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Golden Bears, Amulets, and Old Wives' Tales?

Review of *La teta asustada* [*The Milk of Sorrow*]

La teta asustada (Spain/Peru, 2009) is the second feature from Peruvian director Claudia Llosa. An international co-production, some of the funding for the film came from Spain where Llosa has been based for the past several years. Set in and around Lima, the drama grabbed headlines in February 2009 when an international jury headed by Tilda Swinton selected the film for the prestigious Golden Bear award at the Berlin Film Festival. The film has also picked up awards at the Guadalajara Mexican Film Festival and at the Montréal Festival of New Cinema. However, the film failed to win the main prize at the Lima Latin American Film Festival which gave rise to subsequent speculation about divisions among the jury there over the merit of the film's folkloric elements.

The film portrays the life of Fausta, a young woman whose family has moved from the Andes to Manchay, one of the *pueblos jóvenes* or shantytowns which has grown up on the outskirts of Lima. Fausta grieves for the loss of her mother, Perpetua, who dies in the story's opening sequences. But Fausta is already grief stricken before this loss, her emotions paralysed and her interest in life stunted as a result of being born during the two decades of turmoil which saw conflict between the Peruvian military and the terrorist group Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), and many abuses of human rights. The film's Spanish title, which translates literally as 'The Frightened Tit', refers to a syndrome—that Llosa reports having read about extensively—in which Andean mothers who suffered from physical violation during the unrest gave birth to children believed to be without a soul. The syndrome supposes that the horror of rape and torture was conveyed to fetuses in the womb and then to infants through mother's milk contaminated by trauma and shock. Thus,

Fausta, too young as a child to have understood the attack on her mother and father, nevertheless lives as a young adult with the consequences: these are literal, in the sense that she and her relatives have been displaced geographically, and psychological, in the sense that she, along with her family and neighbours, believes herself afflicted by a trans-generational malady which extends the suffering of her parents into every waking moment of her soulless existence. Shortly before Perpetua dies, she sings to Fausta the story of her husband's brutal execution and her own rape and torture.

Llosa uses her reading of anthropology and witness testimony to create a narrative in which the past and present are conjoined through somatisation of trauma and politics in the ailing body and psyche of a single indigenous female individual: Fausta. As the director and screenwriter has told interviewers on Spanish television, she never actually met anyone suffering from 'la teta asustada' so that the creation of the symptoms in the screenplay was necessarily a work of fiction, and Magaly Solier, the actress from Ayacucho who plays Fausta, has described how difficult it was to inhabit a character whose doleful demeanour was so far removed from her own. The somatisation of the trauma which shook Peru in the 80s and the 90s doesn't stop with Fausta's inheritance of 'la teta asustada', however. As a protection against the fear of rape, she has planted a potato inside herself and as its starchy tubers invade her body and begin to cause infection, she suffers nosebleeds and exhaustion. Her uncle Lucido takes her to hospital when she collapses shortly after her mother's death. Lucido discounts a doctor's attribution of Fausta's illness to the foreign body and insists instead:

Fausta was born at the time of the terrorism and her mother passed on the shock to her through her milk: the frightened tit, that's what they say about

those like her who were born without a soul because it buried itself in the earth, out of fright.

Introduced like this within a medical consultation, the film's somatisation of trauma and of Peru's violent turmoil has the further consequence of using ideas about the body and its ailments to determine two categories of people and to locate them on either side of a boundary defined by attitudes to knowledge rendered adversarial and incompatible: behind the desk is the doctor and all that he represents—progress, modernity, empirical science—while Fausta and her uncle, on the other side, are made coterminous with superstition, atavism, and old wives' tales. But Llosa suggests that the film isn't so much about politics as it is about the legacy of the war and the emotions it has left behind. The film, she says, tries to see through 'the invisible veil which in a way is wrapped around the collective imaginary of Peru.'

Shutting herself off from sexual and social intercourse, Fausta's isolation is emphasised by a family business focussed on matrimonial conjugation. The paradigm of marriage is writ large in the group weddings which Fausta's relatives cater for and organise. Fausta is pictured at her cousin's wedding, a lonely figure before the artificial backdrop of waterfalls provided by the photographer and the real backdrop of Lima's hinterland of parched sierra and desert. The brightly coloured production line weddings with their serpentine dance of consumer goods offer Fausta little comfort. Her cousin's compadre tries to chat her up with a line comparing the red of menstruation and the colour of passion, a pass that only serves to alienate Fausta further.

