

“My Films Are not Feminist”: Relationships between Feminist History and Women’s History in the Case of Third-Wave Mexican Women Filmmakers”

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Two generations of Mexican women filmmakers interested in women issues attended the “Gathering of Latina Women Filmmakers and Videomakers” in Tijuana, Mexico, in 1990. After the meeting, all the members of the younger generation declared to the press that their films were not feminist. Despite the filmmakers’ assertion, their films were included in 1990s feminist historiographies as examples of feminist films. My question is: How to write the history of what happened at Tijuana and the results of the conference? And also: What are the differences between the Tijuana conference and a conference on the same topic held at Guadalajara, Mexico in 2002? My analysis, written almost a decade after Guadalajara, includes a reflection on the reasons I wrote this paper for a conference entitled “Doing Women’s Film History.” In comparing Tijuana, Guadalajara and Sunderland, which ideas have changed and which remain the same?

Although at the time there was no way to describe it, there are at least two ways to think about what happened at Tijuana. The terms of second and third-wave filmmakers, which were not common in 1990, can be used today to address the shift in feminist thought that took place at the time. However,

these terms could suggest that the interests of second-wave feminists (the older generation) had been supplanted by those of a younger generation (third-wave filmmakers). In this way, Tijuana would be an event in which the “old” and the “new” feminism met and, understandably, ideas clashed.ⁱ Tijuana then would be a mid-point in the evolution of feminist ideas, in which all second-wavers had not yet embraced third-wave ideas. This is, in many ways, how we often understand societal change from a historical perspective. However, to understand the conflict at Tijuana in terms of a set of ideas, second-wave ideas, supplanted by another set of ideas, third-wave ideas, is still problematic because it leaves several questions unanswered. Why did the younger generation self-exclude themselves from feminism, a position that they maintain today? And also, why have many of the second-wavers not yet embraced third-wave ideas twenty years later?

I propose another way of understanding the conflict at Tijuana. Rather than thinking about feminism as a homogeneous movement with one position that evolves historically, we can think about feminism as a homogeneous movement that in the late 1980s becomes a pluralistic movement, a movement in which the members, all of them feminist, have a variety of interests. My idea comes in part from Sarah Projansky’s *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (2001), a study of US

feminism in the media between 1970 and 1990. Projansky does not propose openly that a homogeneous feminist movement becomes a plurality of feminist positions in the late 1980s and early 1990s; however, this idea is implied in her analysis, in which she describes six different types of postfeminist positions. If there are six identifiable groups who defined themselves in relation to feminism, wouldn't that mean that the homogeneous movement of the 70s has become plural?

Let's then look at the "Gathering of Latina Women Filmmakers and Videomakers" in 1990 through the lens of post-feminism. The Tijuana conference occurs at a moment in which plurality already exist, but is not recognized. While people attending the conference had diverse feminist agendas by this time, the structure used to organize the conference itself understood feminism as a homogeneous movement. The underlying principle that explains the organization of the panels is the notion that basically all women had a similar life experience, an experience that was defined by its opposition to male experience. This underlying belief manifested in the use of the word "woman", in singular, in the names of the sessions' titles, such as "Woman's Film," "Woman's Film Today," "Popular Culture and Woman's Film," "Film and Video, The Feminine Experience," "The Quotidian Life and Woman's Film."ⁱⁱ Viewing women as sharing a

similar experience allowed women to contemplate the possibility that there should be a “feminine aesthetic”,ⁱⁱⁱ shared by all women. The ideas expressed in naming the panels and in discussing the possibility of a feminist aesthetic suggest to me that feminism was a homogenous movement. If the experience and aesthetics of women was singular, then should it not also make sense to think that the movement’s agenda was also singular? The conviction that there was only one way of being feminist explains the “expulsion” of the younger generation from feminism. If the experience of women was one, then something that went above and beyond the way in which womanhood was defined and understood might, and indeed was, considered outside of feminism.

And indeed, through their films the younger generation brought up new topics for discussion that were not considered feminist. For example, women’s attraction to romantic ideals, an important issue in Sistach’s *Los pasos de Ana* (1989) was rejected as not feminist. In Sistach’s opera prima, *Ana*, the film’s main character, a director recently graduated from film school, is given the assignment of finding about the life and work of a deceased and forgotten Mexican poet, Gilberto Owen. While doing her research, Ana interviews Owen’s old love, Clementina Otero, and reads the poems that Owen dedicated to her. Towards the end of *Los pasos de Ana*,

there is a scene in which Ana reads to herself the poems Owen wrote for Otero. The main character feels sad for not having had a person in her life who could write those poems to her. Ana's longing, according to Sistach, was negatively received: "It is something the American feminist audience finds strange, almost disgusting. It is something, we might say, that is somewhat hard for them to 'swallow'" (Sistach, 14). There were other issues, of course. She explained to me that "At the conference in Tijuana about a half-dozen people stood up and said that the movie [*Los pasos de Ana*] was sexist and *machista*. And the worst of it was that they were filmmakers!" These comments from the audience caused Sistach to her break with feminism. Sistach concluded that "If *Los pasos de Ana* is sexist and *machista*, then I don't want anything to do with feminism any more" (Arredondo, unpublished interview, 14). Sistach's complaint was very similar to Busi Cortés whose claim "My films are not feminist" gives the title to this paper. The discussions of *Los pasos de Ana* at Tijuana shows that there was already a plurality of positions, with one group still adhering to a second-wave agenda and the another group, the third-wavers, also feminist, proposing another agenda.

