

## Film Review

- *Señorita María, la falda de la montaña* (*Miss María, Skirting the mountain*), directed by Rubén Mendoza. Colombia, 2017.<sup>1</sup>

*Señorita María, la falda de la montaña* recounts the story of María, a middle-aged transgender woman living in Boavita, a village in the Colombian Andes, who has been isolated from society for most of her life. The film addresses the personal and social challenges someone with a non-normative gender identity faces in a conservative rural context. Furthermore, *Señorita María* highlights the impact of poverty and religion in the life of a queer person in Colombia. The director of *Señorita María* is Rubén Mendoza, a filmmaker whose work comprises documentary and fictional films focused on marginalized characters affected by social inequality in Colombia. This approach might explain why Mendoza took an immediate interest in María's story. In 2011, Mendoza started the documentary project, which would eventually take him six years to complete. In 2018, *Señorita María* premiered at the Festival Internacional de Cine de Cartagena, was subsequently selected for various international film festivals.

The documentary intimately examines the experience of being a transgender woman in a context where progressive discourses on sexual diversity are rare. The film takes its time to introduce the main character through long sequences that show María's timid yet captivating demeanour. The spectator witnesses her routines, from starting the day in the dark in her house, with no electricity or water, to the arduous peasant's work that earns her a living. This portrait is complemented by an in-depth interview with María about her life, in which she is at times naive and humorous, and at times temperamental and resentful. The exchange also discloses the protagonist's standpoint about her femininity: despite not being familiar with modern LGBTIQ+ discourses, she undoubtedly identifies as a woman. In this sense, the documentary poses the question of how someone raised in a homophobic rural environment is able to embrace her gender identity with such determination.

The portrayal of María is combined with a repetitive score that is commonly played during Catholic processions held in Boavita around Virgin Mary. This association serves as a means to reconsider the paradoxical influence of

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religion in *señorita*'s life. On the one hand, her deep-rooted Catholic education allows her to come to terms with her womanhood ('everyone is beautiful to God, we are all equal in his eyes'), and to find a role model in the Mother of God. At one moment, María recounts how the Virgin once appeared to her in a dream and praised her 'beautiful little body'. This spiritual elaboration works as a religious validation of her persona, a belief she celebrates with wearing skirts and dresses as the Virgin and participating in the church's services.

On the other hand, the same religious values underpin the prejudices that have excluded her from Boavita's social circles. The film features interviews with the people María interacts with for, mainly, work purposes. Their attitude towards her is one of disaffected pity and passive aggression, which is accentuated by their insistent use of masculine pronouns when talking about her. For instance, one of the interviewees says that María was the subject of an exorcism because of 'his' unusual behaviour that marked that 'he' was possessed by an evil spirit. The cruelty of this episode increases when it is revealed that the protagonist has suffered from (untreated) epilepsy for decades. It makes the regressive influence of religion on the main character, and on queer social movements more generally, even more apparent.

In terms of structure, *Señorita María* deploys a progressive narrative that allows the spectator to accompany María in her journey of redemption. This journey mainly consists of revisiting her history, from accepting her gender identity to acknowledging the truth about her conception. The conversation between the protagonist and the director reaches its climax when María, with a trembling voice, curses her incestuous parents for abandoning her when she was a new-born. Although the revelations about the protagonist's upbringing are difficult to witness, the film manages to smoothly draw the viewer into a space of intimacy which prioritises empathy over outrage. The progression of the dialogue is also driven by the voice of *señorita*'s acquaintances, as their testimonies not only give an alternative perspective of her, but also inspire María to delve deeper into her own memories. Finally, by contrasting the solitude and estranged social relationships of María with the tender connection she has with animals, the film metaphorically emphasizes her expressed dream and insistent prayer of becoming a mother, particularly in the sequence in which she helps her cow to give birth.

Still, *Señorita María* falls short when it comes to questioning the concept of womanhood. Unfortunately, the film assumes a rather traditional idea of femininity: the asexual, devoted mother in woman's clothing. Although this might be explained by the protagonist's role model, Virgin Mary, the construct of being a woman in Colombia is not contested within the film in the same way religious morals or the goodness of the Christian nuclear family are. However, this flaw becomes an invitation to discuss some crucial aspects of queer theory surrounding the essentialism and performativity of gender, especially because María does not fit with the idealised queer subject (white, liberal, middle-class, urban) that lies behind these theorisations.

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The most important contribution of Mendoza's documentary is to make transgender experiences in Colombia visible. *Señorita María* counteracts the tendency to omit transgender people from official national discourses, the public sphere, and cinematic representations. The documentary succeeds in presenting a non-glamourised character whose personality is defined by a variety of elements (not only her gender identity). As such, it avoids a simplistic understanding of transgender people and reasserts their multifaceted qualities. All in all, *Señorita María* is a ground-breaking work that evinces the fact that reflecting on LGBTIQ+ identities requires considering factors such as social and economic stability, access to health care, and religiously charged moral discourses. However, above all, Mendoza's work stands out because it is an act of justice that responds to one of María's deepest sorrows: 'it's as if I don't exist in this world'.

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## Notes

- 1 The documentary, has been screened at, among others, the Festival Internacional de Cine de Cartagena de Indias (FICCI, Colombia, 2017), Locarno Film Festival (Switzerland, 2017), Edinburgh International Film Festival (Scotland, 2018), and Trento Film Festival (Italy, 2018). It is currently available on <https://cinemaparaisoondemand.player.com.co/catalogo/senorita-maria/>