It is her immediate grief for her mother which forces her along a path which will ultimately lead to her overcoming that other more deep seated sorrow of

collective trauma. Determined to repatriate her mother's body to her native province, Fausta takes a job as a servant with Aida, a wealthy woman of European descent. A frustrated musician, Aida fills her time by putting up around her spacious home pictures of uniformed men. As she assists Aida with mounting these pictures, Fausta is horrified when she catches a reflection of herself holding an electric drill—poised like a weapon—and she takes refuge in a kitchen where her employer hears her comforting herself by singing. Aida promises her maid a string of pearls if she will repeat for her the lullaby-like song which she was singing to herself. The fruits of this exchange restore the musician's confidence and a new piano is delivered to the home to replace one ejected through a stained glass window. In this earlier scene, Bunuel meets magic realism as Fausta and fellow Quechua-speaker, Noé, the gardener, consider the damaged instrument's unseen and unheard properties. It continues to sing, Noé says, despite being broken. For Fausta, the fragments of stained glass window are like sweets.

As Uncle Lucido grows impatient with Perpetua's unburied body, Aida continues to prise from the distant but nacreous Fausta—one pearl at a time—the musical notes she needs for a new composition. Fausta hears her perform a piano piece for an audience of bourgeois Limeños and when she remarks, with a note of conspiratorial knowing and shared creativity, that the piece based on her music was appreciated by Aida's audience, the pianist makes the servant get out of the car they're travelling in and deposits the younger woman on the side of the road, in the middle of nowhere, obviously perturbed when her unacknowledged muse seeks to go beyond her station by presuming to join in a conversation. Aida's cruelty and snobbery spur Fausta on to claim what is hers and she returns to the house to take the pearls Aida had promised her. Noé finds her at the gate, slumped on the ground, and carries her to the hospital where Fausta finally begs for the tuber to be

removed from her body. When she comes round from the operation, her hand still clenches the pearls and when we see her again, she is taking her mother's body to be buried. The film ends with a close up of Fausta in profile as her face nears the blossom of a small potato plant, a metaphor, perhaps, for the somatic recognition of a vanquished fear and release from a syndrome of inherited trauma.

Labelled by *Variety* as an 'ultra-arthouse item' Llosa's film nevertheless defies simple classification. Though it was shown in Europe before opening in Latin America, when it did premiere in Peru, it was to an audience which mirrored not Aida and 'le tout Lima' but Fausta's family. Manchay, the shantytown inhabited mainly by migrants from the Andes, hosted the film's Peruvian opening night. Llosa told reporters that she was glad to see *La teta asustada* open there: 'I want to share its success with the people who were so enormously helpful to me during the production. It is like being able to come full circle.' For some, however, the film's narrative and its negotiation of divisions founded in race, language, and a still keenly felt colonial legacy, spells not a full circle but a closed circuit which reinforces and replicates the privilege of the few and the disenfranchisement of the many. In the Golden Bear awarded by the Berlin jury, some have seen a present day duplication of the looting of the country's natural resources by European colonists. For example, a respondent adding to the discussion on a Peruvian blogger's page reads the film as:

Yet another incredible story, exploited by certain 'pseudo-Peruvians' to get the only thing that interests them: money. Nothing has changed with these people, who are just like their ancestors, those well known 'conquistadors' who were also interested in only one thing: gold [...] Incredible though it

may seem, in the mentality of the Spanish this concept of 'making money from others' suffering' will never change.

In this view, Claudia Llosa and her creation, Aida, become interchangeable. But Llosa isn't Aida: unlike the pianist, the director has shared her success with her muse, Magaly Solier, who has also been able to pursue a career as a recording artist, thanks in part to her collaboration with the director of *Madeinusa* and *La teta asustada*. And it's hard to imagine a woman like Aida even going to Manchay, far less presenting one of her creations there. *La teta asustada* shows Fausta, an indigenous woman, through her suffering, but it also suggests before it ends that this is someone who can flourish and who will, unlike Aida, succeed in overcoming her neuroses.

If not all criticism reads Llosa as a latter-day Cortés, the film has inspired a debate which is just as polarising, even if it's more subtly elaborated. On the one hand, there are those who read the film as reiterating a discourse of racism, and, on the other, there are those who suggest that it is instead a milestone in the reconciliation of Peruvians divided by wealth, race, and differing experiences of the troubled 80s and 90s. The Bolivian novelist Edmundo Paz Soldán says of the film:

Claudia Llosa finds a skilful way to represent every scene and she allows us to see in the present the power of myth [...] all the secondary characters are admirably drawn [...] and if at moments we laugh at the habits and customs of these immigrants to a Lima made unrecognisable, then it's a laughter born of our own discomfort and not of mockery.

From a similar perspective, academic and critic Gustavo Faverón Patriau writes:

Claudia Llosa has spoken out extensively against racism in Peru and [...] if it's possible that [in her second film she] is opening up a new approach to problems deeply embedded in secular culture, then we can't allow ourselves to ignore them or to discredit them.