The plurality of positions is much clearer twelve years after the Tijuana congress took place, at the "Encuentro de Mujeres y Cine en

América Latina,” (2002), in Guadalajara, México. At the meeting in Guadalajara, women’s experiences were not contrasted to men’s experiences any longer; rather, the focus was on women themselves. The Guadalajara understands that there is a plurality of positions, all of which are given equal standing.^{iv} For instance, the title of the panel “Ruptures, Encounters and Diversity in Languages and Narratives” assumes that there are multiple ways in which women can propose political and ideological changes. Although it was a little bit too late for most Mexican third-wavers, who, like Sistach and Cortés, had renounced feminism almost a decade earlier, Guadalajara acknowledged their position as a viable one.

In her welcoming speech, the organizer at Guadalajara, Patricia Torres, insisted that the meeting was designed with the idea of inclusion (11) and plurality of positions (12). She explained that the group of women invited to the meeting held different political positions (i.e., attendance was not restricted to second-wavers^v) but to those who shared a common practice. The notion of a common practice lay beneath the organization of the sessions and the selection of speakers. Sessions were divided according to genres: documentary, fiction, and experimental cinema. Another important change was the move away from authorship; the speakers included women who were not filmmakers—such as scriptwriter Melanie Dimantes and

producer Berta Navarro—but who had been involved in the process of making films.

The concept of the plurality of feminine experience made the idea of a feminine aesthetic unacceptable. Mexican academic Julia Tuñón made several attempts to encourage panelists and audience to elaborate on the idea of a feminist aesthetic as a viable concept, but despite Tuñón's repeated efforts, the audience did not respond to her suggestion. Their silence can be interpreted as a sign, that by 2002, the idea of a feminist aesthetic could no longer be considered when studying the work of women filmmakers. The two congresses at Tijuana and Guadalajara illustrate a shift in feminist thought; while in 1990 feminism was based on a unified agenda for all the women, in 2002 feminism acknowledged that women had different agendas. The idea that women hold different viewpoints explains why Guadalajara was organized around the notion of women and professions. The use of the plural, the emphasis on diversity, and the silence that followed Tuñón's question about a feminist aesthetic, mark the presence of plurality.

If from the 1990s on, the focus of feminism is women and not woman, then it makes sense to think that there should also be feminist agendas, not one agenda. One of the ways in which feminism understand diversity is by bringing the notions of race, and class into an understanding of women's

lives. However, the Mexican women filmmakers that I am studying are all of the same class and race. Their most important difference is age, and I would like to relate their agenda to the labor conditions they experienced. The improvement of labor conditions for women in general, and the inclusion of women in the higher ranks of the male dominated Mexican film industry in particular is a key difference. The second-wavers, who began directing between the 1940s and the 1970s, experienced more adverse labor conditions than third-wavers, who began directing in the late 1980s. The creation of film schools in the 1970s gave third-wave filmmakers the right to direct, so to speak; they had rights equal to men because they, like the men, had completed their training. Second wavers were not given the right to direct, they had to compete with male filmmakers within sexist film unions.

The relative improvement of labor conditions did not mean that third-wavers did not encounter problems: they faced other problems. As soon as third-wavers joined the ranks of the Mexican directors the clash between their work-life and a family life emerged as a serious problem. Some second-wavers, like Landeta, were willing to give up family-life in order to make films. By contrast, third-wavers were not willing to give up family life entirely for work, and this is where their dilemma began, because the traditional way of understanding motherhood was incompatible with their

work as filmmakers. The challenge then was clear for them: to find new ways to understand motherhood that were compatible with the lives they lived as women filmmakers.

Almost ten years after Guadalajara, I am delivering this paper in Sunderland at a conference called “Doing Women’s Film History.” The conference’s title suggests that gathering, analyzing and creating a history of women in relation to cinema has a political intention. The “Doing” of the title is a call to activism, an activism that, unlike that of the 70s, is centered on gathering information about women. The term “Women” in the title is also significant, or to be more precise, what is remarkable is the absence of the word feminist. The absence of the word feminist in the title of the conference, the papers presented and even the discussions that took place cannot be taken as an indication that the participants of the conference would not self-identify as feminist or that feminism is not important for them. Rather, the absence of the word feminist or feminism indicates that the importance of discussing what is or is not feminist has lessened. The critical goal now is to put into historical perspective the women who were having these discussions in the 1990s and the 2000s and how their discussions were framed. The impulse to study women and their works remains from Tijuana to Guadalajara and Sunderland. From a 2011 perspective we can say that the

ideas which frame the discussions have changed. In that sense, whether third-wave Mexican filmmakers are feminist or not is no longer an issue. What interests us now is that these filmmakers are studied as an important component in the history of women and film. In 2011, the goal is not to compile a feminist history but to write a history of women.

ⁱ The notion of a second and third wave has also been used to talk about the shifts in feminism in general and in Mexican women's filmmaking in particular. In *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film* (2006), Sergio de la Mora refers to María Novaro as a third-wave filmmaker. Drawing from Mora, we can presume that if Novaro is a third-wave filmmaker, Cine Mujer, Landeta, and Fernández Violante are second-wave filmmakers. Thus, using Margar Millán and Patricia Vega's chronology, which dates the end of the Collective's activity at around 1986-7, we can establish the mid-1980s as the end of second-wave feminism in Mexico.

ⁱⁱ In Spanish, "Cine de mujer," "El cine de mujer hoy," "Cultura popular y cine de mujer."

ⁱⁱⁱ Carlos Monsiváis and Mária Millán debated the dangers (Monsiváis) and possibilities (Millán) of using the notion of a feminine aesthetic (Iglesias and Fregoso 192-193).

^{iv} The proceedings were published in *Mujeres y cine en América Latina* (2004).

^v Torres said "En ningún momento este encuentro se diseñó con el ánimo de proclamar que el cine realizado por mujeres es determinante de una visión feminista" (Torres 2002: 11).