucía, from the outset of each film patriarchy is defied or non-existent, and the sexual self-exploration and orgasms of each character ultimately represent the climax they reach as narrative agents and female transgressive subjects. These characters are also able to come into full ownership of themselves because there is no patriarchal “possessor” that impedes their free development as women. Therefore, their (personal or shared) sexual experiences of their own climaxes propose an emerging visible, progressive, and powerful understanding of how the female self can exist beyond archetypes of femininity. They also suggest that the female self can be nurtured differently while coexisting with those who are still bound to the patriarchal logic—or what is left of it.

CONCLUSION

La luciérnaga and *Señoritas*, contemporary Colombian films made by women, propose pioneering and disruptive imagery of women’s femininities and fulfillment through sexuality, desire, and sexual experiences. Although the question of inclusion versus invisibility in filmmaking remains open and problematic, these films seize and occupy a visible cinematic space in which female characters and women filmmakers speak up. These two films cannot cover all fronts, but they are among the first steps toward amplifying marginalized female voices and raising awareness of gender politics in Colombian cinema by problematizing female roles, bodies, and passions in ways that deconstruct patriarchal paradigms of femininity. They have opened an alternative path that, despite being embedded in patriarchal contexts, shows how these women reclaim self-fulfillment.

Beyond being regarded as positive or negative female models in Colombian society, the representations of female sexuality and desire in *La luciérnaga* and *Señoritas* are a sure sign of the progress that feminist film theory has hoped for, particularly with regard to the patriarchal structured film narrative and the context of Colombian cinema. These films not only provide multidimensional modes of representation of women that contest their broad condition as subaltern in a Westernized society but also inform renewed understandings of what has been historically acknowledged as “womanhood” in the creative work of women filmmakers, inspiring upcoming generations both in cinema and in academia. One hopes that it will not be long before those generations have left our current, problematic models of patriarchy behind them.

NOTES

1. I use “femalehood” as a more inclusive term than “womanhood,” challenging a socially defined, gendered, and age-related form of selfhood that also implies a form of socially imposed telos.

2. Skar (2007), Bermúdez (2006), Rueda and García (2015), Silva (2016), and Muñoz-Rodríguez (2016), among others, have incorporated seminal concepts from Mulvey’s theory into their analyses of contemporary Colombian films (all, however, made by men).

3. A feminist term used since the 1970s to critique conventional views on historiography from a female point of view.

4. Ruth Caudeli’s short *Porqué no* (2016) and her features *¿Cómo te llamas?* (2018) and *Segunda estrella a la derecha* (2020) also portray visible and alternative representations of female sexuality and pleasure in Colombian cinema. Her feature-length films have been omitted from this study because they were unavailable.

5. See pioneering Colombian films such as *El llanto de un pueblo* (Enock Roldán Restrepo, 1965), *Amazonas para dos aventureros* (Ernst Hofbauer, 1974), *Pasos en la niebla* (José María Arzuaga, 1978) *Erotikón* (Ramiro Meléndez, 1984), and *La mansión de Araucaíma* (Carlos Mayolo, 1986), all made by men. Notably, the latter two offer the first explicit approaches to female homoeroticism, implying the existence of lesbianism.

6. See, for instance, *La gente de La Universal* (Felipe Aljure, 1994), *Ilona llega con la lluvia* (Sergio Cabrera, 1996), and *Soplo de vida* (Luis Ospina, 1999).

7. As Bermúdez (2006: 77) highlights, the lesbian love between the main character Ilona (Margarita Rosa De Francisco) and Larissa (Pastora Vega) is repressed and only implicit.

8. De Lauretis (1988: 155–156), considering Irigaray’s 1975 work on the psychoanalytic view of female sexuality, explains that “hommo” highlights the semantic duplicity and tension of ambiguity created by the words “homo” (from the Latin “man”) and “hommo” (from the Greek “same”). This also underlines what De Lauretis calls “sexual (in)difference” —a paradox in which the socio-sexual difference of women (women want/are something different from men) is caught, since female homosexuality or desire tends to be defined by masculine models, producing a socio-sexual indifference regarding women (women want/are the same as men).

9. This echoes de Lauretis’s (1988: 156, 170) thoughts about Jill Dolan’s (1987) highlighting of the liberative and diverse reappropriation of pornographic representation in lesbian magazines.

10. Films such as *Rosario Tijeras* (Emilio Maillé, 2005) and *Alias María* (José Luis Rugeles, 2015) provide close-ups that show female gestures when receiving oral sex, suggesting they enjoy this sexual practice and are sexually emancipated by it. Although they challenge the conventional prioritization of male pleasure and/or fellatio in sex scenes, the fact that both productions focus on the female seminaked body and silence female libidos prevents them from disrupting the patriarchal order.

11. A term coined by Hélène Cixous (1975), also known as “women’s writing.” It refers to language that deviates from the rigid, male-dominated one, a free and altered mode of writing the self, the world, and “herstory” from a female perspective.

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