Faverón Patriau's comments are in response to Carlos Quiroz's sharply critical account of *La teta asustada*, which reads the film as a racist mockery of Andean Peruvians. Using Althusser to contradict Quiroz, Patriau suggests that critics of *La teta asustada* who label it racist are unable to see beyond the constraints of their own ideology. A Peruvian blogger living in the USA and who focuses on GLBT issues, human rights, and on the representation of Latinos and of indigenous people in the mainstream media, Quiroz finds *La teta asustada* deeply flawed. During the awards ceremony at the Berlin Film Festival, Magaly Solier was weighed upon to speak and sing in Quechua and in this, as in the film's representation of Fausta and her family, Quiroz suggests that Andean people and their culture are rendered exotic objects and amulets:

The fakeness of this movie represents the vicious racism of Peru, where some white people –mostly in Lima- are trying to define the cultures and identity of our Native American majority, with a fake paternalistic attitude [...] They look at us as the “indios” and “cholos” far away from their lives, until it becomes otherwise convenient, say, when they need cheap labor or to make money out of our traditions. They assume they have the authority to portray our Native people as exotic, curious beings, products of the mountain life in laughable undeveloped communities.

It is a fair comment to say that the film's lighter moments centre either on the perceived naïveté or gaucheness of characters in Manchay: the audience at a

sell out screening at the 2009 London Film Festival laughed loudest at the immigrants' off-colour chat up lines and at the dancing Andean granny, but, as Paz Soldán suggests, laughter doesn't necessarily entail mockery. The audience in London couldn't have been described either as white or European.

The debate in the blogosphere has also been played out in the Peruvian press. Aldo Mariátegui, editor of *Correo*, reads the film as one that plays up to the stereotypes and prejudices of viewers, so that, for example, the average European who goes to see the film will think that:

Peru is a savage country, almost African, where the people are so ignorant they think that grief is passed on in mother's milk; where, if there's a death, it's normal to keep the body stored in a corner of your house, to try to take it on a long distance bus, or to take it to the sea and to send it to the bottom.

All the responses Mariátegui imagines tend to ridicule the film. Meanwhile, writing in *La Primera*, Raúl Wiener takes *La teta asustada* more seriously and finds in Claudia Llosa a talented storyteller who uses stereotypes and anecdote to hold her viewers' attention and to move the narrative beyond Fausta's initial fear and silence.

The polarised debate over the film has generated a great deal of commentary and sometimes this allows a more nuanced approach than does the polemic itself. For example, readers' comments point to the question of atavism in the film. This isn't a concept forced upon the story by angry bloggers, but has been mentioned by the director herself when describing the syndrome that gives the story its title. Portraying Fausta's fear was difficult, she told an interviewer, because, unlike a simple shock or a fright, this 'Was about

something much more atavistic that has been in [Fausta's] body all [her] life.' If a storyteller wants above all else to transcend racism and seek reconciliation, implying that the psyche of one group of people is somehow primitive, or a throwback, is unhelpful. It's not going against the grain of the film to read it in terms of a contrast between Aida and Fausta and seen in this light, one has to recognise that no aspect of Aida's conduct is ever explained by her genetic inheritance. The trauma of Peru's recent past is in no way shown to be embodied by Aida, whereas it is literally incorporated by two generations of Fausta's family. And whereas Aida's privileged position seems to require no explanation, Fausta's situation, which could well be explained by social and political circumstances, is instead made ontological: she's gone wrong simply by having being born and existing. For the angrier elements of the blogosphere, Llosa's narrative and its blend of magical realism and McOndo traits is simply a ruse to rebuild a hierarchy which places a rich white woman above a poor indigenous woman: using Althusser and concepts of subalternity to dismantle this perspective—appreciated more readily from the bottom up than the top down, perhaps—seems a bit harsh, especially since for those upset by the film the hierarchy is one structured around access to education and its benefits. In one of many similar comments, we read:

They'll say: but the film shows a white woman as a bad character. Exactly: it shows just one white woman and she's cultured, well educated, i.e. civilised, as opposed to an *entire* social group which is presented as primitive, ignorant, dirty, insensitive, pathetic, inhuman, and laughable.

