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## Film Review of "Elena" dir. by Petra Costa

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¿Qué aporta *Los amantes pasajeros* al cine de Almodóvar? Si el director ha querido revisitarse sus orígenes, revivir el universo de *Pepi, Luci, Bom y Laberinto de pasiones* y rendir homenaje a la vorágine creativa de los años 80, cabe preguntarse si ha conseguido dar a su nueva película la misma fuerza subversiva y transgresora que tuvieron aquellas o si se ha quedado en un (quizá frívolo, irrelevante o anacrónico) ejercicio de nostalgia. La respuesta, cualquiera que sea, tendrá que ver tanto con el filme en sí como con el contexto cultural en que se inserta. ¿Es España hoy un país más abierto, progresista, igualitario y libre que hace tres décadas? En el terreno del género y la sexualidad, por ejemplo, medidas tan retrógradas como la ley del aborto propuesta por el ministro Ruiz Gallardón podrían dar pie a dudarlo. Cabría argüir entonces que una película tan desinhibida, descarada y antinormativa como *Los amantes pasajeros* sería no solo relevante sino necesaria, y que su estridente clamor de libertad sería tan poderoso en 2013 como lo fue, treinta años atrás, el de las primeras películas del mismo director. En el aire quedan la pregunta y la respuesta.

**Jorge Mari**

*North Carolina State University*

**Costa, Petra, dir.** *Elena*. Busca Vida, 2012. Film.

Petra Costa's first full-length film, *Elena*, premiered in the United States during the Brazilian Film Festival in New York City in June 2013; it was presented in Portuguese with English subtitles. Before arriving in New York, the film had already won a selection of awards on the international film festival circuit. The film accolades include best documentary in the areas of best directing, audience award, editing and production design at the Brasília Film Festival, and best documentary in the 2013 Films de Femmes annual French film festival.

This poetic and fluid documentary tells the story of Petra Costa's sister Elena. Petra travels from Brazil to New York to study filmmaking and acting at Columbia University just as her deceased sister had done decades following the Brazilian dictatorship.

Through her first person narration in conversation with her absent sister, Costa attempts to find the memory of Elena in the streets and sounds of New York City as she follows her dream to become a filmmaker. It is a virtual dialogue between an off-camera first person narrator and an absent departed sister who committed suicide years before. The camera accompanies the impossible dialogue as Petra's off-camera narrative voice talks directly to her sister attempting to make sense of the harsh worlds of depression, adolescent dreams, film, theater, suicide, and the diaspora of a generation of Brazilians during post-dictatorial Brazil.

Through a lyrical collage of her sister's home videos, private diaries, and even the archival footage of her sister's original Columbia University interview, the film's narration twists the documentary genre to include an intimate story. Through the archival videos and voice-overs, Petra's deceased sister, Elena, becomes the film's protagonist coming to life through film.

The documentary begins with the sounds of water followed by images of Petra in New York City, before changing to a close up of a floating and ethereal Elena immersed in a stream. As Petra travels, the off-camera voice explains: "Minha mãe falou que poderia morar em qualquer lugar do mundo menos em Nova Iorque." The mother's wishes are clearly ignored, as the camera follows Petra through the unmistakable streets of New York while making a film to connect with her lost sister. Both film and New York City are unavoidable realities for these two sisters despite their mother's warnings, afraid to lose another daughter to New York, film, and eventually suicide. The film becomes a tribute to filmmaking, New York City and its Brazilian diaspora. It brings her sister's memory to life.

The camera accompanies the sister's journey to 'speak' with Elena through reoccurring images of moving water enveloping the lost sister. Paralleling the constant aquatic imagery, there is a liquid quality to the travel back and forth between Brazil and the United States in the film.

There is also an unsolidified mixture of archival footage that Elena herself took and narrated prior to her death combined with contemporary footage that Petra narrates. This liquid quality confirms the permeable boundaries of documentary, authorship, and the complex national origin of the film hovering between Brazil and the United States.

The film also touches upon the greater social context of the sisters' lives that includes the complex realities of Brazil during Elena's adolescence. Elena is thirteen years older than Petra, and her childhood took place during the oppressive years of the Brazilian dictatorship. In the documentary, there are references to this painful period in Brazilian history as Elena's early video diaries and short films recorded during the dictatorship all take place within the confines of the family home. There is no sense of shared public space or a Brazilian urban landscape. This footage is in stark contrast with the later images of life in the streets of New York.

The audience is reminded of the social context of Brazil during Elena's adolescence when she explains in a recorded interview with Columbia University her reasons for leaving Brazil to study film and acting. During the footage of the interview the audience is reminded that Elena's childhood and adolescence took place during a drastically different Brazil from the cultural and economic boom that the country experiences today. An adolescent Elena explains to her interviewer that she wanted to come to New York to study and act in films since in Brazil there is almost no film industry and the country makes at most one feature film per year. While she physically leaves an oppressive period in Brazilian history, she then begins to enter another form of oppression: her battles with her own depression in New York.

In the end, making a film using the footage of her sister's diaries, home videos, and photographs, Petra's film helps her sister to realize her original dream of making a life in the movies. Elena, the protagonist of this documentary film, is more present in the film than the living Petra, who remains during most of the film an off-camera voice.

This film is an exceptional example of the artistic possibilities of creating an intimate and personal documentary through a mosaic of genres and archival footage. Beyond its impressive aesthetic and technical value for film study, it is an outstanding addition to the representations of Brazil. This story of a young Brazilian woman coming to the United States for college, whilst battling depression and determining her place in New York City, aids teachers in the discussion of these important topics with college students.

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**Franco, Michel, dir.** *Después de Lucía*. Videocine, 2012. Film.

*Después de Lucía*, a Mexican film by Michel Franco, is a portrait of adolescence and the struggles teenagers face in modern society: loneliness, desire to belong, consequences of one's decisions, drugs, sex, and morality. All of these issues and more are examined through the prism of another prevalent social concern, bullying. The film, which won the Un Certain Regard prize at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival, graphically illustrates the cruelty that is teenage bullying, evoking such strong emotions that it is at points difficult to watch. Yet, at the same time these strong emotional responses make it impossible to turn away, forcing the viewer to wrestle with the greater questions.

*Después de Lucía* examines the ugly reality of humanity's cruelty from both the view of the teenage victim and her father. Franco tells the story of a family broken by the death of a wife and mother, Lucía, the result of an automobile accident. Roberto (Hernán Mendoza), who is devastated by the loss of his wife, moves himself and his daughter Alejandra (Tessa Ia) from Puerto Vallarta to Mexico City, both of them seeking to avoid the reality of the loss of Lucía, trying, instead, to just press on with life. Roberto finds a job in a restaurant, while Alejandra