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*The Maid/La Nana*

by Ross Hamilton

The late 1990s marked a sea of change in Latin American cinema, as a new wave of filmmakers emerged across the continent, their work bringing about a “seismic shift” (Wolf) in the region’s contemporary cinematic culture. Hailing from various countries, this new clutch of directors did not necessarily share the same principles and ideas regarding filmmaking, in the way that say, Fernando Solanas et al. had done in the late 1960s. However, they were united by a singular rejection of the Latin American cinema that had come before them. A film that exemplifies many, though admittedly not all, of the defining characteristics connecting this collection of progressive Latin American movies, which have continued to be released over the last ten years, is Sebastián Silva’s comedic drama, *La Nana*, the analysis of which will be the focus of this essay. Through an examination of the film itself, and by drawing from a selection of secondary sources, I will aim to gain a further insight into the context and underlying ideas behind the movement currently underway in Latin American cinema.

Released in 2009, *La Nana* is the Chilean Silva’s second feature-length production, and is representative of what critic Sergio Wolf deems the “extraordinary transformation” in contemporary Latin American cinema in a number of ways. Perhaps the foremost of these is the film’s subject matter, seeking as it does to deconstruct the institution of ‘the maid’, which is described as “a ubiquitous feature of Latin American society and its cinema” by critic Demetrios Matheou. Silva describes the maid as “a hidden subject in Chile”, a monument to the persistent inequality that plagues modern Latin America, and as such the director’s mandate is to portray the person behind the profession, to lend “a Chilean perspective to this messed-up phenomenon” (Matheou). Where previously the maid may have appeared fleetingly onscreen, performing her duties with a smile before vanishing behind the scenes as good help should, Silva makes this hitherto peripheral figure his focus, drawing upon moments from his own life to achieve this end. Discussing his own childhood maid, the director admits to suffering “guilt, as I felt we were imprisoning this woman in a house” (Diestro-Dópido). As such, Silva uses his parents’ home as the film’s main location, again, employing personal experience in order to lend it an ‘organic’ (cite?) familiarity.

Whilst several contemporary Latin American directors, including Lucrecia Martel in *The Swamp*, have attempted to separate individual characters from the institution of the domestic servant, it is by no means a straightforward feat; a fact that is demonstrated throughout *La Nana* by its titular protagonist, Raquel. “An ambiguous figure” (Bradshaw), she is at once “needy and resentful “shy [and] girlish” (Bradshaw), and her conception of her own self, initially at least, is so intimately entwined with her job that she struggles to find her own identity. Indeed, in one scene we see her trying on a sweater belonging to her mistress, Pilar, before later purchasing the same garment for herself, which is one of several indications of the “arrested development of a woman who hasn’t spent a minute of her adult life in her own persona” (Matheou).

The somewhat subdued, domestic drama of *La Nana* is reflected in the aesthetic approach
adopted by Silva and cinematographer Sergio Armstrong, who aimed to make “the audience feel like a voyeur” (Diestro-Dópido). The film’s candid, handheld camerawork lends it a distinct “fly-on-the-wall look” (Matheou), blurring the lines between invention and reality and demonstrating what Wolf terms, the “documentarization of fiction” (Wolf). This approach, and the resultant portrayal of the mundanity of Raquel’s life, is also exemplary of a shift in contemporary Latin American cinema. The protagonist’s rigid routine and lack of any meaningful social interaction creates an affecting but crucially believable setting, effectively “confronting the real [and] contaminating fiction with the material of the everyday” (Wolf). In the process, Silva rejects the “allegorical fervour of the 1980s” (Wolf), the traditional approach of “local flavour dressed up with tenderness in order to seduce the co-producing economic power” (Wolf). Raquel’s lifestyle is unembellished and it certainly isn’t glamourized, and the director even goes as far as to say that the position of the maid “still carries features of slavery” (Diestro-Dópido).

While it would be wrong to call Raquel a slave, she is also not a true member of the family, despite having lived with them for over twenty years. Instead, she occupies a strange grey area between employee and relative. She is too attached to the family to seek fulfilment elsewhere, but not close enough that she can be personally satisfied; “she is intimate with authority, but emphatically beneath it” (Bradshaw). It is the uncertainty and emotional repression that Raquel experiences as a result of this situation that ultimately causes her aggression toward the family’s new maids; a fact which goes unnoticed until it is finally recognised by Lucy, who holds Raquel and asks, “My God, what did they do to you?”

However, these personal issues, which are primarily underpinned by Silva’s broader commentary on class also draw in part from the theme of interracial tension, which is another common aspect present in many contemporary Latin American films. While La Nana does not reach “the outer limits of xenophobia” (Wolf) in the manner of Adrián Caetano’s Bolivia, Raquel’s gibes at her Peruvian counterpart Mercedes carries a racial overtone (“She’s got to understand, we’re not in Peru!”), and her habit of disinfecting the bathroom after her rival’s showers possesses an underlying nastiness that exceeds mere personal dislike. Once again, Silva’s use of the house as a setting becomes significant. In a way, it represents Raquel’s own sovereign territory, and she in turn exhibits a sort of warped nationalism regarding the space. Until her revelation with Lucy, she distrusts ‘foreigners’ who are brought into her own environment, and is completely resistant to anything that will upset the social balance within what she perceives as ‘her’ house and ‘her’ family.

Ultimately, the facets of La Nana concerning class, race and the documentarization of fiction combine to form a film that provides a great indication of the cultural and political transformation undergone in Latin American cinema as a whole over the last decade and a half. Whilst “the shaping factors were not the same” (Wolf) throughout the continent, Silva and his contemporaries, united by a “horror of the cinema of the past” (Wolf), have succeeded in creating films that challenge and subvert the cinematic establishment both in terms of technique and subject matter. Confronting the institution of the maid, the director creates a character in Raquel who is portrayed realistically; who is “scary yet subtle” (Bradshaw), and “defies our expectations at every turn” (Matheou). As a result, he presents us with a film that embodies the underlying spirit of
Latin American cinema today: a resounding rejection of the “aestheticization of the real” (Wolf).
Works Cited


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Films Cited