The film's use of national and cultural symbols has also been provocative. Some will hear in the idea of a 'papa' inserted in a woman's genitalia an ironic reference to the Catholic church, while for others, *papa*, the commonly used word for potato in Latin American Spanish, refers not just to *Solanum*

tuberosum but to a plant species which is symbolic of Andean culture and of the Andean peoples' relationship with the earth. From this perspective, associating *papa* with what is atavistic—what holds Fausta back, and what is eating her up from the inside out—could seem Eurocentric, another instance of neo-colonialism. As Larry Zuckerman recounts in his history of the potato plant's journey from the Andes to becoming a global staple, in the seventeenth century the tuber was associated with a supposedly primitive diet, with the malign—a 'vaporous' food which could cause all manner of ailments—and with wretchedness. Zuckerman suggests that these associations are still to be found today in expressions like 'potato head' and 'couch potato.' Here again, though, it's a mark of the polyvalent capacity of Llosa's story-telling that if on the one hand she uses this symbol of Andean culture in a way which recalls and perhaps even repeats colonial discourse, on the other her narrative also repositions the same symbol as one of creativity and fertility once it's been removed from her heroine's body. No longer internalised and kept secret, the cultural symbol becomes a route to communication and self-assertion. One of the posters for the film pictures Magaly Solier in a décolletage of potatoes, whilst in the narrative her fictional cousin's skill with the knife produces a lengthy and continuous peel predicting a long and prosperous marriage. It is Noé, Aida's gardener who tells Fausta 'The potato is a cheap plant and it doesn't flower very much.' Another kind of internalised colonialism? Some time after the film's premiere, the Peruvian press reported Solier's support for the National Day of the Potato, a campaign organised by the Ministry of Agriculture to encourage increased consumption of home grown food and to support Peru's 600 000 potato growers. The same Solier has also been pictured wearing an Iron Maiden tee shirt, telling journalists that she's a great fan of the heavy metal group.

If globalisation of cultural signs and symbols has made it difficult to segregate the heavy metal fan from the nationalist agrarian, the world wide reach of the economic crisis also takes Fausta's story beyond national borders. The germ of the story is a daughter's struggle to give her mother a decent burial, a problem now facing the world's richer suburbs as well as its shantytowns. In October 2009, the *New York Times* reported:

Coroners and medical examiners across the country are reporting spikes in the number of unclaimed bodies and indigent burials, with states, counties and private funeral homes having to foot the bill when families cannot.

The statistics in this report weren't about a developing country: they were about the USA. More recently, the *New York Times* has also reported on the phenomenon of reverse remittances—families in Latin America sending money to their relatives in the US to help *them* through financial penury. Within this logic of reverse remittances, perhaps it's wrong to try to confine Fausta's story to Peru. It's important to recognise the cultural and political specificity of the film's resonances and at the same time, the widening of wealth disparities across the world and the perverse economy of 'too big to fail' and 'too small to count' revealed and exacerbated by the recession renders the narrative about the struggle for dignity one with far-reaching implications.

Aesthetically, Llosa's film is highly accomplished and Natahsa Braier's photography finds beauty as easily in an arrangement of plates and plastic cutlery as it does in the striking landscapes of Lima's precipitous outskirts. A memorable shot of Fausta and her uncle, downcast amid the wedding celebrations, pictures them behind a cross formed by bunting and is typical of the thoughtful mise-en-scène which reinforces moments in a drama played with reserve and an attention to detail by the main cast.

Sometimes the striking camera work seems almost at odds with the narrative and recalls Susan Sontag's observation that the more successful photography is in its own right, the more it tends to aestheticise the object. The film shows us some of the yellow staircases, the so-called *escaleras solidarias* [solidarity staircases], that Lima's municipal government has been building to connect the *pueblos jóvenes* in the hills with the city's lower lying areas. Through a lens and from a distance, they look oddly beautiful and geometric, whereas for the pedestrians who use them they may have no aesthetic value and simply represent the exhausting daily struggle to move their labour between their homes and the rambling city's more well-to-do neighbourhoods. Similarly, the panoramic shots along the coast create technically breathtaking scenes and yet the distance also lends them the impersonality and strange intrusiveness of a satellite image. Is this a community and a family whose travails and pleasures are felt from within, or a colony peered at and inspected from above?

The question of spectatorship is referenced a number of times within the film itself, as when Fausta is framed by an aperture in the gateway of Aida's house, or when the almost impermeable membrane between the houses of the rich and the world outside is revealed by an electric portcullis opening up to the horizon to establish both an entrance and an outside viewfinder trained on the commerce of day to day life in contemporary Lima. Arguably, Llosa tries as best she can to see the story she tells from both sides of this barrier.

La teta asustada may not be the film that everyone from Peru wants, but it has clearly refined the views of citizen critics on what it is they want to see from a national cinema. Its success at the Berlin Film Festival has led to reports of more funds being channelled to Conacine, the agency responsible for national film production. The film has also brought into the spotlight the legacy of two

decades of civil strife in Peru, and it doesn't pretend that it was anyone other than the poorest and the already disadvantaged who were hurt most, whose human rights were least respected, and who continue to suffer from the consequences of displacement and trauma. And it's a story made by women and about women, itself an achievement in an industry which is still very male dominated. Many of the film's key moments occur in scenes where the characters speak Quechua, even if this language comprises less than half of the film's script. If it's chosen as Peru's submission to the 2010 Academy Awards, what will Hollywood make of this most un-Hollywood of films?

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