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Film Review: A Media Voz [In a Whisper], Dirs. Heidi Hassan and Patricia Pérez Fernández

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FILM REVIEWS

A Media Voz [In a Whisper]. Dirs. Heidi Hassan and Patricia Pérez Fernández. Spain, France, Switzerland, Cuba, 2019. Dur. 80 min.

Heidi Hassan and Patricia Pérez Fernández's co-directed the full-length documentary, *A Media Voz* (2019), premiered at the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam [IDFA] in 2019. Since winning IDFA's prestigious Best Feature-Length Documentary of 2019 Award, the film has also won the Best Documentary prize at the Havana Film Festival 2019. It will continue to travel the international film festival circuit in 2020 including the film festivals in Göteborg, Guadalajara, Costa Rica, Cartagena, Málaga, and Miami. The 83-minute documentary is in Spanish with English and French subtitles.

Through archival footage, photographs, voice overs, and contemporary material, Hassan and Pérez Fernández share their autobiographical stories of deep friendship, immigration, and the centrality of filmmaking to capture their paths, drive their careers and eventually form the means for their reencounter. The documentary opens with blurred images of buildings, rain, and puddles, eventually settling on the picture of two young girls in a public swimming pool brimming with water and people. As an off camera voice speaks in the first person affectionately addressing a dear friend who is also off-camera, we come to learn that the two voices are those of the girls in the past swimming photograph now decades later. Throughout the film water is a reoccurring image, which connects, separates, and eventually reunites the two friends.

These same women later appear in snapshots, this time from behind the camera, in film school making their way as filmmakers directing in Cuba. Lugging equipment and filming behind immense camera lenses, the women hang from cranes for aerial shots and sit on moving cars to film. Their work on filmmaking further solidifies another language that they rely on for communication: cinema. These documentarians came into their own forming part of an exciting time of change and visibility of Cuban cinema with a generation of *nuevos realizadores* in the early 2000s. While their studies and subsequent careers in cinema bring the two directors even closer together, the documentary also reveals it is cinema that will eventually separate them, at least temporarily. With an invitation to take part in a film festival in Amsterdam, Patricia travels to Europe representing their films, and makes the painful decision to defect to Spain and not return with her fellow Cuban travelers to the island. This decision means that she cannot return to the island for five years.

Like many Cubans, the two voices from the diaspora exist in a complex relationship with their country. While the fraught topic of leaving or staying in Cuba is omnipresent in Cuban fictional and documentary cinema, there is something special about this documentary's approach to representing the intricacies of immigration. The documentary does not focus on government top-down immigration policies, simplified politics, or sweeping generational stories. Instead in this complex film we not only see the decision of leaving Cuba being made, but we also discover the future ramifications of such a monumental change. Hassan and Pérez Fernández deconstruct the happily-ever-after story of leaving as well as the catastrophic suffering narrative of abandoning the island. They share their own gray spaces of beginning again after making this decision to migrate. Their stories are multi-faceted processes of constructing home despite the cold realities of their lives abroad, finding work in the face of racism and misogyny, turning forty, and struggling with fertility treatments and the prospects of motherhood.

Amidst this experience of change, both Hassan and Pérez Fernández have relied on filmmaking to communicate, to find themselves in foreign countries, and to find each other. Thus, this highly intimate look at immigration is also deeply rooted in the story of women filmmakers offering their own personal gazes to the worlds around them. Their gazes are made explicit as they show glimpses of themselves while filming, thus revealing the subjectivity of their filmmaking process, making it impossible to read their stories as universal. It is their highly personal form of filmmaking that they use to write themselves into the fabric of the cities that they have immigrated to -legally or not. They ensure that they are documented at least in cinema sharing the complexities of their stories for an unknown future audience which the film eventually concludes were each other all of these years.

As the water theme follows throughout the film, we realize that it is not a simple reoccurring image signifying immigration and leaving an island nation. Instead images of water are omnipresent as both filmmakers make visible their own struggles with infertility, questions of motherhood, the passing of time, change, and continuity. There is also another aspect of the water images throughout the film- these women, like water, find each other, and flow back to their deep friendship that they had as children. Through cinema the filmmakers rekindle the precious friendship that they had in the Cuban swimming pool decades before.

This documentary surpasses national identity with a complex story of co-production, and the international trajectories of the filmmakers themselves. It is a story of true friendship, immigration, and ultimately a love and need of cinema. This documentary shows another face of the Cuba's diaspora, and a powerful face of women's filmmaking. It is an exceptional addition to university-level explorations on Cuban studies, Cuban film, the *nuevos realizadores*, documentary studies, diaspora studies, and new medias.